In times of breakdown, we have the responsibility to break through to new paradigms of unity and collaboration.

Hate speech and hate acts are up 35 percent in schools around the country. This shift has been documented here in Santa Barbara as well.

Every hour of news is filled with controversy, contempt, and more evidence of social fracturing. Young people are filled with anxiety and depression as they bear witness to the unskillful and often immature polarization and divisiveness evidenced in adult leadership. The world just doesn't feel safe or promising for most of our teens right now.

In times of breakdown, we have the responsibility to break through to new paradigms of unity and collaboration.

AHA! has never felt more called to work with our community to cultivate conversations and actions of kindness, compassion, and positive contribution.

We come together to witness love, courage, and unity at events like our recent Sing It Out at the Lobero Theatre. Over 500 youth and families came together to support and witness the breakthrough performances of our teen singers.

Feedback from Sing It Out:

“It was such a prodigious and uplifting event! The kids were amazing and extremely inspiring No words to describe how amazing what you and AHA do.” - Eddie Garcia, Banc of CA

“Thank you all for a lovely event – each of the participants revealed so much about themselves in the most vulnerable ways and that takes so much courage.” - Susette Naylor, Thompson Naylor Architects

“I thought the show was just wonderful, as did my two colleagues who attended. The teens were all so confident and strong! What a great experience for those students. I sat next to a SBHS teacher who knows a number of the kids and he cried the entire show. He was very touched to see what AHA accomplished with this particular group of kids.” - Marianne Clark, Lobero Theatre Foundation

Those kids were terrific and so inspiring. Every story just filled my heart with love for them. AHA is such an important program to the community and is turning out some very confident and mature young people…exactly what our future needs! - Barb Alcock, Deckers Brands

“I learned so much last night about what, who and how AHA! is - and departed feeling inspired and alive!” - Nita June Davanzo
Focus on AHA! Youth: MAYTE RODRIGUEZ MEDEL

Mayte is a recent Santa Barbara High School graduate (she was chosen as a commencement speaker!) and has been a part of AHA! since eighth grade. When Mayte first started attending AHA! she was very shy, too afraid to be seen and heard. Mayte was confused about every step she took and was pessimistic about her surroundings. She remembers her first AHA! summer group; it was six weeks long and she remembers feeling a sense of community. The older AHA! teens inspired her to voice her opinion, to be spontaneous, and to hold the space of the circle. Every time she would show up to AHA!, she would leave feeling happier and hopeful that a change in her life would occur. Through connection circles she was able to open her ears, her eyes, and her heart to the different experiences those around her had gone through. Mayte has noticed that strength and resilience resonate among every teen in AHA!. She learned about what being an ally truly means, the significance behind the words we use, and how it is completely okay to feel confident. The facilitators and the rest of the AHA! staff made her experiences worthwhile; she looks up to their open mindedness and trustworthiness. Mayte broke out of her shell when she joined Sing It Out during her junior year. She knew that if she could sing to an audience of four hundred people, she could do anything. In the Fall, Mayte will embark on her own new adventures at UC Irvine, taking what she has learned in AHA! into the real world. She leaves with heavy heart, but with enough confidence to help her through rocky roads. As she culminates her final summer with AHA!, she hopes to inspire the teens who are new to AHA! as well those who are returning teens. Mayte is beyond grateful for the lovely human beings that AHA! is made up of; they all hold a very special place in her heart. Mayte’s thorn is that she is afraid that she will not find another place like AHA!. Her rose is that she can honestly say that AHA! made the past five years a great definition of survival and love.

Focus on Staff: Brandon Battle

Brandon Battle is a core facilitator at AHA!, driven by a desire to support people in his community. Brandon has worked with differently abled individuals in supportive living at Devereux and with children of single moms at St. Vincent’s. He has studied Early Childhood Education, Philosophy, Music Composition, and plans to return to school and major in Music Therapy.

Brandon was raised in Goleta and is a happy father of beautiful, imaginative seven-year-old, Kaiyia. Brandon also plays lead guitar; he is inspired by Jimi Hendrix and Carlos Santana, and has played with many local bands. Brandon delights the AHA! community when he displays his softer side with an acoustic guitar in hand, often playing accompaniment to our mindfulness practice. He is a passionate believer in the healing powers of music and in April was one of the adult participants in this year’s Sing It Out at the Lobero Theatre.

