

MADE BY US

★ Youth250 ★ ★ OUR STORY ★

IMPACT & INSIGHTS
2024-2026

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,



With Gratitude

Youth250 was a three-year project by Made By Us to foster youth contribution, visibility and influence in America's story leading up to the U.S. 250th anniversary in 2026.

This work was made possible by \$1.7 million raised in direct support of the project over three years, \$1m of which was put directly into youth roles. We are deeply grateful to our supporters, including the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the Bezos Family Foundation, Hearthland Foundation, Pop Culture Collaborative, New America, Policylink, Eisenhower Fellowships and Mrs. Jacomien Mars.

We received significant in-kind support from our participating museum partners, including our Board of Directors and our event hosts at the National Constitution Center, Atlanta History Center, Conner Prairie, Utah State Museum, Eastern State Penitentiary, Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and Stanford d.school.

Partnerships made this work impactful. Dillon St. Bernard and Team DSB lent creative vision and narrative horsepower since day one; Jake Cooper Designs, Laura Vignale and Monika Stengert supported our web and design presence; History Co:Lab brought key research support in the field of adolescent development and program facilitation; National History Day helped us co-launch a youth writing club; and facilitators, consultants and advisors from the Civic Collaboratory, Experience Institute, Every Museum a Civic Museum, New American History, The Washington Post, World Affairs Council of Philadelphia, and more refined and augmented our ideas. Eisenhower Fellowships sent our Executive Director, Caroline Klibanoff, to Australia and New Zealand to meet with 90 cross-sector leaders in order to bring back expertise on youth engagement and leadership in institutions, particularly youth bureau structures. Key publishing partners, including Teen Vogue, The Fulcrum, Latino News Network, CSPAN, PBS Student Reporting Labs, American Alliance of Museums, American Association for State and Local History and Aspen Institute, amplified our message.

At Made By Us, this work was led by Caroline Klibanoff, Executive Director and Alex Edgar, Youth Engagement Manager, with team-wide support from Nia Mosby, Cameron Katz and Hope Delgado.

Thank You to Our Supporters



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INSTITUTE of
Museum and Library
SERVICES



POP
CULTURE
COLLAB

Executive Summary

The United States' 250th anniversary arrived at a deeply polarized, challenging moment in American history – and just as the **largest, most diverse youth generation in American history** stood on the precipice of adulthood, preparing to become active voters, leaders and community members.

Young Americans, through survey data, behavioral trends and commentary, had made their dissatisfaction, disconnection and distrust in American institutions clear. And yet, this generation held the most at stake as the inheritors of our democracy.

The 250th anniversary presented an opportunity to invite this next generation into the innermost workings of the American story itself, working with museums, historic sites and civic institutions **to put their stamp on the 250th commemoration and kickstart a lasting increase in youth representation across our systems.**

Over three years, Youth250 built and activated the infrastructure to drive a measurable increase in youth influence, contribution and visibility in civic life.

We challenged leaders and institutions to include the next generation in decision-making, not just for the benefit of young people, but for the future sustainability of our institutions themselves. We asked: **what might the United States be like with young people in every room where decisions are made?**

Key innovative elements helped us paint that picture, including:

- A 100-member national youth advisory board that logged more than 4,000 combined hours of training and advising for 150+ institutions
- Tools that reached thousands of institutions, including the Teen Toolkit and Gen Z Engagement Scorecard
- Public platforms, from 400+ Letters to America to the touring Youth250 Declaration that put young people's words center stage

Young people involved in Youth250 reported greater levels of **confidence, sense of being heard, connection to country and even patriotism**, nuanced as that measure can be. Every institution that worked with the Bureau said it improved their capacity for engaging young people. And notably, institutions kept building youth councils and new roles long after their work with us, clear evidence that Youth250 generated change lasting far beyond this anniversary moment.

From celebrity and press pickup to structural governance changes, the throughline in this report is **contribution**: young people dreaming, deciding, and building; with older generations, established leaders and institutions.

As Youth250 comes to a close, Made By Us carries this work forward shaped by **11 key insights**. Over the next five years, in hundreds of cultural institutions, we will unleash a tidal wave of youth leadership in shaping America's story, past and future, through deep community collaboration, support for third spaces, intergenerational networks, historical relevance and civic participation.

Thanks for helping us build Youth250. We invite you to join us in what comes next.

By The Numbers

Youth Roles and Influence

\$1M

put directly in young people's hands — wages, stipends, and microgrants

500+

teens and young adults in advisory, fellowship, contributor or ambassador roles

400

youth Letters to America received or performed, from 25 states and 4 countries

13.3M

reached by Youth250 content and stories

Institutional Transformation

250

institutions used Bureau services for advising or youth roles; 100% said it improved their work

671

organizations have taken the Gen Z Engagement Scorecard or YouthSync Rubric

7,500

times the Youth250 toolkit has been accessed by organizations

10+

institutions have launched new youth councils or roles as a result of Youth250

Narrative + Attitudinal Shift

51-pt

average increase in Bureau members feeling valued by older generations

45

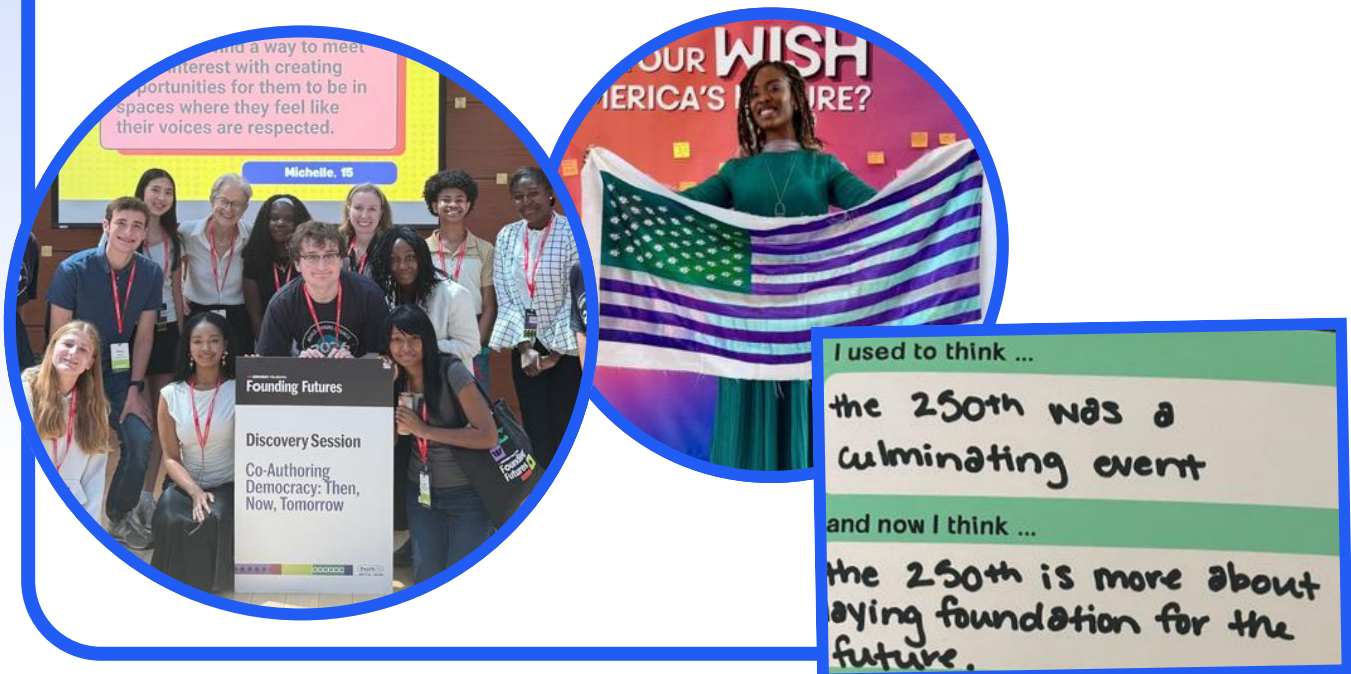
events and convenings, from workshops to conferences and youth-led events

