



Wednesday, February 22, 2012

Feinstein winner of T&G Young Leader Award

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WORCESTER — For a guy who has made a career out of fostering collaborative efforts and linking loose associations of artists and artisans, Matthew Feinstein is perhaps understandably uncomfortable about accepting an individual award.

Mr. Feinstein, 30, co-director of the Worcester Roots Project, is this year's winner of the Telegram & Gazette Visions Young Leader Award.

The award, given to a person in the early stages of his or her career in recognition of outstanding achievement in private business, professional life or community leadership, will be presented along with four other Visions Awards at a public ceremony at 4:30 p.m. Tuesday in Mechanics Hall, 321 Main St. The award includes a \$2,500 honorarium.

Mr. Feinstein was quick to note he's not the only one who should be celebrating.

"We're going to be doing a reception after the award ceremony, at 6 p.m.," Mr. Feinstein said, sitting in the bare-bones Pleasant Street office space his organization shares with the ex-prisoner group EPOCA. "It's about the organization, it's not about me. The reception will allow other folks to show what they've been able to accomplish, things like that. These organizations have been a real collective effort, it's the work of so many dedicated selfless folks."

Mr. Feinstein grew up in the western part of the state, and has been in Worcester for 12 years. He came to the city to go to Clark University, and never left.

"When people ask me where I'm from, I don't say Western Massachusetts," Mr. Feinstein said. "I say Worcester."

The Worcester Roots Project focuses on social justice



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and environmental justice issues, and works on projects through youth leadership programs and youth worker cooperatives.

The Roots Project's most well-known pilot has been the Toxic Soil Busters, a youth-led collaborative that works on lead remediation in soils. It spun off from lead remediation work the Roots Project had been doing, and it has cleaned up 40 yards in the city, Mr. Feinstein said.

"To see a yard that was poisoning a child, and then a couple months later, after the work of volunteers and our folks, we'd see a beautiful and safe yard, and people growing vegetables instead of kids playing in contaminated soil," he said.

Mr. Feinstein said he considers himself less of a coordinator than a mentor. The Toxic Soil Busters, for example, is almost entirely run by the youths who work there. They make decisions large and small, from which materials to use to annual budgets to hiring and firing. The model has earned the group accolades, and Mr. Feinstein said it is considered a national model for how youths can run their own businesses in a cooperative style.

Mr. Feinstein is also a co-founder of Stone Soup, the group of activists, artists, and community organizations that shared space in a King Street property. A fire in 2009 heavily damaged the building, and scattered the groups across the city. But the groups that made up Stone Soup have tried to stick together as much as possible, Mr. Feinstein said. But it's not just about property, it's about a shared vision, he said. Plus, all the groups have had a part in designing the new space. He said there have been fights with the insurance company, but construction of the new Stone Soup building on King Street is scheduled to begin next month. The construction will be paired with a capital campaign, he said.

Mr. Feinstein said that when he first joined the Worcester Roots Project, it was mostly volunteers and had an annual budget of \$4,000. It has grown to an organization with a \$120,000 annual budget, he said.

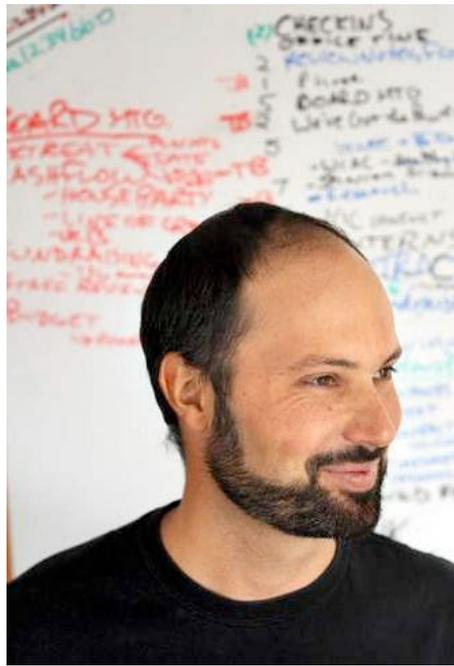
The Roots Project relies on grants and donations from local foundations such as the Fletcher and Stoddard foundations and the Greater Worcester Community Foundation, but Mr. Feinstein said part of his long-term vision for the organization is a move toward self-sufficiency.

The cooperative model is already in effect with the Toxic Soil Busters; the remediation and landscaping work is largely self-sufficient, he said. The Roots Project has also expanded to include under its umbrella Youth In Charge, a youth program that operates out of Plumley Village, the Future Focus Media Co-op and Youth Training Institute, and the Worcester Energy Barnraisers, Mr. Feinstein said.

Mr. Feinstein said the Worcester Roots Project will continue to do its work, but he said he would like to see even more spinoffs that help foster a vision of a green and cooperative economy.

"It's about changing the whole economy in Worcester, regionally, and throughout the world, actually," Mr. Feinstein said. "We can be the key organizer in that building of a new economy, that takes into account social justice, that doesn't wreck our planet, and that also doesn't perpetuate the same oppressions and inequalities."

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Matthew Feinstein is recipient of the Visions Young Leader Award.
(T&G Staff/TOM RETTIG)
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-- MATTHEW FEINSTEIN

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