



Laura Zaepfel, of NMG, and Denise Herkey of 21st Century Club.

For all the armchair cynics who sit back and bemoan Buffalo's troubles year after year, you have finally met your match. They are young, savvy and outspoken, but more than anything, they are doers. If not for them, we may have been travelling across a twin span bridge by now, with voter turnout in the younger demographic plummeting and the word regionalism sounding like some type of foreign policy decision. In them may lie Western New York's best hope for an economic and social renaissance. Needless to say, if

anyone has put a buzz in this city's ear, it has been the New Millennium Group and the 21st Century Club.

The organizations, made up primarily of young professionals, are working on change in Western New York. The New Millennium Group (NMG) has projects; each focused on the ultimate goal of economic redevelopment of Western New York, and bringing people back to the area. Divided into action groups, NMG has been able to cover a wide range of growth projects, from the Peace Bridge to workforce development. According to

In March, their membership totaled 65, and today they are about 350 strong. Malley explains the group's popularity by the fact that Buffalonians feel the need "to be involved and effect change. Many young Western New Yorkers have left the community... and have chosen to return, and love it here."

Despite the growth in the group's membership, NMG still faces the challenge of diversity. "We still don't represent the cross-section of the community. That's one of our greatest goals," says Malley, conceding the lack of minority membership in the group. According to NMG's Emerson Barr, "The plan is for the group to encompass more of Buffalo."

One goal of NMG then, is to reach out to those who are here and get them actively participating in the community. "Our greatest challenge is to get all of those people and all of that energy involved," says Malley. "It's a unique opportunity, I believe... this is a new chance to get people involved and reverse the trend of cynicism [by using] energy."

Such change comes in big and small packages. The larger projects become media spotlights, such as the signature span Peace Bridge campaign, which NMG believes is a critical component in the economic prosperity of the region. "We believe we have a stronger tie to the Canadian economy than to any other regional economy in the US," says Malley.

Of NMG's hard line approach, Zaepfel says, "We are making people be accountable for their decisions, and we're not just going to say, 'Well, that's always the way it's been done, so I guess they know what they're doing.' Not taking anything away from the people that are making these decisions, but I think the younger people in the community have a lot at stake; possibly, a lot more at stake."

The smaller projects get less attention, but seem to be as integral a part of the group's master plan for the redevelopment of Western New York. Malley cites the development of park areas and water access, "like you see in the redevelopment of

Tracy Diina, President of 21st Century Club, and Mary Katherine Malley, President of New Millennium Group.

Young Guns

Building bridges, minds and a better future for WNY

By: Jennifer Fee

NMG president Mary Katherine Malley, the group has over 10,000 signatures on their petition for a 'signature span' Peace Bridge, not to mention the fact that they are responsible, with the help of the 21st Century Club, for generating public awareness of the issue. As NMG's communications chair, Laura Zaepfel, puts it, "We are very professional, very directed, very focused, and we're serious about where we think this area needs to be."

With all the external challenges they take on everyday, one challenge facing NMG internally is their burgeoning membership. Malley is not exaggerating when she describes the group as "continuing to grow exponentially."



a lot of Great Lakes cities," as examples of smaller scale battles the group is waging and winning. Tasks as simple as planting trees provide opportunities for NMG to get their message out. "We can demonstrate to the community what we can have," explains Malley.

The organization's next big projects fall under their workforce development task group. In September, NMG begins its Ambassador Program, assisting WNY employers by 'hosting' job candidates visiting from out of town, as well as launching a website designed to attract former Western New Yorkers around the country to job opportunities back home. "Bottom line, it's bringing people to the area," explains Zaepfel, who thinks NMG's next focus should be on getting college graduates to come to or stay in the area.

NMG has also provided a great social outlet for young professionals in the area to meet other young professionals. "I had joined... and I knew nobody... there [has not been anything] that has brought everybody together like this," says Zaepfel. "It's been an amazing year and a half."