400

youth Letters to America circulated nationwide

90%

of Letters to America participants felt more seen and heard



Part I: Project Origins

“Will Gen Z Care About the 250th?”

In 2023, with the U.S. 250th anniversary on the far horizon, Made By Us began to explore the landscape of plans for the commemoration. The national America250 commission was early in developing plans, as were museums across the country, and media, funders and the general public were largely unaware of or uninterested in the approaching anniversary. Virtually no one was attentive to the generational collision that would soon be at play.

The largest youth generation in U.S. history had already sparked a social, economic and political reckoning in American institutions and civic life. At Made By Us, we tracked these trends as well as Gen Z's record low levels of trust, patriotism, hope for the future and faith in democracy, driven in part by a lack of representation in the nation and systems they stood to inherit.

We saw that the United States' big birthday would arrive just as this generation crossed into adult citizenship; and we saw, too, that the gaps in programming planned so far mirrored the gaps in civic life for young people. Traditional history and civics programs would not sufficiently speak to their needs, in their language, on their terms – and they would not likely participate.

On the flip side, if we seized this opportunity to design a commemoration with and for the next generation, it could **reignite connection to the American story, involve youth perspective in creating solutions for tomorrow, and drive increased civic participation long-term.**

We published a call to action, “[Will Gen Z Care About the 250th?](#)” and began to gather data.

Since 2021, Made By Us has coordinated a national [Civic Season](#), an innovative, collective campaign from Juneteenth to July 4th each summer, co-designed by Gen Z and museums. Similarly driven by the desire to shift historical programming closer to youth needs, and to foster deeper connection to community and country, Civic Season offered years of insights from approaches tested in varied contexts. So we knew that young people ask four key questions when it comes to participating in civic life:

“IS THIS FOR ME?”

“WHO ELSE WILL BE THERE?”

“DO I KNOW ENOUGH?”

“WHY SHOULD I CARE?”



Among 18-29 year-olds:

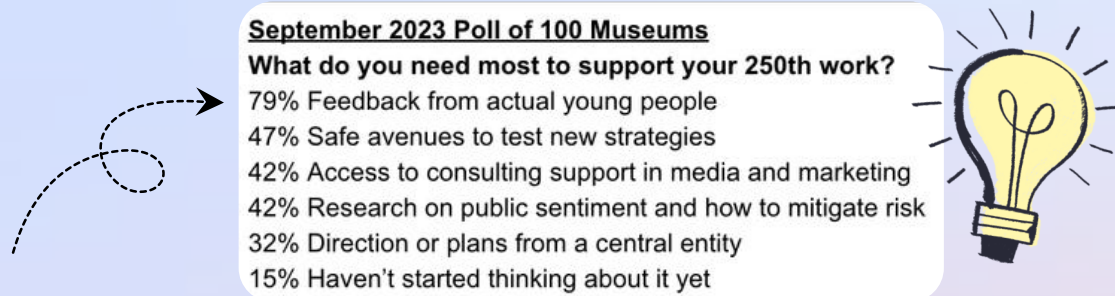
16% think U.S. democracy is working well for their generation

36% believe democracy can address the country's pressing issues

15% say the American Dream still exists (33% of 65+ say so)

[Tufts CIRCLE 2026](#); [Pew Research 2024](#)

The fastest and most effective path to addressing these needs is to involve young people in decision-making. But across the board, American institutions struggled with such inclusion, and museums were not immune. Our survey of 150 museums in 2023 ranked “input from actual young people” as the top item museums most wanted to support their 250th planning.



In an instant, a solution emerged: **Made By Us could spin up a cohort of trained, paid youth advisors and match them with cultural institutions** seeking input and fresh perspectives. We could provide this as a service to the field for the U.S. 250th, and in doing so, show hundreds of institutions the value of including and investing in youth as a best practice.

Immediately, a second outcome became evident: by building this concept, which became the Youth250 Bureau, the arts and culture sector would **pilot a first-of-its-kind shared solution that could be emulated across sectors** as a means to rebuild trust, strengthen resiliency and prepare our democracy for tomorrow.

Funders and partners came in to support this effort, and we got to work on four goals:

- 1 **MAKE THE UNITED STATES' 250TH ANNIVERSARY A MEMORABLE, MEANINGFUL SPRINGBOARD INTO THE COUNTRY'S NEXT CHAPTER**
- 2 **HELP YOUNG ADULTS FEEL SEEN, HEARD, AND REPRESENTED**
- 3 **MAKE CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS MORE RESPONSIVE AND NIMBLE FOR YOUNGER AUDIENCES**
- 4 **DRIVE A PERMANENT SHIFT IN HOW INSTITUTIONS OPERATE THROUGH OUR MODELS AND INSIGHTS**

The Youth250 Bureau would be the cornerstone of our offerings, but we knew we would need broadly accessible tools for assessment and implementation (Youth250 Toolkit, Teen Toolkit).

To inform this, we began with research and discovery.

Part II: Research & Design

Imagine & Incubate Workshops

Supported by IMLS, we held a series of day-long, facilitated workshops to ask: how might we transform the 250th for young people? Across 6 workshops, we gathered 260 participants with an even split between local young adults and local civic leaders.

In historic settings at the Atlanta History Center, Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, Utah State Capitol, Conner Prairie in Indianapolis, and Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, groups participated in design questions, sticky-note brainstorms, backcasting from 2076, and even a cross-generational "meme exchange" to surface differences in language and cultural references. Aaron Wilson-Ahlstrom from Experience Institute facilitated. These exercises became part of the Youth250 Toolkit itself, so that any institution could replicate the workshop.

In Palo Alto, we joined the Future's Happening convening at the Stanford d.school to engage futurists and students in crafting the design brief for the Youth250 Bureau.

The workshops surfaced what young people and institutions could build together, and informed the rest of the project. As one Gen Z participant put it:

"I realized, how could people in 1776 possibly envision where we would be today? They were probably thinking of the most positive and optimistic scenario. So it's not about what they got wrong, but about the spirit that they had. We have even more options and information and power today... what are we going to do with it?"

