

# What Do Young People Think? A Two-hour PBS Documentary

by Judy Woodruff

Veteran broadcast journalist Judy Woodruff was one of the featured speakers during the 2007 Community College National Legislative Summit. I have known and long admired Judy's work and was intrigued by her latest project with PBS, *Generation Next*, which interviewed young Americans on a variety of subjects and provides a wealth of information regarding their hopes, dreams and attitudes about life, work and the future. We asked Judy to revisit her presentation during the 2007 Summit and to share it in this issue of the Trustee Quarterly. I hope you find it interesting and helpful in understanding the newer generation of students who are enrolling in your institutions and living in your communities.

—J. Noah Brown, President and CEO

THERE ARE AROUND 42 MILLION young people in the United States between the ages of 16 and 25. So there are 42 million stories about the lives of this remarkable younger generation, unlike any other in American history.

Of course, one could say every generation is remarkable, but my focus as a long-time journalist, interested in trying to help my generation, the baby boomers, understand our children, has been on what's unique about those young people born after 1980, with little or no memory of the Cold War, but with vivid memories of September 11, 2001, and the war in Iraq.

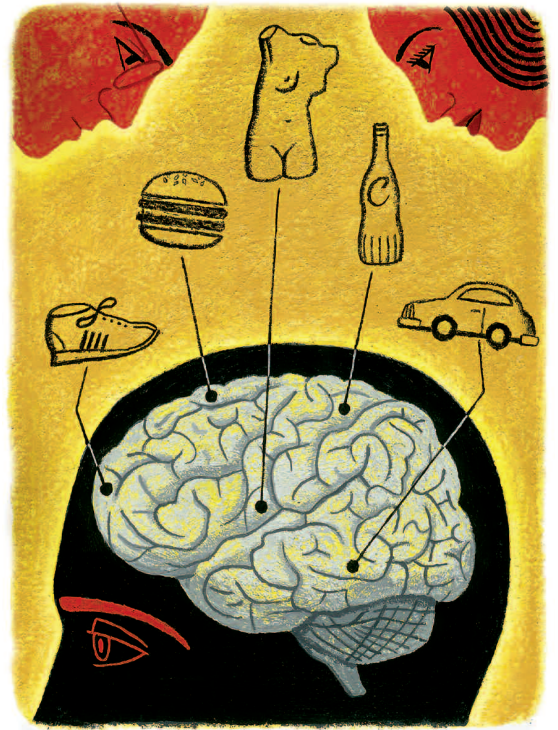
We know they're the most diverse generation ever — one in every five of them has a parent born outside the United States. One in every eight was himself or herself born outside the United States. They are accustomed to being next door to, down the street from, or in a classroom with, children of different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds. If they live in New York City or the suburbs of Minneapolis, they're accustomed to hearing different languages in the hallways of their schools, and hanging out with Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists, as well as Christians and Jews.

My documentary production team and I traveled the country, visiting 17 states and 29 cities and talked with over 500 young people about their hopes, dreams, values and opinions on everything from their closeness to their parents and the role of faith in their lives, to their view of America's role in the world. What we found gave us profoundly rich material for what might have been a 10-hour documentary. But we settled for two, and thanks to the support of the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, we were granted two hours on PBS to tell our stories.

In January 2007, we laid out the basics: the diversity of *Generation Next* and how they've been shaped by this moment in history and the explosion of technology that's occurred during their short lifetimes. From cell phones to laptops, from ipods to Facebook and MySpace, this younger generation is communicating the way they want to. We profiled five young people, including 18-year-old Adora Mora of Columbus, Ohio, daughter of Nigerian immigrants — a pharmacist and an

accountant — who made education a priority for their eight children. Adora is a sophomore at Harvard. We also told the story of 22-year-old Lisa Higaki, a second-generation Japanese-American woman, working at a small advertising agency in Los Angeles, paying off a \$14,000 credit-card debt, and staying active in her Evangelical church. We also told the stories of Jesse Jones and Sarah McGarity, who attended Columbus State Community College together, as well as 25-year-old Gabe Ballejos, who joined the Army right out of high school, and has served two tours of duty in Iraq.

In September 2007, we rolled out *Generation Next 2.0* on PBS, in which we profiled six more remarkable young people — from former gang member



Leo Vasquez, of Los Angeles, holding down two jobs, having taught himself to read, after spending all but a few days of his young life behind bars — to 24-year-old Cole Carpenter, who farms several thousand acres of grain with his grandfather, in rural Leoti, Kansas. Despite the financial and weather-related uncertainties of the farming life, Cole loves the land he lives on and plans to raise his own children right where he grew up.

Yet another unforgettable “Generation Nexter” is 23-year-old Lakeesha Perry of Detroit, a single mother of three, who had her first child at the age of 14, and who today is combining child raising with finishing her bachelors degree at Wayne State University and working in a training program at General Motors. Lakeesha told me her fondest wish every day is to have just a moment or two by herself, a moment of peace and quiet.

In this run-up to a presidential election year, we asked many of the young people we interviewed about their political views. Not all are politically active, but we found them remarkably well-informed about the issues of the day, and surprisingly impatient to make a difference.

Our conversations, coupled with polling done by the Pew Research Center, demonstrated the difference their diversity has already made. They are far more likely than their parents’ and grandparents’ generations to say that immigration has been good for this country: 67 percent of young people believe the growing number of immigrants strengthens American society, compared to only 38 percent of those over age 60 who believe that. Plus, even in a period of greater acceptance between the races, on the part of all age groups, we found the younger generation most accepting of interracial dating.

Young people are also significantly more likely to say that gay couples should be allowed to legally marry: 44 percent, compared to 28 percent of older adults. This is according to a poll done for the *New York Times* this year.

The young people we interviewed have grown up in the shadow of 9/11 and under

the constant refrain ever since, of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite the fact that members of this younger cohort have done most of the fighting — and the dying — in these wars, most young people say they don’t feel a connection to them. As it has for older adults, their support for the war in Iraq has slipped; and interestingly, when asked whether the best way to ensure peace is through military strength or good diplomacy, 63 percent favored diplomacy, seven percent more than their elders.

Significantly, they are also more likely than their parents’ and grandparents’ generations to say that government often does a better job than people give it credit for.

What does all this add up to politically, since young people historically don’t vote in as high of numbers as do older Americans? First, we know the percentage of voter turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds jumped more than any other age group between the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004. In both years, they favored the Democratic candidate.

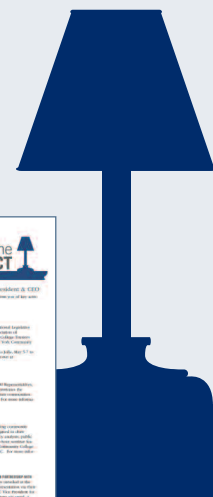
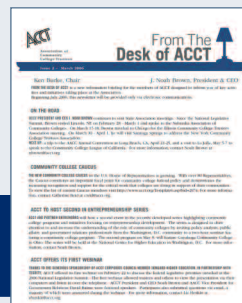
It hasn’t always been this way. Ronald Reagan carried the youngest voters — by 59 to 40 percent, in 1984; but 20 years later, in 2004, John Kerry got 54 percent of their vote.

In the 2006 congressional elections, voters aged 18 to 29 favored Democrats over Republicans by a whopping 60 to 38 percent. Already, strategists in both political parties are telling us that if young people vote in 2008, as they did in 2006, it will be very hard for Republicans to win next year.

Those young people who told us they are anxious to have an impact on the political system and policy-making in the United States could get their wish sooner than most of them have dreamed.



*Judy Woodruff is a senior correspondent at The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer.*



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