Call it kismet, but two years ago, Tracy Diina had a similar revelation about the opportunity for her generation to get involved in the community. She was working in the Community Development office at City Hall, where she met a lot of other young professionals who shared her enthusiasm for Buffalo. "We all had a common fervor for our jobs and for the city." After kicking around the idea for a few

months, she eventually convened a meeting of about 20 of her peers. Out of that first meeting in February of 1998 came the 21st Century Club and their mission, which according to club president Diina is "to promote the participation of young people in the civic and governmental process."

Public relations chair Denise Herkey has been involved with the club since last summer. Her story is one echoed a thousand times over, in this city and elsewhere, of college graduates who have trouble finding the same outlets for their energies in the workaday world. "This type of activism and involvement is something that I was missing in my life. When I was in college (at Buffalo State)... I did a lot of civic activity and I loved it. Then you get out of college, and you are trying to find your place, and I found mine (she now works for Assemblyman Sam Hoyt)... but I was still missing something else. And [21st Century Club] filled that."

If New Millennium Group is about concrete projects, the 21st Century Club is about information and education. "I think what distinguishes us, as a group, is that we don't necessarily take sides. We are all about awareness and education... We are more about letting people make their own choices, but giving them the information that they need to make the choices," says Diina.

"I think it was a wise decision in the beginning, and I completely support it now that I'm on board, to stay non-partisan. I think that is the best way to direct policy...



James Bates and Jill Lemke of 21st Century Club, and Joe Saccone and Laura Zaepfel of New Millennium Group.

Policymakers are coming to our meetings, and that's telling us it's working," echoes Herkey.

And they are coming in droves. A happy hour event co-sponsored by both groups at the Park Lane earlier this year drew so many people that it was difficult to move in the spacious Buffalo landmark. "That was a pivotal point... that showed that we are being taken seriously," said Herkey. When the groups recently hosted Kevin Gaughan to speak on regionalism in a lunch-hour session at Spot Coffee, the place was also packed to standing-room-only capacity.

Currently, the 21st Century Club is tackling the issue of voter registration and education, with a comprehensive drive to get younger voters registered and participating in the governmental process. The goal is to register 500 people before October 8th, and after hitting the area's major summer festivals, they are well on their way. According to Diina, "There is an amazing amount of young people who are not registered, and we feel the only way to make any difference is to get the power of the vote."

"Just registering them is not enough. You have to register them, give them information about the candidates... walk them through it the first time. Once they have that information, they don't mind casting their vote," explains Herkey. "We want to educate people in a non-partisan way... and to make sure [younger] people's concerns are being listened to. And you are starting to hear

l-r: Joe Saccone, Jason Miller, Marc Hudak, and Emerson Barr of New Millennium Group.



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that from the candidates that are out there."

"That shows that we are actually making a difference," adds Diina.

Similar to NMG, the 21st Century Club is divided into committees, focusing on such things as public relations and the issues the club will tackle in the upcoming year. In January, the issue committee picked four issues to concentrate on for the year: smart growth, the City of Buffalo charter review process, regionalism and their current focus, voter registration.

"We did not pick the Peace Bridge, but that picked us," says Diina, citing that the club was also involved in publicizing the debate over twin vs. signature span.

Currently, the 21st Century Club has about 150-200 people who regularly attend meetings and participate, although Diina notes that the number of paying members is actually lower. While the club has no age parameters, they are focused on the participation of young people around Western New York.

"We've made it very clear from the beginning that we have a regional focus, a Western New York focus," explains Diina.

"We tend to have events in the city... but we want to branch out; we think that's important... We do have to think as a region to sustain us," adds Herkey.

Is their room in the landscape for both groups? The answer so far is a resounding yes, as the groups, co-sponsoring many events together, have been a model of both cooperation and collaboration.

"We made a movement toward meeting with [New Millennium Group], and convened the first joint meeting of our steering committees... to find a common ground," says Diina.

"We are a collaborative group. We can be successful and have an impact on the region only so long as we are coordinating with everyone else who's out there and working on the economic redevelopment for the region," says Malley.

NMG's Marc Hudak agrees, "Bringing business and talent into WNY is something everyone can agree on."

Will these groups meet with continued success? NMG's Jason Miller thinks so, "The reason we've been successful is that we are fighting the good fight." ☺