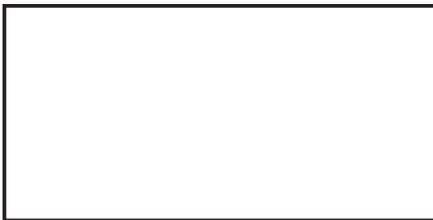
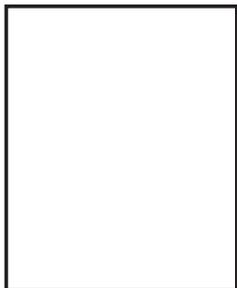
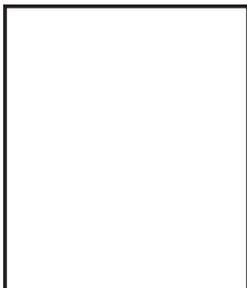


The Future is Ours

Young Leaders of Tomorrow



GLOBAL OPPORTUNITY YOUTH NETWORK: PUNE

भविष्य आहे युवकांचे

 aspen institute



Photos, Text & Design by
Maya Gugelev-Shapiro

The Future Is Ours is a collection of youth leaders across Pune (PMC) and Pimpri-Chinchwad Municipal Corporation (PCMC) who have been connected through the Global Opportunity Youth Network: Pune (GOYN). Coming from all different communities, these youth are not waiting for permission to lead; they are simply getting out there and trying to make the world a better place. They are building social enterprises, strengthening schools, creating access to healthcare, expanding digital skills, and rethinking what opportunity can look like for their peers.

GOYN, in collaboration with Lighthouse Communities Foundation, has the main goal of helping opportunity youth rise to their full potential by investing in their ideas, education, support, and long-term growth. This book aims to capture that goal in action. Each individual story showcases a youth with a special kind of leadership, responsibility, and strength to stand up for what is equal for all, even when it is the harder choice, not for the title or the credit, but for the commitment to something larger than themselves.





Leadership is Listening

Sajida Khan, 21

Pune

Twenty-one-year-old Sajida is the eldest of four siblings, and a father who was the only breadwinner, putting a lot of pressure on Sajida to do well in school and lead by example. Her family wanted to send all their children to school; however, English-medium schooling for four kids was too expensive, so her parents put all of them in Marathi-medium school. This pushed her even more to speak up in class, become head girl, lead prayers in the morning and much more. She encouraged her peers in sports, gave speeches when guests came to the school, and was part of a street play about saving trees that won first place in an inter-school competition. Sajida was a truly outspoken academic who was the epitome of a stereotypical leader.

However, when Sajida was getting ready to start college in the Bachelor of Business Administration, her mindset changed. She went from a loud and confident leader to a quiet listener and observer. She went to class each day in a full burka, never talked, and would only write down answers on paper and show them to teachers when necessary. However, she didn't sit at the back of classrooms or doze off. Sajida was always in the front row listening and absorbing all the information possible; her wide, bright eyes were the only indication that she was truly making the most of her education.

Now, a couple of years and a degree later, Sajida has started her masters and has continued to do the same thing for classes. When asked why she does this, she explained the importance of listening in leadership and in learning. As a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) member Sajida is working on a Youth Innovation Fund project that she created around supporting traditional housewives who want to make an income or learn but cannot, as their responsibilities make very little time to leave the house. In this project, she created a course to teach these women traditional Maharashtrian jewellery making as a skill for them to then start a small business of their own. Sajida is a strong and confident young woman who wants to support her community and others on a more community-centred approach, and while she is outspoken, she also knows the importance of listening in leadership situations.





