

Professor Willem van Vliet—’s Reflections on the Founding of Growing Up Boulder

Growing Up Boulder came about in 2009 in the wake of Denver’s Child- and Youth-Friendly Initiative, a program initiated by the University of Colorado’s Community Design and Research (CEDaR) center’s predecessor, the Children, Youth and Environments Center (CYE). That program was a partnership with several city departments in Denver’s mayor’s office and the nonprofit Assets for Colorado Youth (ACY), working with other city-wide organizations and involving active participation by youth from across the city. This Denver initiative ran from 2004 till 2007. It produced important lessons for Growing Up Boulder.

When David Driskell arrived in Boulder in December of 2008 as the City of Boulder’s Director of Community Planning and Sustainability, he reacted enthusiastically to a suggestion by his friend CYE director Willem van Vliet—that they launch a new initiative to make Boulder the nation’s first child-friendly city, based on principles of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. This new initiative directly benefited from the Denver experience. It made CYE and CU Boulder at large the central axis of a partnership with Boulder’s planning department and Boulder Valley School District. It also embarked on concrete projects with the goal of setting precedents to demonstrate young people’s competence and show the value of their contributions to local planning.

Begun in 2009, the name of this new initiative, Growing Up Boulder, came from participating youth. Its overall goal was to bring about a culture change so that youth participation in local affairs would no longer be extraordinary, but mainstream and routine. The ultimate measure of Growing Up Boulder’s success would be its having made itself redundant.

During Growing Up Boulder’s first 5 years, the CYE Center provided leadership and vision and gave pivotal support by allocating funding, obtaining project grants, making available administrative staff and space, involving ENVD students and faculty, coordinating and directing projects through PhD students, and engaging interns. The Boulder-focused projects that CYE had already been undertaking gradually consolidated under the Growing Up Boulder umbrella, as one among several other CYE programs.

Key principles that underpinned CYE projects also informed Growing Up Boulder: interdisciplinary collaboration across campus, vertical integration that included undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty, partnerships with city departments and community organizations, participatory action research, and engagement with low-income and minority populations. Early projects included several good examples of these principles, such as a summer long program with children at the Family Learning Center that involved students and faculty from ENVD, the Department of Theater and Dance, the Museum of Natural History, the Department of Education, and the Department of Mathematics. Another good example is “Leveling the Playing Field,” a semester-long project conceived of and carried out in 2009 by some 75 fifth-graders at Mesa ES to make their school grounds more accessible and inclusive, supported by about 20 ENVD graduate students and faculty.

Initially, Growing Up Boulder activities featured an annual event, youth directed action groups, and after-school projects. Over several years, school-based activities became integrated into regular curricula and projects were derived chiefly from the agenda of the City, which had become Growing Up Boulder’s main funding source.

After the CYE Center transitioned into CEDaR in 2015, Growing Up Boulder increasingly became a stand-alone operation while still enjoying support from its affiliation with CEDaR and the University at large. In 2021, Growing Up Boulder left the University and transitioned to become a nonprofit under the fiscal sponsorship of the Colorado Nonprofit Development Center.