6

workshops

260

participants

Hosted by:

Atlanta History Center
Atlanta, GA

Conner Prairie
Fishers, IN

Eastern State Penitentiary
Philadelphia, PA

Smithsonian National
Museum of American History
Washington, DC

Stanford d.School
Palo Alto, CA

Utah State Capitol
Salt Lake City, UT

I used to think ...

that I was pretty isolated in my frustrations, political anxieties, interests for how to think about the U.S. and its future

and now I think ...

there are a lot of people out there with the same feelings, similar interests/passions, concerns, and a lot of willingness to try to make positive change.



Fears

AI disinformation

I'm growing up. I have no idea how to imagine life outside of university. I have no idea how to imagine life outside of living in my house of the past 21 years. Not sure I'll ever feel like I'm supposed to be 26.

I think the every day person is not in the extreme, I worry our Political/Industry leaders will continue to push the fringe until there is no turning back. Basically, civil war.

- Lack of empathy in society.
- Environmental health
- Media - divisive, negative, harmful.

Sources of Hope

Making art. Stories!

My family, friends, faith

learn stories of problem solvers

Disassociate through 90s sitcoms, 90s R & B books

Music, talking w/ loved ones,

join orgs + workshops like Youth250



"I used to think institutions have to get it perfect and tell all of the stories, and now that's shifted to, I think if institutions create the space for people to show up then people will come tell their own stories."

"I used to think that the old folk were invited to this meeting because we were gonna teach y'all something. And I want to thank all the Gen Z because you all have inspired and taught all of us."

"I wish there was a way to do this more often with such a diverse range of age and background. I think our societies would all really benefit from that."

Youth250 Toolkit + Teen Toolkit

with



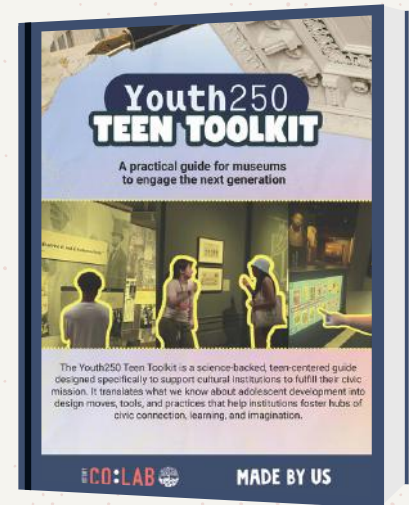
To capture our learnings and provide training tools and templates for more institutions, we worked with **History Co:Lab** to produce the Youth250 Toolkit and Teen Toolkit. Within its first few months, 7,500 staff had accessed the toolkits.

History Co:Lab's adolescent learning scientists co-designed the Teen Toolkit with youth, surfacing the **7 Domains of Civic Thriving** to anchor what teens need in museum spaces: a place to **Belong, Be, Become, Connect, Learn, Do and Lead**.

Together, the Youth250 Toolkits contain:

- Generational snapshots on Gen Z and Gen Alpha, drawn from research on demographics, information habits, politics, technology use, and civic attitudes
- Tip sheets for intergenerational work, barriers and opportunities
- Planning worksheets and workshop scripts to use with colleagues
- Plug-and-play templates for proven activities to engage youth
- Case studies from museums implementing these approaches

Demand for training on the Toolkit and support with implementation outpaced what our small teams could easily staff. Made By Us and History Co:Lab have begun fielding requests for consulting support from individual museums, state-wide museum systems, and networks of libraries, performing arts organizations, theaters and live music venues to apply these learnings.



7 Domains FOR Civic Thriving

A Place to
BELONG

A Place to
BE

A Place to
BECOME

A Place to
CONNECT

A Place to
LEARN

A Place to
DO

A Place to
LEAD

8,600

unique visitors to date

9

conference sessions
on the Toolkit

170

staff signed up for a
community of practice

671

self-assessment takers



"The toolkit truly reflects what teens hope to see, feel, and hear when visiting museums. I think more museums should be able to recognize the importance of authentic representation for young people as they are forming their own identities. It can be hugely empowering to be able to see ourselves and stories from our heritage being reflected in museums."

Kaelyn Tan, 17, CA

YouthSync Rubric

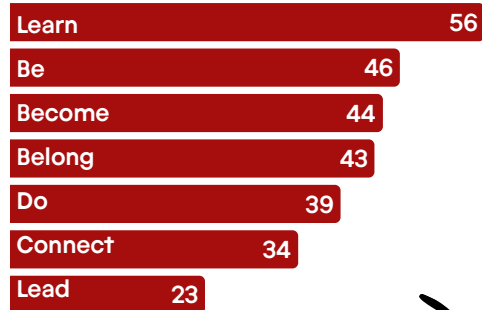
by History Co:Lab

Measures an organization's **internal posture** toward youth, tracking the teen experience across the **7 Domains of Civic Thriving**.

Respondents have most developed their capacity to serve as places for teens to **Learn** (56%). In the next tier, they are places for teens to **Be** (46%), **Become** (44%), **Belong** (43%), the foundations of basic connection. Weaker roles are serving as places to **Do** (39%), **Connect** (34%) and by far the most elusive, a place to help teens **Lead** (23%).

178 quiz takers

8% Thriving
38% Developing
54% Emerging



Gen Z Scorecard

by Made By Us

Built by youth, the Scorecard tracks investment in youth-engagement strategies across 30 tactics, and surfaces constraints and opportunities.

493 scorecard takers

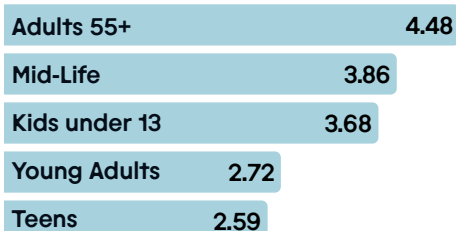
14/30 average score

74% say staff capacity is their biggest constraint

63% have youth "trainee" roles like internships

But just half as many have youth contributor or leadership roles like council seats, advisors, speakers or creators.

How well do you think you serve each group?



What We Learned

Alongside external research and our own consistent insights, these tools highlighted the dearth of opportunities for young people to **contribute and lead**. This shaped the future of the project and our ongoing work.

When young people are invited to contribute their ideas, perspectives and skills, this leads to higher rates of civic participation, responsibility, hope and resilience; and institutions and communities benefit from their "fresh eyes."

Part III: Youth Influence, Contribution and Visibility

Youth250's work drove three objectives:



Youth Influence

Youth influence happens when young people are included as equals in decision-making and given real power. Through Bureau consultations, leadership roles and governance positions, we increased the level of youth influence on America's institutions and leaders.



Youth Contribution

Youth contribution means creating new avenues for young people to have a meaningful experience as they write, create, advise, speak and reflect on the United States, putting the American story in their own words.



Youth Visibility

Youth visibility refers to making young voices and perspectives heard and seen in arenas where they have previously been absent: legacy media, prestigious conferences, high-powered stages, and platforms and events where the audience is typically 55+ or highly credentialed.





Youth Influence

Youth250 Bureau

At the center of this pillar is the Youth250 Bureau: America's first national youth advisory board.

