Rebel YELL

ACT UP’s youth make their voices heard

March 1, 1997 By Phil Geoffrey Bond

On a rainy afternoon in a cramped East Village apartment, the dynamic, if soggy, members of Youth Education Life Line (YELL) New York sit around a table, discussing their history of triumphs and tribulations-in particular, their victorious 1991 march of 300 young people and teachers who stormed across the Brooklyn Bridge to the city’s school board to demand safer-sex education in public schools. Pictures of arrests and protests clutter the tabletop, along with heart-shaped flyers promoting a school AIDS curriculum, which they distributed to the Board of Education on Valentine’s Day 1994. Boxes of activist nostalgia are surrounded by a plethora of letters from other young people across the country who write with questions about everything from safer sex to how to begin AIDS education programs in their own hometowns.

YELL evolved from Youth Brigade, a group of public school teachers in ACT UP outraged at the lack of prevention education in the public school system. The group changed its name to YELL when younger members of ACT UP/New York came to the floor of a 1991 meeting, pleading for money and support to fight for safer-sex education and condom distribution (“the condom wars”) in city schools. From that point on, YELL became the primary voice of young ACT UPers and inspired similar groups across the country.

New York YELL members recently completed their second youth ’zine-the first premiered in 1994, and to date, more than 11,000 have been distributed nationally. The group has also collaborated on a unique comic book for young people in foster care, detailing their rights to HIV testing and confidentiality, and outlining practices for safer sex.

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