

**RMYC 2022 SUMMER SCHOOL**

**AND**

**WORK EXPERIENCE REPORT**

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**RMYC 2022 SUMMER SCHOOL AND WORK EXPERIENCE REPORT**

*“An ounce of prevention is worth more than ten pounds of the cure.”*

**Introduction:**

The Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC), supported by its parent organization, the Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario (MANWO), ran a student summer program in Thunder Bay from June to September 2022. The program incorporated tasks to gain work experience, summer school, life skills training and opportunities to explore career options. Program sponsors included Service Canada, Employment and Social Development Canada, YES Employment Services, Students Commission of Canada, Sioux Lookout Area Aboriginal Management Board, Matawa KKETS, Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre, Carleton University, Pathways to Education, Lakehead Independent Living Centre, and First Nations Band Councils.

A total of 46 mostly high school students ranging in ages from 15 to 25 years old took part in the program. The students worked different hours a week based on the contracts and funding provided. Post secondary students served as team leaders training and supervising those learning to work for the first time. A number of junior youth council volunteers aged 12-14 years old involved with the RMYC’s Girl Power and Band of Brothers Programs were recruited to assist with the summer day camps for children in community housing neighbourhoods. We ran summer school with local boards of education for five weeks. Nine students who wanted to earn extra credits or complete courses they struggled with due to on-line learning registered for summer school.

The summer team was diverse with students from different racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Those selected were mostly volunteers and executive officers who led the RMYC, planned and organized the youth group’s activities during the school year. The students were divided into teams and worked on the priority issues identified by youths. A considerable number were Indigenous students supported by their Band Councils, and some racialized youths were sponsored by private donors. They liked the inclusive social climate and the peer mentoring approach to teach young students work skills.

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We provided employment training and supported students to do school assignments, and organized workshops and presentations to teach life skills, communication skills, social skills, work-place safety, cultural competence, build self-esteem, enhance self-confidence, and develop leadership and organizational skills. We consulted the youth about the pandemic and the challenges they were dealing with, and we solicited their comments on the summer program and the areas they felt needed improvement.

Students were encouraged to share stories, express their opinions and feelings. The following is an unranked synopsis of our observations with an analysis of some issues that overlap from the past year. The recommendations are *italicized.*

**1. Transportation**

A major concern identified by students was safe transportation. This was very evident by the high demand for RMYC vans from youths who did not have someone they could ask to give them a ride to attend unique events, go for appointments or to access essential services and supports safely. Taxis are expensive and purchasing a monthly bus pass is $55.00 for youths or $3.00 one way. It is costly to get around unless one is working and has a stable income. There are transit safety concerns, especially in the evenings. Frequent incidents of assaults made the youth, especially girls and young women and their parents/caregivers very anxious. As a result, some missed attending events and participating in after school programs and extra-curricular activities.

Thunder Bay is spread out between the original two Cities on Fort William and Port Arthur, and it can take anywhere from 40 minutes to an hour to travel by bus to our offices. This is the reason we moved our summer work program from the spacious Vale Community Centre and used the Mandarin Restaurant by the south-core next to the City Hall bus terminal. It is inconvenient to have actives late since younger students are afraid to take the bus alone. If they missed their connections, they were stranded for a long time, and it affected our work schedule if we had to wait for them to start something or go somewhere. If they did not have a phone with access to transit data, they could easily get lost or wait for prolonged periods, which is hard during harsh cold winters.

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*\* The RMYC is advocating for subsidized transportation for youths and free or discount passes for those registered and participating in after school programs. The city should gather information on transit safety and conduct regular reviews on bus schedules/ routes in order to make improvements that save time for riders and enhance safety.*

**2. Finances and Budgeting:**

From our discussions, we learned that many students lacked money-management skills. They were excited to earn money, but keen to spend it without budgeting. Many liked to spend money on trivial things and set no expenditure limits. Bombarded by colourful advertisements, they purchased expensive brands of iPods, notepads, and designer fashions they could not afford given their level of income. Others indulged in food delivery services regularly, went on mindless shopping sprees buying electronic games, magazines, and trivial things without setting priorities and spending limits.

Students living on their own often loaned money to friends who could not pay them back, then struggled to pay rent or buy necessities such as groceries, personal hygiene products, bus tickets, and telephone connectivity they really needed. They went over budget on pay-weekends buying on impulse, and were asking for advances and loans for bus-fare or to buy food the next Monday. This compromised them to unscrupulous people keen to take advantage of their desperation and exploit them for favours.

