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By Kathleen Burge

Globe Staff / November 11, 2007

The City Council candidates had finished making their pitches, and the people who had come to listen began to pull on their coats. But Cynthia Loesch wasn't ready to leave. She nudged her group, teenagers who wanted to speak about issues important to them, toward the front of the room.

"She's like, 'It doesn't matter that they're not taking questions. We don't care. You need to go up to the podium,'" recalls Nebulla Stephen, a graduate student who was with Loesch at last month's candidates' night in Dorchester.

The designated speaker, a high school student who looked terrified, reluctantly began to address the politicians. The room grew quiet as she spoke, and when she finished, the audience applauded. Some of the candidates came forward to laud her courage and give her their business cards.

"Cynthia's like, 'Look, she's doing it. I knew she could do it,'" Stephen recalled. "Cynthia just stepped back and let them go. It was a very, very proud moment."

Loesch is used to pushing against authority. Now 22, and frequently mistaken for one of the high school students she mentors, Loesch has been an activist in Codman Square since she was 13. After two of her grandparents died of smoking-related illnesses, she took on Big Tobacco, joining an environmental group called BOLD Teens - for Breath of Life Dorchester - and attaching warning labels to packs of cigarettes sold in their neighborhood.

Loesch and BOLD Teens helped convince The Boston Globe to stop accepting advertisements for tobacco products. She and others in the group demonstrated outside stores in Codman Square that promoted cigarettes.

"I used to get calls every once in a while saying, 'Can't you get that girl outta here?'" said Bill Walczak, CEO of the Codman Square Health Center.

Three years ago, Loesch was elected president of the Codman Square Neighborhood Council, the youngest person ever to lead the group. And after she graduated from Boston College last spring, she turned down better-paying and more prestigious jobs to stay in Codman Square, the neighborhood where she grew up, and work as the new coordinator for FAMILY Inc., a nonprofit social services group. Those who have worked with her wonder if she will eventually enter politics.

All of her work has one common goal: to transform Codman Square, where she

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still lives with her father.

"You go to other neighborhoods, you don't see any trash, you don't see any litter. You're breathing clean air," she said.

By staying in Codman Square, she is also bucking the impulse to flee that overcomes many residents of the neighborhood who manage to get a good education. It wasn't for lack of opportunity: When she graduated from Boston College, she received job offers from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, the state Department of Public Health, and the offices of various US and state representatives.

"I think that we're all really lucky that she's here in Codman Square," Stephen said. "She could have gone anywhere in the world because she's such a star. But she's like, 'No, this is what matters, this is what counts.' "

Loesch is becoming one of Codman Square's most visible figures. When Governor Deval Patrick paid a visit recently, she was striding along the street beside him. And when Mayor Thomas M. Menino held a press conference about crime and a new community policing effort this summer, Loesch stood behind him, her white shirt a stark contrast to the sea of dark suits.

Harold May, the 81-year-old founder of FAMILY Inc., which works in Codman Square, was looking to hire a coordinator and kept hearing one name: Cynthia Loesch. When he finally met her at a meeting they both attended, he, too, was impressed.

"I knew as soon as Cynthia opened her mouth and started to summarize what was happening at that meeting," May said. "It was so clear to me that she's the right person."

Those who know Loesch say she's a workaholic. "I have a thought at 4 a.m. and I text message her and she text messages right back," said Stephen, a BOLD Teens coordinator. "We feed off of each other."

Loesch says she often works on a Saturday night, although she also likes to go to the movies or out dancing with friends.

She does not have a boyfriend. "I wouldn't be able to commit the time and energy for one," she says.

Some of Loesch's inspiration came from her own father, the Rev. Bill Loesch, an activist who had marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Loesch has four brothers and sisters; when her parents divorced, she stayed with her father in Codman Square. All through college, even when she lived on campus in Chestnut Hill, she continued to work in Codman Square, sometimes commuting back and forth several times a day.

"It kept me grounded," she said.

Her dedication to their neighborhood even during college gave her credibility with the teenagers she continued to mentor. "She was still with the community," said Alexis Claytor, a high school senior who lives in Dorchester. "I think it's very unusual."

Claytor joined BOLD Teens three years ago and was inspired by Loesch's passion for her work. But although Loesch has great faith in the teens she works with - showing up at their games, planning a breakfast for honor roll students - she's

not a pushover.

"She's very small, but she has one of the strongest handshakes I've ever encountered with a woman," Claytor said.

One day recently, as Loesch was meeting with May, her phone rang. It was an MIT student, calling to talk about a possible solar-powered machine for Codman Square that could separate recyclables.

Loesch had submitted a proposal asking mechanical engineering students in one of the school's classes to consider designing the project.






"So, is it just an idea still or are you committing to it?" she asked.

She listened for a moment. "So 50-50?" she asked. "80-20?"

A minute later, she hung up, beaming, and told May, "I have exciting news!" It looked, she said, like one more small success: The MIT group was going to choose the Codman Square project.

Kathleen Burge can be reached at kburge@globe.com ■

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