

Raising Youth Voices

We Are Family Foundation empowers young activists and social entrepreneurs

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN



▲ Nile Rodgers and Nancy Hunt

▼ Some of the Global Teen Leaders who are part of the We Are Family Foundation's initiative for youth.

GROWING UP ON THE LOWER EAST SIDE OF Manhattan, Nile Rodgers learned to read — both music and English — at a very young age. “I was the beneficiary of after-school programs set up to help Eastern European Jews transition into an American way of life,” says Rodgers, the legendary musician who co-wrote the 1979 hit “We Are Family” and co-founded the band CHIC, which recently released its first studio album in 26 years.

“By the time I was a kid there, the programs were helping Black and Puerto Rican children, and that’s where I got most of my training.” The first book Rodgers read was “Treasure Island” and the second was “Moby Dick.” He didn’t understand everything in these grown-up books, but he had a support system in place and could ask about the meaning of unknown words. Rodgers has often recalled this formative childhood experience — particularly while growing his nonprofit, We Are Family Foundation (WAFF). The organization empowers youth of different ethnicities, cultures

and backgrounds and provides the guidance, structure, education and wisdom to help them make social change through activism.

“The training I had was one of the greatest things in my life — the thing that helped me become who I became,” says Rodgers, WAFF chairman. “Had I not had that extra training, I would not have been on the same trajectory.” He says the program changed his life profoundly. “I know that just by giving young people that little bit of extra help, it can make all the difference in the world.”

We Are Family Foundation was created nearly 20 years ago, after September 11, 2001. In response to the event and as a way to heal, Rodgers returned to the hit song (originally written for the pop group Sister Sledge), re-recording it with a community of more than 200 artists, actors, firefighters, police officers and others affected by the tragedy. The song inspired a documentary directed by Spike Lee, “The Making and Meaning of We Are Family,” and then inspired Rodgers and Nancy Hunt to cofound WAFF in 2002. Since then, the organization has focused on programs that promote cultural diversity while nurturing and supporting the talents and visions of young people around the world. WAFF helps fund what Rodgers calls “incredibly robust ideas” surrounding basic human needs: food, water, shelter, health, safety, education and the environment.

Today, the foundation is best known for its annual Just Peace Summit, a New York City gathering that helps young social entrepreneurs from around the globe move forward with their projects through leadership and conflict resolution skills, adversity training and networking; it’s followed by a yearlong mentorship. During the summit, teens develop strong bonds with each other across cultures and borders. So far, they have come from 60 countries on six continents, and the global family is now about 400 strong. Their work reaches millions of people worldwide.

“Imagine yourself 16 years old, and you come from



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WE ARE FAMILY FOUNDATION

a society where you may not fit in because everyone around you is doing something different,” says Hunt, president of the foundation and Rodgers’s life partner. “All of a sudden, you’re in a room with people who speak other languages, but you all share a passion about building something and making change. Everyone may come in with a label — Hindu, Black, Jewish — but those labels quickly fade.” Soon, Hunt says, the teens feel like a community; they feel, at last, like they’ve met their family.

The summit — part of a larger program called Three Dot Dash — is successful in part because teens are open to learning and nurturing, whereas adults have often already made up their minds, Rodgers and Hunt explain. “Ninety-nine percent of [the teens] are trying to solve a problem they are experiencing or their friends or family are experiencing,” says Rodgers, a member of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Songwriters Hall of Fame. The teens’ reaction to the problem is to take action, and their minds are wonderfully open to solutions. “They haven’t yet learned the word ‘No.’”

One former Global Teen Leader from 2008, David Saddington, led a public awareness campaign in the U.K. that led to adding climate change to school curricula. Today, he is a senior policy adviser working toward net-zero emissions in the U.K. by 2050, and he sits on the U.K. board of directors for WAFF.

Virtual Fun

WAFF also runs TEDxTeen, a global stage for young people to inspire and educate through storytelling. TEDxTeen Kelvin Doe, for example, shared his story of collecting electronic scraps as a 10-year-old in Sierra Leone. He eventually built a community radio station with recycled materials, including homemade batteries and a generator, and became the youngest ever “visiting practitioner” to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) International Development Initiative. Another TEDxTeen came up with an early detection test for pancreatic cancer, and yet another developed an AI system to quickly detect breast cancer.

In June, after the killing of George Floyd, the foundation launched the Youth to the Front Fund, a commitment to support and fund under-30 BIPOC-centered youth activists. Unlike the Three Dot Dash program, the fund seeks grant recipients working specifically in the areas of systemic racism, inequality and justice.

WAFF’s Youth to the Table initiative invites youth to share their thoughts and perspectives in board rooms,

where people generally don’t have a clue about the youth perspective, Hunt says. Beta testing is underway at a couple of organizations, including WAFF and SAP, a funder of several WAFF programs.

During the pandemic, WAFF, like every other organization, has pivoted to accommodate virtual meetings. The summit was held online in 2020 (and will be again this year) and was a win for the organizers and participants. Rodgers says the 2020 event (which was about half females) was like a “turbo-charged accelerator” because the virtual offering was so effective and productive. The foundation was able to touch more people (some of the teens’ families listened in online) and arrange iconic mentor matches (who didn’t have to travel to New York and were often from the teens’ countries).

“I was extremely inspired,” Rodgers says. “We thought that would be the most difficult summit, and it was the most successful. During the pandemic, we not only survived, but thrived.” At the virtual summit, Rodgers played a new role: Typically, he interacts a lot with the teens, but last summer, he wanted to sit back and see if they were having fun. Indeed, they were. Every virtual session opened and closed with a dance party, and the summit concluded with a WAFFY awards ceremony, a playful, Academy Awards-esque event with a stage and more than 30 awards, including the Humor and Humanity Award, Maya Angelou Award and the Get Sh*t Done Award.

“Nile might be the 68-year-old face of We Are Family,” Hunt says, “but inside, he’s 9 years old. He always says, ‘When people are having fun, you can teach.’ So we utilize fun to deal with some of these serious issues.”

After the victory of injecting fun at the virtual summit, Rodgers decided to test it on the grown-ups. The foundation’s last two board meetings began with a DJ and dance party. “The members were shocked,” he says. “It put us in a different head space. We were more efficient, and even if the topic wasn’t fun, we set the tone and kept learning. It’s a great way to run a meeting and run an organization.” ■



▲ Musician and philanthropist Bono supported WAFF at a gala that was also attended by President Jimmy Carter.