Brandon brings a fresh and engaging energy to AHA! programs. He enjoys facilitating discussions around Emotional Management and Stereotypes. He leads the Music after-school group, where he supports youth as they experience making a song with peers in a Notes for Notes Studio at the Boys and Girls Club. He will also be co-leading our new Junior High AHA! Peace Builders Program at Goleta Valley Junior High. Brandon says, “I am at home with the AHA! team, who all love and support each other while providing the community we love with amazing social and emotional learning skills. I really enjoy bringing a balance of fun and depth while engaging the inspiring youth we serve.”

AHA! After School participant:  
“I have become so much more hopeful for my future. AHA! has given me a reason to fight through all of my problems and stay alive for the people that love me. But mostly, HOPE, so much hope in so many ways.”
Thank you, Santa Barbara Women’s Fund!
For the first time, the Women’s Fund voted to support AHA!. Their generous grant award will enable us to serve all four junior highs with our AHA! Ally/Peace Builders program.

Training Professionals
This Fall, 50 Los Angeles educators will begin a year-long training in the AHA! Method. Our educational system is recognizing that we need a generation of mature and thoughtful leaders who not only can do well on tests and have proficient knowledge, but who also know how to manage emotions, demonstrate empathy, and know how to collaborate with diverse team members. These educators will leave our training with resources to provide these 21st century skills to youth.

Connecting Youth with Nature
For the first time in years, we have restarted our Renewal in Wilderness program for teens. We will take 15 teens on a camping trip from June 28 - July 1 removing them from the 24/7 clamor of manic devices and providing a supported space for them to connect with their true and beautiful natures.

On June 15th, AHA! hosted a day-long PEER MEDIATION training, led by the phenomenal Shemaina Garcia, a 23-year-old graduate of the Intercultural PeaceBuilding Program. In attendance were 27 youth from all area high schools and 12 AHA! staff. Together, adults and youth learned how to transform conflict into a constructive, empathic conversation about shared interests, needs, and values. Youth received essential tools for listening for the feelings and commonalities that always lie beneath surface positions. In AHA! Peace Builders, these youth will continue to refine their skills; eventually, the SBUSD will call upon their expertise to help provide harmonious conflict resolution on their respective campuses. They will also be able to hold safe spaces for their friends to work through everyday conflicts. “Over time, the seeds of compassion bear fruit and feed the next generation,” affirms AHA!’s Executive Director, Dr. Jennifer Freed. Participant Noah B., a 14-year-old who will be a freshman at San Marcos in the fall, put it more succinctly: “The training was awesome.”

The ALUMNI GROUP has started up again at AHA!. Imagine our surprise when Alex, 34 years old, and his sister Debbie, 31 years old, entered the full room. They were both part of the first AHA! summer session in 1999. Debbie is now a labor organizer and Alex is a chemistry teacher. They made the trip from Oxnard and said, “If you are still here doing the great work, then we want to be part of it.” The group’s focus is on how alumni set and meet their goals, and how best they can contribute their gifts to the wider community. Group facilitators Jennifer Freed, Julian Henderson (himself an AHA! alumnus), and Melissa Lowenstein have created a replicable format for running this group, which includes mindfulness, check-ins with emotional management, sharing small and large success in goal achievement, dealing with obstacles and setbacks, and closing with acknowledgements and gratitude.

This is a truly a crowning jewel of AHA! programs: 18 alumni ages 17 - 34 supporting each other in fulfilling their dreams, handling inevitable negative patterns or setbacks, encouraging each other to lead with kindness and empathy, and contributing their excellence to the world.

Carpinteria High School student:
I very much enjoyed learning how to repair relationships as I think that is the most important lesson we can learn.
With your ongoing support, AHA! has become a nationally recognized contributor to discussions about social and emotional competencies and how crucial they are to solving 21st-century problems. We are frequently called upon both locally and nationally to engender leadership that represents the best of all our human capacities and sensibilities.

- Unmediated Lives and Content for Teens is the Real Lethal Trigger/Read at www.huffingtonpost.com
- As images of violence escalate, how do we talk to our children?/Read at www.usatoday.com
- Jennifer Freed’s SEL Formula: Attitude, Harmony, Achievement/Read at www.themeetinghouseafterschool.org

Thank you for uplifting us and our community! May you feel the AHA! glow today.

Gratefully,
Jennifer Freed, Rendy Freedman, and the AHA! team