The Bureau was built to be diverse in every sense, and a key design choice was to make the role **extremely part-time, a few hours a month**, so that participants could draw from their other identities and responsibilities at work, school or social life. Bureau members represent many walks of life: students and working professionals, artists and gamers, gig workers and new immigrants, military service members and farmers, a truer representation of this generation than a narrow slice of hand-raisers chosen for credentials.

100

members ages 18-30

500

applicants from 50 states

25

hours of training

250+

consultations and placements

A hundred young Americans became the Youth250 Bureau, and today they sit on the boards of museums and foundations, engage with policymakers, and are changing the fabric of their own communities. History isn't something that happens to us and gets discovered later. It's something ordinary people shape in real time, with their community behind them. That support is essential. It's the only reason history gets made instead of missed.

ALEX EDGAR, YOUTH250 BUREAU LEADER



HOW IT WORKED

Bureau members earned a stipend and worked in cohorts of 10, led by a peer leader. They kicked off their tenure with 25 hours of training from the Made By Us Team and from experts at Smithsonian, McKinsey, Teen Vogue, Hopelab, and CoGenerate, among others.

From there, the Bureau completed more than 150 consultations for institutions and initiatives including the National Archives' 100 Docs challenge, Utah's America's Potluck, PBS and Ken Burns' The American Revolution, the Obama Foundation, Oregon Humanities, the International Spy Museum, and Campus Compact's 250th Community.

Quarterly pulse surveys of Bureau members tracked a 51-point increase in feeling valued by older generations, a 49-point increase in their sense of influence over the country's future, and a 36-point increase in patriotism, alongside gains in cross-generational confidence and comfort speaking up.



"Having the confidence to speak up as a young person is something that has come from my time with Youth250."
Tyler Tucker, 26, DC



"As a result of the Youth250 consultations, I feel confident sharing my ideas and insights in any space."
Kayla Pilgrim, 18, IL

Youth250 Bureau members became:

strategists

speakers

advisors

designers

storytellers

... architects of the 250th itself.

FOR INSTITUTIONS

100% of organizations say getting youth input:

- ↑ increased understanding of Gen Z
- ↑ improved their U.S. 250th strategy
- ↑ raised their confidence in engaging young audiences

Organizations planned to implement 80% of youth recommendations within a year.

FOR YOUTH

+ **49**
pts

ability to influence the future of the U.S.

+ **36**
pts

feeling patriotic

+ **23**
pts

confidence working with other generations

+ **51**
pts

feeling valued by older generations

"Running a program without public input is like building a house without a blueprint. Running a Gen Z program without Gen Z input is just not smart. The Youth250 Bureau ensures you don't have to plan or run a program without youth at the table."

— Adam Rozan, Smithsonian's National Museum of American History

It was great to jump on a call with Gen Z to pitch an idea and hear their responses and suggestions for improvement in real time.

— Illinois State Museum

"Before joining, I was hesitant to use titles like patriotism or pride. While there is much to improve, I have greater hope for the future through working with the Bureau."

— Halle Gensler, 23, IL



Board Seats, Committees and Setting the Agenda ✓

One of the greatest successes of Youth250 are the two Gen Z board seats installed at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, in partnership with Made By Us. We supported board training and the selection of candidates for two young people, Sarah Fling and Wyatt Nako, both Youth250 Bureau members, to serve on the museum's top board - a first.

Bureau members joined the Illinois America250 Commission, the South Carolina America250 Commission, the New Hampshire 250th Working Group, CoGenerate and the board of Hopelab.

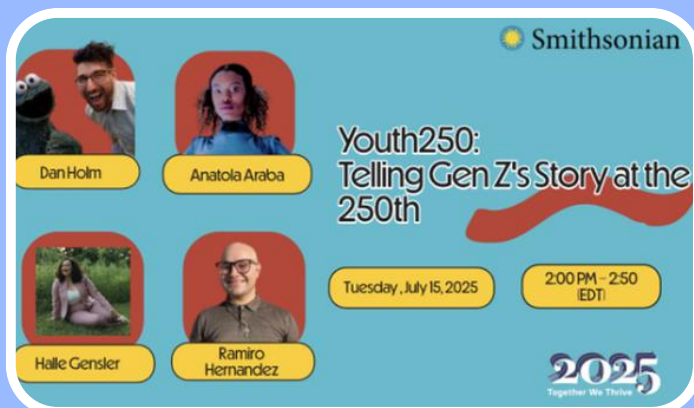
We drove a shift in the agenda at SXSW ("Gen Z vs. the Gerontocracy" panel), TED Democracy (featuring 11 teenagers ages 13-17), and the Policylink Equity Summit (featuring a Made By Us delegation of 15 youth and a closing speaker). Youth250 panels took the stage at the American Alliance of Museums, the American Association for State and Local History, the Smithsonian Education Summit, Lincoln Presidential Ideas Forum and Carnegie Corporation's Summit on National Service, among dozens of other stages and programs.



Kayla Pilgrim, 18, on the Illinois 250 State Commission



Angelina Johnson, 24, at Lincoln Ideas Forum



Smithsonian Education Summit, 2025



Youth250 Delegation at Policylink Summit

National Museum of American History Adds Five New Members to Advisory Board

Two Are the Board's First Representatives of Generation Z



Left: "Gen Z vs the Gerontocracy" at SXSW 2025;
Bottom left: Youth250 Bureau members at the opening of the Emancipation Proclamation at National Archives;
Bottom right: Youth250 panel at Association of African American Museums Conference



TED DEMOCRACY

When TED Democracy released its lineup, Made By Us and History Co:Lab reached out to ensure youth voices were there.

In a sold-out session at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia, 11 teenagers ages 13 to 17 shared their candid perspectives to a much older, credentialed crowd - who asked questions, lingered late + wanted even more!





Youth Contribution

Youth250 Content Corps

After getting such widespread interest from Bureau applicants, we decided to open another avenue for young people to contribute directly to the 250th through content and storytelling.

350 young people, ages 13 to 30, joined the volunteer Youth250 Content Corps.

We split the group into under- and over-18, provided initial training and circulated content prompts and publication opportunities.

"Can We Talk? It's Gen Z"

A bi-monthly Substack uplifting youth voices for leaders and institutions.

500 subscribers **12,000** views

Youth250 Writing Club with National History Day

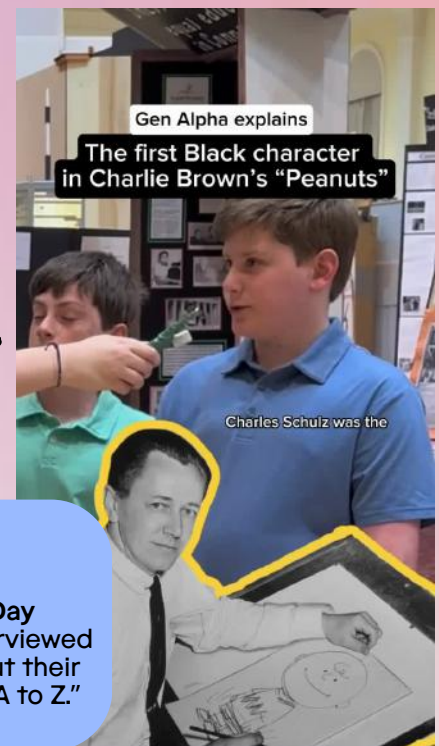
A former Washington Post editor held weekly meetings to research, write and pitch historical stories from youth.