Leadership is Inclusivity

Kshitij Bhosale, 21

Part of the Future is Young Project

Pune

Twenty-one-year-old Kshitij has overcome a lot of struggles, but his view on equality has never changed. Being a queer person, a youth, and more than anything else, a person, life has not always been easy. When his mother was married at 16 and widowed at 22, Kshitij was no more than five years old, and they moved in with his maternal grandparents in a bustling area of Pune. Many years later, he has completed his degree in political science and is truly passionate about empowering young people through the multiple organizations he has worked with. One of these organizations, where we met, is called Deep Griha Society, a place where he does some volunteer tutoring for the youth of the community. He also does similar work with Lighthouse Communities Foundation, where he is a Spoken English Trainer for youth, both opportunities in education, which he said he loves to do and wants to do more of in the future. Kshitij believes that school systems are backward as they praise high-achieving students and put all others down, which doesn't help anyone for future schooling or life. Kshitij has also worked with other organizations even taking on the role of mobilizing youth in a peaceful protest against the government takeover of the land his community sits on. An issue that still exists as a very large threat, however, the protest helped the community understand what is going on, and he believes that wisdom is incredibly important, as people need to be informed before they make decisions. Kshitij also spoke as a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) member at the GOYN Convin-ing 2024 in Pune, where he spoke on mental health and the importance of equality. Kshitij is still learning and has many hopes for the future, including starting projects for helping support youth advocacy, activism for the environmental crisis, the queer movement and inclusivity for all. He has also considered writing or helping create a short film as another way to shed light on marginalization and is excited for the leadership opportunities of his future.



Leadership is Adventurous

Ovi Bhandalkar, 22

Part of the Future is Young Project

Pune

Ovi Bhandalkar knew she was different from a young age, growing up in Pune. Ovi was used to the regular chaos of the outside, but didn't always know how to interpret the inside chaos. However, through counselling and therapy, she realized around the age of eighteen that she was transgender. From there on, it was an uphill battle of resilience and strength that got her through the tough challenges she had to face. From running away from home to begging on the streets of Mumbai for a month, Ovi has stood up to every challenge and kept going. Two years ago, Ovi was featured in the Future is Young book and spoke about being a twenty-year-old aspiring lawyer; well, no more. Since then, with nothing but hard work, twenty-two-year-old Ovi is in law school with an internship at a reputable law firm and a "can't wait" attitude to start her own practice specifically to help the trans and LGBTQIA+ community. In addition to school, Ovi has also taken a major leadership role in the Youth Advisory Group (YAGs), a community she loves so much as she "feels heard and each opinion of mine (hers) gets listened to". Since joining about two years ago, she has spoken on panels at two major GOYN global convenings on marginalized groups and trans specific topics, flying across the world to Brazil for one of them and even moderated a panel for the regional India convening. In the interview, Ovi also reflected on her conversations with YAGs from other countries, where she realized that even though it looks like countries all have different problems, the actual roots are the same: marginalization. For Ovi, there is nothing more important than equality, and she is looking forward to fighting for the rights to equality for trans people and all marginalized groups from the bench of a court and maybe even her own organization around housing for trans youth one day.



Leadership is Beyond Titles

Rameshwar Khairnar, 25

Pune

Rameshwar is from a small village about 120 kilometres from Pune and moved to the city for higher education in 2019. While in college, he studied economics; in addition to his degree, he independently learned English on the side. As a kid from a Marathi-medium background, he understood that learning a new language was not just something interesting but something that gave him access to opportunities otherwise untouchable.

After graduating in 2022, Rameshwar applied for the Teach For India fellowship and got placed at a school in Hadapsar, Pune. This fellowship was supposed to last for two years, but as Rameshwar grew to love teaching English, he has now extended it twice, putting him near the end of his fourth year at this school. Through this fellowship, he has learned so much about the educational system. He has slowly grown to believe that certificates may not always mean learning, and as he watches students struggle with English, he sees how confidence, communication, and exposure matter just as much as curriculum.

This learning has led him to start a Youth Innovation Fund (YIF) project, not a top-down approach project that doesn't account for ground-level problems, but a bottom-up approach where he trains youth volunteers to teach three-month-long online English courses to middle schoolers, allowing for flexibility, small groups, and a solution not based on burdening teachers with more work. These courses are structured modules focused not just on vocabulary and grammar but also on confidence and public speaking. Rameshwar has observed many different systems and has carefully chosen a curriculum so that learning is improved substantially and can be tracked carefully. When asked about the leadership of this program, Rameshwar states a dislike for titles, as leadership is not something you assign yourself; titles are just words anyone can say, but trust must be earned. Student enthusiasm, volunteer excitement, and hard work show trust, and to him, that's leadership.