Some of the summer students did not have proper identification needed to open a bank account or were not old enough to do it on their own. They relied on their parents to cash their pay cheques or used Money-Mart and Cash-Money outlets that charged them high fees for the service. Compared to youths who are well supported by their parents, many of our summer students are from impoverished families and considered the students’ wages as supplementary income to support the family and make ends meet. There were instances where parents cashed the student’s cheques and used the money without the youths’ consent. This left the youth frustrated and unmotivated. Some were pressured or coerced by family members to give them money which discouraged them from coming to work and enjoying what they were doing.

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*\* It is prudent to teach youths to budget and support them to open bank accounts. They must learn the importance of setting priorities and how to distinguish needs from wants.*

**3. Unsafe Living Environments**

We were alerted of unsafe living situations involving some of the summer students. Indigenous students had trouble accessing shelter when schools closed and stopped paying the boarding parents. This drove them to unsafe homes where they encountered violence, faced abusers, were exposed to substances, and felt threatened. Those not living with their families had problems finding clean affordable homes to rent and were forced to spend nights at emergency shelters with strangers.

Overcrowded and unclean living conditions made life difficult. Some of the youths shared space with known gang members, drug dealers, and human traffickers who made them feel unsafe. This affected their ability to concentrate on their summer school and their jobs. The fact that they were working and earning money made them targets to be exploited. One student had first-hand experience with home invasions and was able to narrate the ordeal and trauma of living under such conditions.

Life in dysfunctional violent homes with addicts affected the mental health and lifestyles of youths. Wanting to be loved, to belong, and be accepted drove them to unsafe parties, got them intoxicated regularly, and some exchanged sexual favours with strangers for affection, money, or just to have a roof to sleep under. Boarding students being billeted in city homes lost the support services provided if they dropped out of school. With no money for rent or jobs to sustain themselves, many relied on friends and acquaintances for shelter and were couch-surfing. This made them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

Students transitioning out of foster care told us that they needed guidance to live on their own successfully. They did not have enough money for rent, lacked skills for independent living, and were sacred of being homeless. Their plight made the RMYC start a Transition House Pilot Project to create a safe home for at-risk youths in school.

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The Transition House trained students to be responsible tenants. They acquired life skills to help them develop the capacity to live on their own and thrive. The RMYC supported them to have a safe and sustainable living environment. They came up with rules and guidelines such as no abusing substances, no overnight visitors, schedules, and so forth. Students had to learn sustainable budgeting to thrive on their own..

The youth credited the Transition House as a safe space that enabled them to focus on their schooling and encouraged them to access the supports they need to succeed. All the Indigenous students staying at the house had experienced childhood trauma and were dealing with the symptoms. They needed advice, counseling, guidance, mentoring and supervision to stay on the right path in order to achieve their goals.

*\* Feedback from students living at the RMYC Transition House confirms the benefits of this initiative. More safe spaces with adequate supports are needed to train youths to be good tenants and prepare them to live independently. We need guaranteed income to cover high rent costs or subsidized housing for youths such as those aging out of care.*

**4. Alcohol and Substance Use:**

For many youths, abusing substances was a normal part of their lives. They saw friends, family members, acquaintances, and prominent personalities using alcohol to socialize, celebrate, unwind, chill or self-medicate, and copied them. We reviewed studies which revealed that childhood trauma, abuse, and violence are underlying causes that drove children and youth to start abusing substances. With inadequate counseling and limited healthy interventions to deal with the trauma, hurt and pain, they turned to alcohol and substances that led to addiction and other negative behaviours .

Four summer students missed work or showed up late due to hangovers. One student made social media postings inviting youths (minors) to parties and asking them to bring alcohol. This encouraged under-age drinking and attracted lonely youths to unsafe places to find friends and have fun. Peer pressure drove youths to misuse substances and oftentimes they were not aware of what, or how much, they were ingesting.

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Alcohol was the drug of choice among youths in Thunder Bay, followed by opioids. We talked about the dangers of using drugs at work, the risks of accidents and losing your job. Drugs also exposed youths to gangs, abusers, exploiters, and human traffickers. Cravings or addiction resulted in youths being manipulated and taken advantage of. Three students staying at our Transition House were sexually assaulted while under the influence, and had to go to the Thunder Bay Sexual Assault Centre for counselling.

A majority of the older students had used substances to escape from bad memories, and to cope with hurt and pain of grief, loss, trauma, and poor mental health. Indigenous youths told us they suffered from the intergenerational impacted by residential schools, the 60’s Scoop, and colonization. They lacked positive role models as their families did not know or have healthier ways to cope. Limited opportunities in their underserviced communities and inadequate counselling services created a void they often filled with drugs. This led to dependency to cope and paved the way to addictions and violence.