168 members **12** meetings

Online Storytelling

Content Corps members created videos & articles for Made By Us channels.

100+ content pieces



At the National History Day competition, Made By Us interviewed Gen Alpha participants about their history projects in a series: "A to Z."

"I am really glad that writing programs like this exist for students!"

"I am really enjoying Roots by Alex Haley that I borrowed from the library last week. I can barely put it down to do life stuff."



Writing Club articles were featured in the Boston Globe, Substack, Medium, Libby blog, The New York Historical and more.

Can We Talk? It's Gen Z

Is Civics Education Enough to Engage Young Adults?

Gen Z is looking for something more tangible than civic education. The question is: are our institutions ready to bring...
OCT 15, 2025



Gen Z Wants to Help, Actually

Although Gen Z is sometimes stereotyped as lazy or unwilling to work, the Youth250 Bureau shows us that young adults are...
OCT 1, 2025 • MADE BY US



History Class Ought to Take a Lesson From TikTok

Don't overlook the element of surprise to fuel learning



Wish Walls, designed by Gen Z

As the 250th approached, Made By Us worked with 26-year-old Katie Costa to design a 28-foot mural on display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History during Civic Season, inviting wishes for America's future.

The Smithsonian collected nearly 10,000 wishes, many stored in a time capsule to be opened in 50 years. Costa's design inspired more than 300 pop-up Wish Walls across the country, at parks, stadiums, libraries and festivals, and was featured on CNN and PBS.

Our series "Gen Z at the 250th" chronicled a wide range of young people shaping this moment, from filmmakers to geocachers to textile weavers.

Meet the 18-Year-Old Filmmaker Who Captured the Navy's Historic Apology to the Tlingit People in Alaska

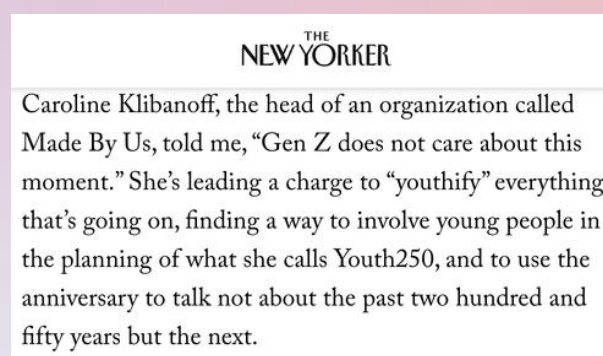
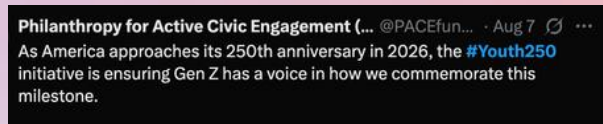
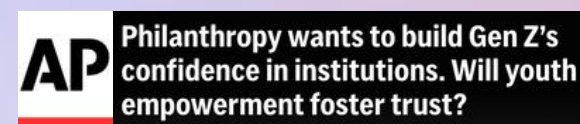
These West Virginia Students Started a Business to Spark Connection with America's Founding Documents

Meet the 27-Year-Old Stitching America Back Together — Literally

Addressing America in Teen Vogue and Washington Post

On July 4, 2025, with a year to go until the 250th anniversary, we published an open letter and video in Teen Vogue with the call to action: **“bring us into every room where decisions are being made.”** The letter reached 1.6 million people and was co-signed and reposted by 25 cross-sector leading organizations, like Points of Light and Future Caucus.

The same day, a dedicated Youth250 letters section ran in the print and digital Washington Post, kicking off coverage of Youth250 in AP, WSJ and the New Yorker. Youth250 leader Alex Edgar was named to Forbes 30 Under 30 and a Young Futures Awardee.



Narrative Campaign

A huge part of shifting the narrative for America's 250th was simply helping leaders and institutions SEE younger generations.

We worked with Team DSB to deliver a robust campaign strategy for Youth250 that included influencer partnerships, PR outreach, press releases, media training for youth, and video and content production across platforms. An entirely Gen Z creative team produced media for the Youth250 Our Declaration event, which fed the news cycle for months, and coordinated youth speakers with reporters at AP, CBS This Morning, [Military.com](https://www.military.com), Forbes, CSPAN, local news outlets and podcasts.

Short-form and long-form video content hit platforms and channels including Substack, influencer pages and youth media.

250 US 'Wish Walls' Share Gen Z's 90,000-Plus Hopes & Fears of America's Next 250 Years

How Gen Z Wants to Celebrate America's 250th

Gen Z Has Entered the Chat: What We Want from Museums

Young Americans Launch "Letters to America" Initiative Ahead of 250th Anniversary

National coalition launches Letters to America for 250th anniversary

Alex Edgar Won't Let Older Generations Off the Hook

The Youth250 co-founder and first Gen Z board member of Points of Light says young people can't save democracy alone, and shouldn't have to.

Gen Z Panel Discussion on America at 250

After the Birthday Cake: Baking a 15-Year Arc of Civic Renewal

BY DR. JANE KAMENSKY AND CAROLINE KLIBANOFF

The Declaration's 250th anniversary opens a 15-year civic window. Thomas Jefferson's Monticello President Jane Kamensky and Made By Us Executive Director Caroline Klibanoff discuss why we must use it to build knowledge, skills, and character for the next generation of citizens.



Dillon St. Bernard is a co-founder of Youth250, a nonpartisan, Gen Z-led effort to help shape America's next 250 years from the perspective of those who have the greatest stake in it: Young people.



Our Declaration

On February 17, 2026, Made By Us convened **Our Declaration** at the **National Constitution Center**, an event that aired on C-SPAN where young people collaboratively authored the Youth250 Declaration – a 12-foot scroll outlining Gen Z's grievances, truths, vision and commitments for tomorrow – right across the street from where the original document was drafted by the Founders. Gen Z artist **Haley McDevitt** synthesized notes.

During the day, young people took the stage to share reflections on America at 250, including Shania Bennett from the Philadelphia Mayor's Office, who is now running for Mayor at age 26. Eight young people performed "Letters to America" in a creative showcase including singing, dance, spoken word and documentary.

Youth delegates signed the Declaration before it began its national tour around the country. In response to it, young people in Los Angeles and Tampa crafted their own local declarations, adapting the format.