In the future, Rameshwar is approaching the end of his fellowship and wants to strengthen this program into a reputable course that lasts.



Leadership is Access

Qasim Shaikh, 26

PCMC



26-year-old Qasim grew up bouncing between the village where he was born and Pune. He moved to Pune at a young age with his family for school. However, when his father's work slowed in Pune, they moved back to their hometown. It was there, around 11th and 12th standard, that he began teaching himself software engineering and computer science. Qasim didn't have a laptop, so he learned to code using an app on his phone. His first app combined academic and Muslim religious studies in an accessible way. Not everyone has a laptop or WiFi, he says, but you will find a smartphone in almost every house. His second app was a technology education platform entirely in Hindi, since most existing courses were in English, making them difficult to access without language skills. During this time, he realized that while he wanted to learn these things himself, he also wanted to teach others. At the same time his older brother was running religious classes nearby, so Qasim began adding English and basic computer skills to the sessions. He believed students should not have to choose between tradition and modern knowledge. He soon after enrolled in a formal Computer Science degree, but left when he found the learning too theoretical and lecture-based, without practical application or actual skills. He decided to self-study through online courses, short certifications, and hands-on experience. In 2025, he opened a small computer institute in his hometown, investing all of his savings and time into it. He offered dozens of courses, but many students could not afford the fees, and sadly, the institute closed within months. While it was a setback, it strengthened his commitment to this passion for accessibility in education. Today, he has a new project in Pune as part of the Youth Innovation Fund (YIF) program, working on an Educational computer institute foundation focused on basic foundational skills. Qasim strongly believes that if people understand the basics, they can teach themselves the rest. Looking ahead, his goal is simple: to create access to skills and opportunities that did not exist before.



Leadership is Looking Forward

Tanuja Kamble, 21

Pune

Tanuja Kamble is a twenty-one-year-old first-generation graduate with a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science and an aspiration to continue learning. She is the first in her family to ever go past 10th standard, let alone complete a bachelor's degree. Tanuja's father works in construction labour, and her mother was a waste picker before becoming a homemaker, so she has never had anyone explain how to navigate academic classes or competitive exams, or give guidance on careers.

This never stopped Tanuja, as she always just kept going, working, learning, and even volunteering in social sector work before she knew what it was. At just ten years old, she has joined a children's club to speak on issues like child labour and child marriage. In her free time, she would work with this local organization by visiting communities, meeting stakeholders, and learned how young people could raise real concerns and be heard. Years later, Tanuja had worked incredibly hard and was asked to speak at the 2024 GOYN India convening. She prepared for months and on the day found out that she had been removed at the last minute. This didn't stop her from looking forward; she got upset for a bit, but still showed up the next day and tried to let it go. One year later, halfway across the world, she finally got her panel at the 2025 GOYN Brazil convening, where she represented all of GOYN India on a main stage panel. Tanuja continues to work hard and looks forward instead of back as she advocates for youth voices in decision-making and connecting communities to government schemes. For her, leadership isn't about your title or long list of achievements its about continually being open to growing, learning and always looking forward.

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your title or long list of achievements its about continually being open to growing, learning and always looking forward.

