

New director at F.Y.I. sets path for nonprofit

by Daniel P. Bader

Part of the mission of Fresh Youth Initiatives (FYI) is to help guide neighborhood kids through the tough years of adolescence. Executive Director Esteban “Steve” Ramos, who took the non-profit’s top spot this spring, sees his job as guiding the W. 171st Street community service organization through its own adolescence.

Washington Heights resident Andrew Rubinson founded the organization in 1993 as a positive after school activity for youth between the time school ends and when their parents get home from work.

F.Y.I. engages about 200 kids every year through various community service oriented programs, like sewing sleeping bags for the homeless or painting community murals.

It has grown into its four-story building, feeding 80 to 100 kids every day after school while they work towards F.Y.I. t-shirts and hats earned with service hours.

Though he nominally took over as executive director in January, Esteban, previously an assistant director, was mentored through April by Rubinson while at the same time taking business classes at Columbia University.

On his own now, Ramos used the summer to gain his feet. He has big plans for the 16-year-old organization, internally and externally.

His first change was to organize the dozen staff and volunteers at F.Y.I. Typical of young organizations, much of the weight and responsibility rests on the founder who has his hands in everything, and a staff in place without formal organization.

“A lot of people were overlapping” in function and responsibility, Ramos said. He has instituted what he calls a “cascading model of leadership.” The new organization structure follows a corporate model, with department heads that are given more autonomy over their particular responsibilities with their own staff that will hopefully lead to greater efficiency.

“There’s definitely a culture shock,” Ramos said, but added: “We’re all here. We love this organization. We’re going to do whatever we can to make this happen.”

Ramos’ office is on the third floor of F.Y.I.’s four-story building on W. 171st Street between Audubon and Amsterdam Avenues. On the white board behind a long meeting table, Ramos has the future of F.Y.I. mapped out.

He estimates that for every youth the organization impacts, 10 other people are indirectly touched by F.Y.I., roughly 2,000 members of the community. Esteban’s goal is to more than double those numbers in the next year, to 500 youth and 5,000 community members.

“It’s pretty ambitious,” Ramos admits. “But I think we have a talented team. I think we can do this.”

He wants to tackle that big goal in bite sized pieces, like adding Saturdays to the after school program and initiating a welcome program for new immigrant students that will help them learn English. There are bigger bites too, like a universal pre-kindergarten program, with an entire new staff.

Part of that means seeking out new funding sources, like grants, which means being able to quantify exactly what F.Y.I. does. Getting organized is part of that, Ramos said, but so is better documentation of the progress students make, or as he puts it, “making sure what [we’re] doing works.”

That means goal setting for students and for employees, tracking each youth’s growth, focusing on academics and documenting what percentage of the youth’s time is spent on community service and health and fitness.

“We’re really going to be focusing on how we articulate our impact,” Ramos said.



F.Y.I. Esteban “Steve” Ramos has started off his tenure at the W. 171st. non-profit by setting goals, organizing the staff and finding new resources.

F.Y.I. Esteban “Steve” Ramos ha comenzado su trabajo en la organizacion sin fines de lucro del Oeste de la Calle 171 poniendo metas, organizando los empleados y buscando nuevas fuentes de fondos.

PHOTO: Daniel P. Bader