YOUTH250 DECLARATION TOUR STOPS

- Carpenters' Hall - Philadelphia, PA
- America's Black Holocaust Museum - Milwaukee, WI
- Cincinnati Museum Center - Cincinnati, OH
- Heritage Village Museum - Pinellas County, FL (Top)
- James Madison's Montpelier - Orange County, VA
- Conner Prairie - Fishers, IN
- Youth250 LA at The Democracy Center at Japanese American National Museum (Right)



What Youth250: Our Declaration Taught Me About Youth Leadership

"The young leaders I met at Youth250 were not waiting to be discovered. They were already leading." – Omar Naeem

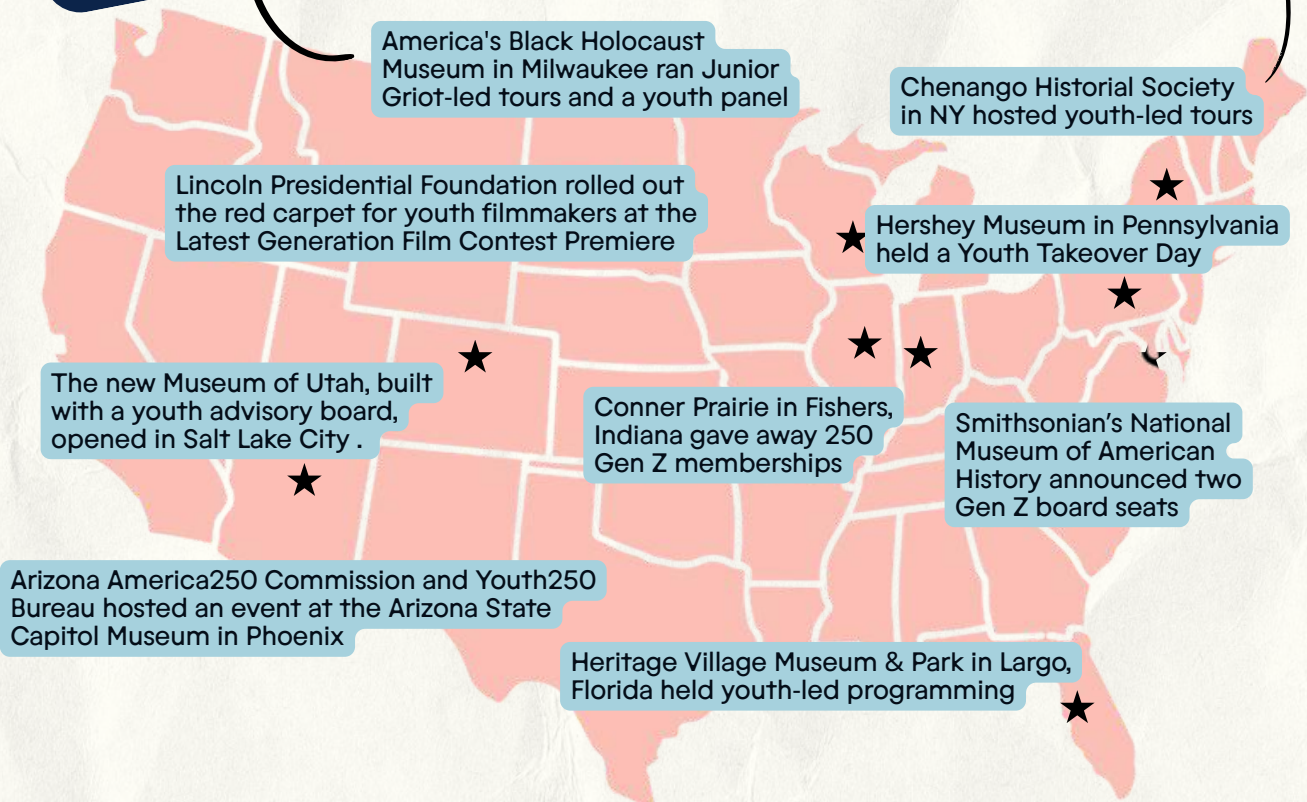




Youth Visibility

National Youth Day

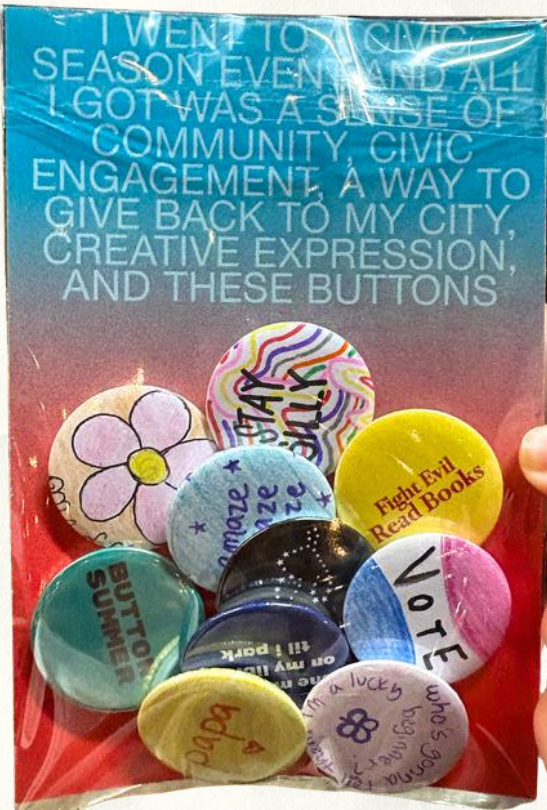
Made By Us marked the midpoint of Civic Season with the inaugural National Youth Day, co-designed by Civic Season Design Fellows and Youth250 Bureau members. Institutions across the country handed young people the microphone for the day, celebrated youth creators and announced new youth roles and programs.



Civic Season Microgrants

Civic Season Microgrants supported youth-led local activations during Civic Season and the 250th. Events included:

- Shayna Canty's One Direction-themed, mental health support event in Stroudsburg, PA
- Nsiong Udosen's hands-on civic clay art salon in New York City, NY
- Catherine Dao's button-making event on identity and self-expression in Los Angeles, CA
- KaRa Lyn Thrasher's participatory budgeting and storytelling project in Phoenix, AZ
- Angelina Johnson's and Alexandra Vidal's trivia nights in Washington, D.C., and Fort Lee, NJ
- Kaylee LaTocha's live youth performance, radio show and time capsule in Anchorage, AK
- Khadidah Stone's interactive storytelling archive in Birmingham, AL
- Sofia Alvarez's community cultural celebration in Los Angeles, CA



Service could be an opportunity to meet younger generations' desire for in-person connections. Sofia Alvarez — a cohort lead for the Youth250 Bureau, a separate effort to center Gen Z perspectives throughout next year's programming — said young people want "third spaces." That means somewhere outside of home, school or work that feels "safe," she said, but doesn't require spending money.

Dear America,
 They tell us we are the future.
 But the future isn't waiting somewhere far away.
 The future is sitting in classrooms today.
 The future is walking crowded hallways,
 studying for tests, working after school,
 caring for family, and trying to figure out
 what comes next. The future is already here...
 - Taelyn Gray, 14 , Philadelphia, PA



Letters to America

As the 250th got closer, there remained a lack of presence of youth perspectives across the country. There were calls for younger people to learn more history and civics, to serve as volunteers, to register and vote, to trust institutions more, and to appreciate and sustain democracy. But no one was asking young people what they needed or what was missing, or even what they thought.

Letters to America was an invitation for youth ages 13 to 30 to put their own words to the country in writing, spoken word, drawing, or film. Sparked by the Letters to America performed on stage at the "Youth250 Our Declaration" event, we opened the call nationwide and received more than 400 letters from 25 states and 4 countries.

The letters that came back ranged from deeply personal (teenagers writing about growing up post-9/11, in the shadow of a pandemic, and inside a polarized news cycle) to pointedly civic, including a Threads series tying a youth letter to the Supreme Court's birthright citizenship ruling that drew 20,000+ views and shares from celebrities Mark Ruffalo and Mandy Patinkin.