Leadership is Alongside

Samrat Pawar, 27

Pune

Samrat is a 27-year-old born into a nomadic tribal community where migration for work was normal. However, going to school and building an education was far less common. He is a first-generation graduate, and during 15 years of schooling, he lived in hostels, working part-time to get himself through his education. He went from government schools to a prestigious university and later completed his master's degree in education. But Samrat found his passion through a Teach For India fellowship, where he was placed in the city of Pimpri at a low-income government school during the COVID years. During this time, he taught 72 children mathematics and literacy. He saw firsthand that treating every child the same was not enough. Some needed more time, some needed visual learning, while others needed one-on-one tutoring. For Samrat, equality wasn't enough. That understanding shaped his commitment to equity. He began working not just with children, but with youth in undergraduate programs. Samrat believed that if he equipped youth with the right skills, mindset, and exposure, they could become educators themselves. So he started a Youth Innovation Fund (YIF) project, where he trained 82 undergraduate students in professional and leadership skills. These 82 youth then brought this learning to over 500 children in different government schools, teaching them foundational skills and confidence to become better learners. Today, his project continues as he works with more than 700 youth, who collectively impact over 21,000 children. For Samrat, leadership is not about telling others what to do, it is about standing alongside those who want to learn and, together, building something that can impact thousands.





Leadership is Not Judgmental

Satish Waghdare, 28

Part of the Future is Young Project

Pune

Satish came from a rural farming family, and while he did some social initiatives there, he wanted more, so he came to Pune after his bachelor's in arts and history. In Pune, he began to study for his UPSC Civil Services Examination (an exam that can take years to pass). During this time, he got caught up in a land dispute with his uncles due to a misunderstanding that led to him almost being charged with attempted murder on no basis through a highly illegal accusation from one of his uncles. During this debacle, he realized that many people don't know their legal rights and how to take action, so after a while of studying for this exam, he decided to switch his plans and started his master's in law.

Satish was also a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) member who did a project on getting legal knowledge to youth in India, including through a Facebook page that he started during COVID as an agriculture law page for advice, but it has since turned into a page about legal advice for all. He also created a comprehensive handbook about one's legal rights for young people.

Now Satish has one semester left in his law master's degree and, as an alumnus of the YAG program, has turned this Facebook page into a full-blown company. Kayda Mitra Pvt. Ltd. works in collaboration with GOYN and on its own to do outreach in communities on legal education in the hopes of making all youth knowledgeable about their rights. Satish also believes that leadership is listening to others, leading him to create a helpline for anyone with legal questions around personal problems, marriage issues, mental health, or general health concerns. He believes that legal rights are important and everyone should know them, no matter their situation or community. As Satish continues to grow as a legal professional and youth leader, he is focused on expanding Kayda Mitra into a non-judgmental, youth-led legal awareness movement and standing up for youth rights.



Leadership is Responsibility

Mustakim Shaikh, 20
PCMC



Twenty-year-old Mustakim is one of six siblings and moved constantly between his hometown and Pune. However, after 10th standard, he moved fully to Pune and has been there since. Unlike others, Mustakim found out exactly what he wanted to do in 8th standard when he learned about generic and brand medication inequalities. Generic medications are the same compound as branded medications but are sold at a much lower price, as they are not backed by big brand names. Mustakim found out that India is one of the biggest exporters of these generic medications; however, many Indians don't get these cheaper medications and struggle to afford branded treatments.

Mustakim decided to try to fix this. He went into pharmaceuticals not just as a possible career but as a responsibility to help those in need. Now, as a pharmacy student, he has a clear future goal: build a company focused on generic medical stores in the hope of getting quality medications to those in need at a lower price. While studying full-time at the moment, he is also working as a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) member, connecting people with government schemes, holding leadership roles in his college's youth development initiatives and the Indian Pharmaceutical Students' Forum.

On top of this, Mustakim is collaborating with his brother on a Youth Innovation Fund (YIF) project for accessibility in tech education. This doesn't mean he won't do his own project, as he is looking forward to completing his YIF project called Med Flips, making his goal a reality and getting families the healthcare they need.



