

# Rappaport Briefing

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## Rappaport Fellow Cynthia Loesch: Giving Communities a Voice and a Vision

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*By Jane Whitehead.* “I love working in a fast-paced environment,” says Cynthia Loesch, 28, now in her final year at Northeastern University School of Law. Loesch jumpstarted her career as a community organizer by founding the BOLD Teens, a youth-led social and environmental justice group in her Dorchester neighborhood, when she was just 13.

In 2009, Loesch was named one of Ebony Magazine’s “Leaders Under 30,” on the recommendation of Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick. She has won awards from the National Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, the New England Patriots’ Charitable Foundation, and the office of Boston Mayor Thomas Menino.

In a recent conversation, Loesch makes no mention of these honors. She talks about the debt she owes her father, veteran Civil Rights activist the Rev. Dr. Bill Loesch. “He taught me everything I know, and I was just able to take it in a new direction,” she says.

The BOLD Teens began as a group of young people in Dorchester, who, like Loesch, had lost relatives to tobacco-related diseases. A signature success was convincing the Boston Globe to ban advertising of all tobacco products in November 1999. The group allied with the Codman Square Neighborhood Council (CSNC) to “make our efforts more intergenerational, and take more of a holistic community approach” to problems including violence and substance abuse, says Loesch.

While double-majoring in Social Policy and Sociology at Boston College, Loesch co-ordinated the BOLD Teens and served as the youngest ever President of CSNC. On graduation, as Director of Community Organizing for a Dorchester-based non-profit, among other initiatives to reduce inequalities in health, in 2008 she set up a Farmers’ Market in Codman Square to bring affordable fresh produce to the community. In 2010 -2011 she master-minded the building of Dorchester’s first LEED-Platinum certified energy-efficient model home to prove to skeptical developers that meeting green building standards could be cost-effective as well as benefit the neighborhood.

The glacial pace of the BOLD Teens' eight-year campaign to ban the sale of tobacco products in pharmacies prompted Loesch's decision to go to law school. She realized that she had not taken into account the legal issues preoccupying key players in the policy arena. "I was not aware of how mindful our elected officials and the board of health had to be of the risk of being sued by the tobacco industry," she says. Legal training, she concluded, would super-charge her effectiveness as a community organizer and advocate.

Loesch says of the Rappaport Fellowship, "It was perfect, because they let you create your own opportunities." From May-August 2013 she engineered a unique immersion into the control center of Boston's urban planning efforts, the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), reporting to three supervisors: an architect, a planner and the General Counsel.

Even for the quick-talking, multi-tasking Loesch, the pace at BRA this summer was break-neck, she admits, as the agency raced to complete the agenda of outgoing five-term Mayor Thomas Menino. Her major responsibility was working on the Mayor's post-Hurricane Sandy directive to prepare the city for climate change by analyzing the feasibility of current buildings to adapt, and figuring out best practices for new construction.

Thanks to the Fellowship, Loesch had access to "two phenomenal mentors," former Massachusetts Attorney General and Rappaport Center Advisory Board Chairman Scott Harshbarger, and Abim Thomas of Goodwin Procter, former Deputy Chief Counsel for Governor Patrick. "They have opened doors for me that I could not have opened for myself," she says. The combination of their expertise, with other networks forged at BRA, will be invaluable as Loesch forges ahead in her mission to "generate new ideas, create new opportunities and improve the quality of life" not only for her neighborhood, but for the whole city of Boston.

## Discussion

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