Publishing Partners

400 letters **25** states **3.2M** people reached

LNN **HER CAMPUS™** **CNN**

Arkansas Democrat Gazette

Leveraging Our Differences
FULCRUM



Unified Youth



Letters were featured in a 12-consecutive-week column with Latino News Network and The Fulcrum, quoted at length by CNN from 16-year-old Annalise Huang's letter, and published on HerCampus. Organizations like Opportunity Youth and A Pictures' Worth launched spinoff campaigns on mental health and Cincinnati stories (respectively) and large events featured youth letters, like the Arkansas Democrat Gazette and Clinton Presidential Library teaming up on a booth at the Arkansas Folk Festival.

Top Themes in Letters



America has powerful, inspiring ideals - that we haven't lived up to.



Calling for a greater sense of shared responsibility, "we"



Young people are already organizing, creating, and leading - give us a chance to really change the future.



Immigration and diversity are central to what America means.



We want an honest, inclusive history.



Community is the antidote to isolation.



The American Dream must become attainable.



Young people are anxious and exhausted about the present and future.



America is unfinished - we have to build what comes next.

Excerpts

"In summary, the idea of America is great, and the execution is pretty good, but we should strive to make the reality great."

Alex, 13, Ellicott City MD

This is what I've come to understand:

America is not just a place you're born into. It is something you grow into.

As someone who didn't start her story in this country but is growing up in it, I carry both gratitude and responsibility. Gratitude for the opportunities I've been given. Responsibility to help make those opportunities real for others.

So here is my wish for America: that we continue to open doors, not close them. That we learn to see strength in diversity, not division. That we remember that progress is not something that happens to us—it is something we create, together. America, you are still becoming. And I am proud to be part of that story.

Mary, 16, North Carolina



Who Told You You Weren't
Already Free?



T. Malik, 29, Jackson MS

HER CAMPUS



Caitlyn, 21, Orlando FL

CULTURE STYLE WELLNESS LIFE CAREER MORE

THE AMERICA GEN Z
INHERITED IS EXHAUSTING,
BUT WE STILL HAVE HOPE

MAY 20, 2020



CAITLYN VASEY

Dear America: Pick Up A Book

Gabriela, 14, Philadelphia, PA

I Mourn for the World I was Promised

Arlene, 26, Indianapolis IN

Hoping - from Switzerland

I am a spectator, witnessing growth

I am a spectator, witnessing that growth at cost, cost to our past, our present, and our future but most importantly, our identity

I am a spectator, one who has no means of change, no method of conveying my opinion, spectating the shift of tides that separate me from my nation

I am in awe

I am in awe of our nation, rising, pushing forward with the persistence of the ocean, driving itself towards its destiny, in the only way that we know how

I am a product

I am a product of a failing land, a land once meant to bind us together under the word United

Sean, 16, Luzerne Switzerland

Impact and Reach

For participants:

100% found it easy to participate and felt supported

91% felt more seen and heard

82% felt more connected to the 250th

73% felt more connected to the USA

55% felt nervous to submit their Letter

Ripple Effects

This campaign inspired spin-offs and expansions:

- **Heather Cox Richardson** recruited 4 youth speakers to host her 250th series, to 150k views
- **A Picture's Worth** in Cincinnati launched a portal to capture voice notes from local youth
- **The Clinton Presidential Library** and Arkansas Democrat-Gazette hosted a Letter-writing booth at the Arkansas Folk Festival
- **Opportunity Youth** launched a spinoff campaign for Letters to America focused on mental health

"I loved this campaign, and think there should be year-round opportunities for young people to share their views on our nation and democracy.

I would love to see Made By Us continue open calls like this, especially with guaranteed publication partners."

– Jason Vadnos, 19, Nashville



David Selditz 🌟 David Selditz Jun 28

♥ Liked by Heather Cox Richardson

When I listen to this younger generation and their fight for a better future elevates my hope. The young blood is sorely needed.

Gerri Horka 🌟 2d

Wonderful to see the upcoming generation of leaders taking part in this!



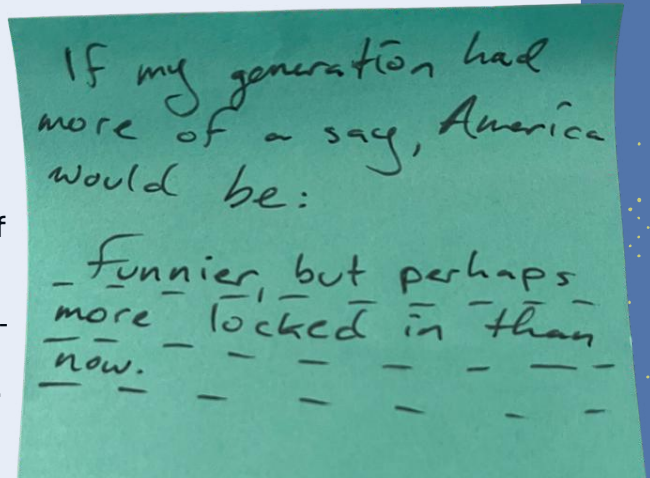
What Changed

For Youth

Confidence and a seat at the table

Youth250 moved young people into rooms that had never had a seat for them before.

Bureau members reported measurable gains in how connected they feel to their country and to older generations: a 51-point increase in feeling valued by older generations, a 49-point increase in their sense of influence over the country's future, a 36-point increase in patriotism, a 23-point increase in confidence collaborating across generations, and a 14-point increase in comfort speaking up. Letters to America participants reported similarly strong results. In all, more than 500 young people served in a formal advisory, fellowship, or ambassador capacity connected to Youth250.



Young people involved in Youth250 continue to innovate and spin off ideas into new avenues for impact, including the New Voters 250 Fellowship, LEAD250, and Future250 from Generation Citizen.

For Institutions

Structural change and a model that works

Every institution that worked with the Youth250 Bureau reported improved understanding of Gen Z, an improved 250th strategy, more confidence engaging young audiences, and said they would recommend the Bureau to peers.

Beyond this, we received inbound interest in the Bureau model from other sectors including libraries and consumer brands. As one person shared, "most youth aren't given opportunities like this for influence," and next-generation advisory groups can open doors for emerging talent.

Further, institutions kept building youth infrastructure of their own after their work with Youth250. New youth roles and advisory boards have been approved at institutions that never had them before; leaders have made real commitments to youth inclusion across programming; and we continue to receive updates about Youth250 spinoffs in Los Angeles, Arizona, Cincinnati and more.

Youth250 gave institutions the proof and access needed to embrace, and prepare for, the future ahead. Youth inclusion has become the bar for business success, seen not just as a "nice to have" but as essential for intelligence and strategy.

"When I met with the Gen Z-ers of Youth250, I was inspired by their vision for how we could celebrate this moment. Youth250 is an essential resource for organizations that want to better serve younger people: direct access to real input from youth voices across the country."