Leadership is Respect

Siddhi Nigot, 19

Pune

Siddhi is a nineteen-year-old Youth Advisory Group (YAG) member who grew up as the eldest in a small home with a disabled father who has long dreamed of becoming an actor and singer. However, since beginning her work with NGOs at around the age of eleven, she has had a second parallel dream: a career in the social sector. Between getting top marks in her bachelor's in computer applications, she balances her work with five separate NGOs and her acting in a theatre group. However, for Siddhi it isn't one dream or the other; it's both. She uses her acting skills in her NGO work and her leadership skills in both. According to Siddhi, leadership is not about pushing others down to get further ahead, but holding

the hands of your peers and helping all who want to get to the top. A belief that she brought to the 2025 National Children's Conference on the Indian Constitution when she was selected to represent the state of Maharashtra out of around 600 girls connected to one of the organizations she works with. The conference was a five-day experience in Madurai, Tamil Nadu Siddhi describes as "Simply great." Siddhi continues to talk about her time learning about the Indian Constitution, democracy, and youth rights, as well as gained confidence and courage from activities and networking with all the young people she got to meet from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Delhi, and other states. All while proudly representing Maharashtra and

explaining her state's culture and identity to others. Overall, this was a leadership milestone that she won't easily forget, especially since this experience has shown her how much she likes the leadership role and helping others. Since coming back from this conference she has stayed true to this courage around leadership, and she has taken on a coordinator role within her college's National Service Scheme (NSS) volunteer program, as well as starting an Instagram page for her amazing poetry, even having a video go quite viral a couple of months ago. With each new role she takes on, Siddhi is part of a future where creativity, courage, and community leadership exist side by side.





Leadership is Inclusion

Bala Madas, 25
PCMC

For much of Bala's life, being underestimated was a constant. Being born with a disability, his family moved states in the hopes of getting treatment and settled in Pune before he was even two months old. Growing up, Bala was often excluded from sports, opportunities, and even some expectations placed on other students, constantly underestimated and overlooked, even in things such as chess, where he was better than everyone on the school team and even beat the coach, but was still offered help based on assumptions. But for Bala, leadership isn't about past achievements or expectations; it's about what he intends to do. Over the past couple of years, he has worked part-time on and off as a salesman for banking and credit card companies, and he understands firsthand how hard it can be for a person with disabilities to find stable work. Being on the inside of these companies, Bala has started to gain an understanding of how they operate. In the future, Bala wants to fully understand this process in the hope of building his own sales calling company that only hires people with disabilities, building accessibility in from the start of the project. For Bala, inclusion is the main goal, and he looks forward to starting the work toward it.



Leadership is Freedom

Chhaya Kavire, 27
Pune

Chhaya was born in a small village where being a boy meant education and being a girl meant marriage. Often, girls would not be educated past the 10th standard, much less the 12th or anything past. Chhaya didn't want that life and decided to do anything not to be forced into a child marriage, a very real possibility as her family started to get marriage proposals when she was around 17 years old. Her solution to this problem was to start working from when she was in the 11th standard. According to her, working meant that she wasn't a burden to the family, she would contribute financially, and then she could delay her marriage. After a while, the proposals slowed, and her family started to change their mindset. This didn't mean Chhaya was done, she had seen cousins married young, one widowed soon after the wedding and forced in to domestic work, another a victim of domestic abuse, pressured to produce a son, often with no other choices as economic freedom is not always possible for women. Now Chhaya works as a journalist in Mumbai, and she is also a YAG member with a Youth Innovation Fund (YIF) Project, on setting up spaces for women to learn who never had the chance before. However, Chhaya doesn't just want to teach them hard skills, but is teaching them practical skills like banking, reading contracts, calculating wages and most importantly knowing their right. Chhaya wants to continue helping women as much as she can and be a role model for her adoptive daughter, one of her cousin's daughters that Chhaya took on, so that one day her daughter can choose her own path, not the one that is laid out for so many women.

**The Future is Ours
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Commissioned by

**Global Opportunity Youth
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This book is the Work of the Global Opportunity Youth Network (GOYN), a multi-stakeholder organization. GOYN is a collaboration of the Aspen Institute and Global Development Incubator. The organization follows a 'place-based' approach to build agency of young people and connect them to local and



Learn more at goyn.org
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Concept by
Alice Gugelev & Annu Mehta

Photos, text & design by
Maya Gugelev-Shapiro

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