ENERGIZING A SMALL YALE CLUB
THE YALE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION OF WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

AMBASSADORS IN ACTION: AN AYA CASE STUDY
THE ASSOCIATION OF YALE ALUMNI

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PROBLEM

“Our Yale Club is too small to have much of an impact. Nobody wants to get involved.”

The Yale Alumni Association of Western North Carolina is centered in the town of Asheville, where most of its members are retirees and older alumni. For many years, practically its sole activity was a monthly lunch held in Asheville, which was attended by a core of “regulars.” The Club had virtually no impact on the lives of anyone else.

SOLUTION:

In 2011, AYA executive director Mark Dollhopf ’77 spoke at one of these monthly lunches and gave its attendees this challenge: “If it’s so great that you went to Yale, how is Asheville a better place because Yale alumni live there?” A small team of Yale alumni, led by Conner Fay ’51 and Jim Cavener ’59 DIV, decided to answer this challenge, and began researching possible community projects the Club could try. They decided to make a long-range commitment to local education, and, knowing that the Club was too small to take on multiple projects, they identified one school that badly needed help: the poorest-performing primary school in the region, Fletcher Hall Elementary. Working with the new school principal, the Club identified a host of ways Yale alumni could get involved: tutoring in math and reading, organizing book fairs, helping with grounds and facilities maintenance, landscaping, and fundraising for academic enrichment activities.

This team then presented their ideas to their fellow alumni, expecting them to be as excited as they were. It’s significant that about half of them replied, essentially, “We’re happy just being a Yale Club with a monthly lunch. Why should we get involved in things Yale Clubs don’t usually do?”
Fortunately, the planning team was not discouraged; they simply engaged those of their fellow alumni who did want to give involved and put them to work. YAAWNC’s involvement with Fletcher Hall began in 2012, and today has grown exponentially. Although the Yale Club is small, it has leveraged its “sweat equity” to get many other professionals and local retirees involved, and the Club’s activities have been featured prominently in local news media. Local Yale alumni who were never involved before are now volunteering at the school on a monthly basis, and YAAWNC has initiated substantial collaboration with other alumni groups and local civic organizations.

Most telling of all is that the Yale Club continues its monthly lunches, but attendance is much higher now on a regular basis than it ever was before it started getting involved in its community.