Norman Burns, President and CEO, Conner Prairie



What We Learned

YOUTH

BELONGING, RELEVANCE, AUTHENTICITY, PARTICIPATION

Across this work, Gen Z consistently asked for four things:

Belonging: museums as community and third spaces

Participation: a real hand in shaping and co-creating programs

Relevance: history connected to the issues shaping life today

Authenticity: institutions that communicate honestly and humanely

"Young people do not want proximity to institutions. They want representation and connection within them."

ALEX EDGAR, 23

ROLES WITH STRUCTURE

Across our efforts young people continually appreciated more scaffolding, structure and clarity.

Their world is fast-paced and multiplatform. If we can offer and model very concrete structures (write a letter; attend board meetings; speak on a panel), we can give them a foothold in civic life they can leverage and point to as experience and contribution.

REAL STAKES

The Bureau's institutional consulting, Letters to America's press commitments and celebrity pickup, and the Youth250 Declaration mounted for thousands of historic-site visitors worked because they put young people directly in front of decision-makers and the public eye. The work was visible and consequential.

EARLIER OPPORTUNITIES

The teen years are a short time frame with fewer avenues to connect directly with youth (versus going through a teacher or school), making it challenging to sustain relationships. By creating a continuous connection with history and civics that begins in the teen years and extends through early adulthood, we can fully support a critical window for connection and contribution; while introducing our institutions to their newest constituents sooner for planning.

COUNTER THE HOPE DEFICIT

There is still a hope deficit - but a counter-narrative exists. Young people across America are taking civic action in ways that go unseen by survey data and knowledge assessments. Yes, the data is dire; but their eroded faith in institutions is a call to action, not a reason to scold. Help them see what is possible. Share stories of history when change was made. Do long term thinking (they have many more years at stake here). Embed radical hope.

RITUALS MATTER

We need rituals that generate outcomes. The 250th proved that a nationwide, intergenerationally-shaped civic ritual that actually means something is something the country needs on an ongoing basis. That is the case for continuing Civic Season for years to come.

INSTITUTIONS ► UNITED STATES

CAPACITY IS STRAINED

Institutions have worked through board and C-suite resistance, unfamiliarity with younger generations, and the pull of existing programs. The barrier that remains is budget and staff. Demand for custom coaching and tools outpaced what our lean team could staff, and requests for Bureau support have continued apace.

BUT...

COLLABORATION IS THE MULTIPLIER

The Bureau was a shared, field-wide resource, and we've seen how templates for Civic Season, Wish Walls and Letters to America sparked uptake because they filled a gap. The next step is shared communications, design and storytelling, moving from toolkits and materials to co-resourced people power. What the field needs now is funding and infrastructure for collaboration itself.

Made By Us exists to build that capacity at scale.

MUSEUMS ARE CIVIC HUBS

Museums are trusted, nonpartisan spaces that hold history, complexity and imagination together. According to AASLH, there are more than 21,000 history organizations across the United States, a trusted local presence in nearly every community. Young people are looking to museums to be places for civic dialogue, reliable information, social gathering and identity exploration. A forthcoming tool from Made By Us will help assess and strengthen these roles for museums.

THE FUTURE IS INTERGENERATIONAL

Accepting that none of us knows what tomorrow brings gives us the humility to invite new voices to imagine and shape it. Waiting until young people are deemed "ready" to lead means losing their unique power as novices. Letting them figure it out on their own squanders the expertise and wisdom we can share. Young people and established institutions need each other to shape the future.

LOCAL + PLACE-BASED FIRST

Although Civic Season and Youth250 are national campaigns, the programming is activated locally, led for the most part by museums and historic sites – places that are anchors of a community's local civic ecosystem.

"Most people will not hold public office, or shape national policy, or organize political coalitions...

Accessible, local efforts increase the opportunity for broad swaths of a local community to come to meaningfully know and understand one another.

The power of a group fitness class at the YMCA or a library-sponsored book club to foster engagement across generations, socioeconomic classes, or ethnic backgrounds cannot be overstated."

**GINA BEVIGLIA, F.M. KIRBY FOUNDATION
IN YOUTH250 SUBSTACK**

What's Next

Youth250 showed what happens when young people get a real seat at the table. Made By Us is carrying three commitments forward, and we invite you to build them with us.

A Civic Ritual for Every Summer

The 250th proved the need for an intergenerational rite of civic imagination. Civic Season has proven to be that durable, magnetic ritual, every summer between Juneteenth and July 4th. Civic Season already lives in 800 communities and has reached 85 million Americans in 6 years. Next, we'll build **deep local leadership, high-profile partnerships and civic hope activations** that make Civic Season an enduring fixture of the American calendar.

Youth-Certified: A Path for All Museums

If all 21,000 history organizations in the U.S. had structures for youth to participate and lead, millions of teens would shape their communities, our institutions would gain resilience and our leaders would gain the wisdom of the people of the future. We've already engaged 500 museums in serving younger audiences and discovered key barriers and opportunities. Next, with our R&D partners at History Co:Lab, we will build **a path that moves museums from engagement to co-creation**, future-proofing our cultural institutions and setting the bar for certified youth engagement in museums.

A Hub for History & Hope

History is the first building block of civic engagement; we have to know our past to shape the future. A love of history often starts on a museum field trip, at National History day or in a favorite class – and then has nowhere to grow as adulthood approaches. Through relevant, timely content, trends and pop culture savvy, a youth leadership network, and connections to hundreds of museums, Made By Us will build on our Youth250 community by **launching a hub for all young people who want to find radical hope in history, discover opportunities to contribute and learn, and grow their civic muscle.**



"I have more confidence in my position as a Gen Z professional. Experiencing the Youth250 cohort has made me more passionate about civic engagement and using my voice to tell a larger story,"

Katie Costa, 26, GA



"Thanks to Youth250, I feel more comfortable embracing my youth as an asset in my work instead of forcing myself to assimilate to older coworkers' expectations."

Paola Alonso Guerrero, 27, TX



"I loved being able to go into the local community and having our work highlighted, no matter how big or small the project was."

Monique Vargas, 26, IN

"We each bring distinct backgrounds to the Bureau; yet all of us have faced the reality that our vision for change is often dismissed, and we remain committed to elevating the voices of our generation to create the futures we seek."

Ramiro Hernandez, 24, TX



"For the first time in years, I feel proud to be an American and that feeling is rooted in the mission, this work, and the incredible community we've built together."

Sofia Alvarez, 28, CA

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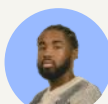
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Our Declaration Hosts

Carpenters' Hall
America's Black Holocaust Museum
Cincinnati Museum Center
Heritage Village Museum
James Madison's Montpelier
Conner Prairie
The Democracy Center at Japanese
American National Museum

Champions

A Picture's Worth
ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge
Amplify Pledge
American Academy of Arts & Sciences
American Alliance of Museums
American Association for State and Local History
Andrew Goodman Foundation
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette
Atlanta History Center
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Campus Compact
Charles Wright Museum of African American History
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Clinton Presidential Library
CoGenerate
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For more information, please visit:

Civic Season, Wish Walls & Letters to America
Impact + Insights Report



[@HistoryMadeByUs](https://www.instagram.com/HistoryMadeByUs)



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Youth250

Next Generation America

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250