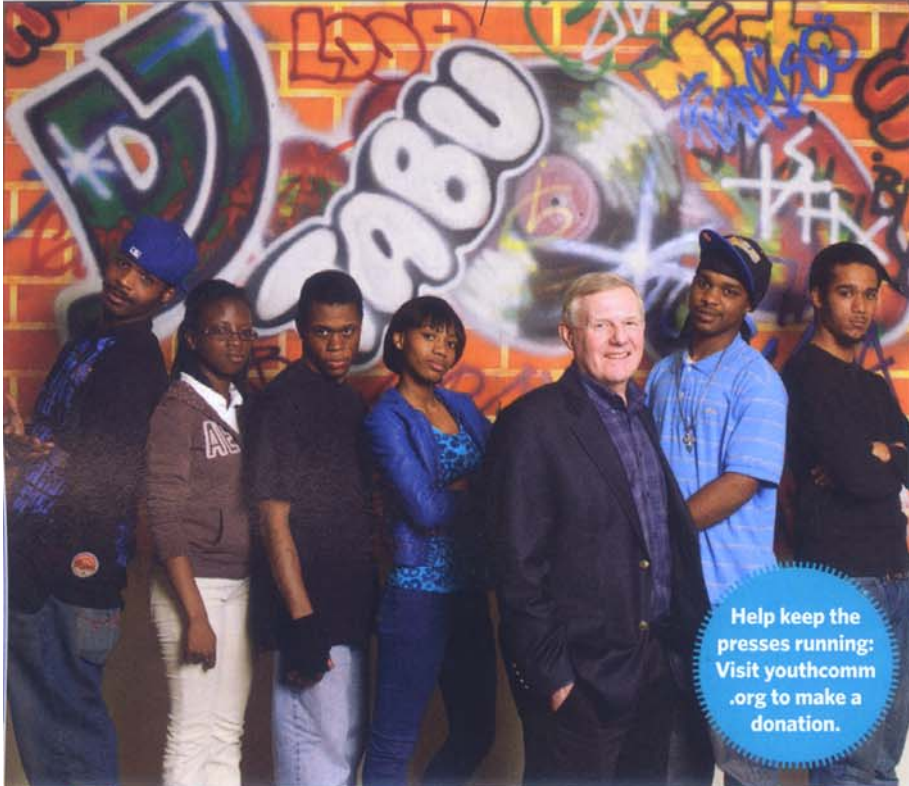


EVERYDAY WAYS WE CAN
ALL MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Name **Keith Hefner**
Age **54**
Cause **Youth Communication**
Hometown **Montclair, NJ**
Family **Wife Diana Autin; son Peter, 32; daughter Elena, 19; daughter Emilia, 16**



“Given the chance to talk about their lives, young people feel empowered to change their circumstances.”

Do the Write Thing

Inner city teens tell their stories through a unique publishing program—and learn self-respect too.

Mighty pen Back when Keith Hefner was in high school, his principal tried to cover up a story in the school paper about the football coach not allowing an African-American student to play quarterback. When other students heard about the scandal, they protested. The kid eventually got the position. “It was the first time I realized words could make a difference,” Keith says. He joined the newspaper staff and

soon became editor. **Raise your voice** Ten years later Keith was still passionate about helping people share their stories. After hearing about a journalism program for troubled teens in Chicago, he launched the newspaper *New Youth Connections* (NYC) in New York City. Keith recruited students through a teen program and ran a writing workshop in the basement of a church for eight months before publishing the first

issue. Today NYC is distributed to 65,000 public high school students monthly during the school year. NYC publishes first-person essays and articles on topics like bullying, sexual health and dropping out of school. “We aim for those kids in the back of the classroom who are having trouble learning,” Keith says. **Fostering hope** One recent success story: A 13-year-old girl joined the program after submitting a poem

about her troubled life to an essay contest. At first she was reserved, but as her writing skills improved she became a critical thinker—and more trusting of people. Currently she’s in college. “Through writing she was able to process, make peace with and move beyond her past,” Keith says.

Strong allies Other Youth Communication publications include *Represent*, a bimonthly magazine written by—and for—foster kids, which is distributed to 9,000 children in group homes nationwide. Youth Communication also publishes anthologies of personal essays, and in 1996 a foster teen passed a collection to then First Lady Hillary Clinton. The book inspired her to support a bill doubling the national funding to assist kids leaving foster care. **Fit to print** Reaching out to youth in need is

important to Keith; his three children are adopted. “My son used to have a rough life, which impacted his learning and emotional health,” he says. “Working with disadvantaged teens helped me understand his struggles.”

Hard at work Today Youth Communication has a paid staff of four full-time professional editors who work in a Manhattan loft with 24 workstations. One hundred students a year come through the doors. “It’s hard for young people to get a job because of the economy, but we help them find success.”

Power of the press Program alumni are now social workers, school principals, novelists and journalists. “I am amazed at how kids who have been knocked down can get back on their feet,” he says. “The stories emphasize their survival.” ●



Know someone who's helping to change your community? Send details along with a photo to goodworks@familycircle.com.