*\* We need to invest in improving the wellbeing and quality of life for children and youth so that they do not resort to abusing and relying on substances to cope. We also need child advocates to advance causes impacting youth and engage them to find solutions.*

**5. Body Image Issues:**

The youth said social media, TV shows, movies, magazines, and verbal talk bombarded them with messages about body image. Celebrities and important people in their lives including peers often talked about certain standards of beauty; physical appearance, who is pretty, and popular likeable images. This put pressure on them to look a certain way, and affected their self-esteem, self confidence and feelings of insecurity. Negative messaging about weight, how they look, and constant comparison to other people was damaging to youths, and impacted their mental health, pride, and happiness.

*\* We should create accepting environments for youths to feel they belong, support them to deal with personal challenges and be non-judgmental when they seek assurance. Peer support groups should be supported to promote acceptance and offer validation.*

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**6. Education/ Summer School:**

Indigenous and racialized students felt that not all teachers in their schools took them seriously or acknowledged that they have aspirations to do better. When approached for help, some educators dismissed them as if they had trouble understanding the materials and could not keep up with the other students. We heard that the climate in school was unsafe due to bullying, racism, homophobia, ignorance, and mean people.

The students said that there were teachers who lacked empathy, were inconsiderate, and did not take the time to get to know their students well. Culturally incompetent staff who used a biased mainstream approach to teach did not inspire Indigenous, racialized, and minority students to show up for class or motivate them to participate in the learning process. The indifference by some educators made them feel they did not belong, drove some to skip their classes, or drop out altogether.

We talked about the importance of the land acknowledgements today as failure by our education system to teach us about the traditional inhabitants of the lands we live on, and our true history. The RMYC is committed to making schools more welcoming, accepting, inclusive, and safer for every student to realize their true potential to succeed. We formed a Student Working Group to share ideas to improve the education system, and promote Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and the Accepting Schools Act. The goal is to work with our school boards to apply the government’s guidelines to improve the school climate and enhance student wellness, safety and achievement.

Since the pandemic, the RMYC has run summer school at our Multicultural Youth Centre through local school boards for students who struggled with virtual learning. We offered incentives to improve school attendance and performance. This included tutors for academic support, bus passes for transportation, and breakfast to encourage them to show up early for summer school. We fed them lunch so that they could stay all day and participate in the summer work experience program in the afternoon. Three students who needed a safe place to stay were living at the RMYC Transition House.

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Working with the students gave us a chance to see the challenges they were dealing with before, and during the pandemic. Many were struggling because of the baggage they carried from home interfered with their schooling. During the pandemic, their problems were compounded by social isolation because they had no access to services. The supports they relied on were not available when schools were closed. Their lives and ability to learn was harder because it was exceedingly difficult to get direct access to teachers and guidance counselors. They fared poorly on their own without anyone to coach them and got further behind academically. Those involved in summer school appreciated the tutors and the peer support to guide them to do their schoolwork, complete assignments, and catch up with their courses.

Indigenous students told us that historical factors affected their motivation and family support to attend school. Being taken away from home and forced to attend residential schools created resentment, which continues to be felt in Indigenous communities to this day. Their parents may appreciate the value of education today, but lack the passion and drive to motivate their children to stay in school and urge them to hang in there when they struggle. Remiving little children from their parents and communities to distant boarding schools, prohibiting them to speak their language and imposing a mainstream education system with a non-Indigenous curriculum has created and perpetuated a situation where racist attitudes and cultural stereotypes prevail. This background has contributed to the high numbers of Indigenous school dropouts, and unfortunately many end up in the justice system. According to Statistics Canada and Correctional Service Canada, 89% of young offenders in the federal correctional system have below grade 10 education, and 65% less than grade 8.

*\* A recent (2021) study by Dr. John Hodson and Nadine Hedican titled “Educational Challenges for First Nations Children in Thunder Bay Schools – Let the Dreams Begin” revealed a school dropout rate as high as eighty per cent (80%) among First Nations in local schools. Therefore, we must engage Indigenous people in the education system, invest adequate resources to support their children to succeed, and fully implement the Truth and Reconciliation Call to Action # 6 – 12 on Education to make a difference.*

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**7. Racism, Sexism, Ableism, Homophobia and Transphobia:**

Bigotry impacts every teenager, yet many students tell us that schools do not do much to teach them about internalized hate and systemic racism. We are aware that racism, sexism, stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, ableism, transphobia, homophobia / 2-spirit, and Islamophobia exist in society and adversely affect the youth. Indigenous, racialized, and other minority groups face the full brunt of the hatred. This impacts their lives, mental health, performance in school and achievement.

Black youths talked about Anti-Black racism and were aware of the Black Lives Matter movement. Muslim students shared their experiences with Islamophobia. Indigenous students spoke about the impacts of colonization, residential schools, and the 60’s Scoop, and how intergenerational traumas affect their lives. Poor parenting skills, broken homes, dysfunctional families, and impoverished living conditions contributed to stress and trauma they were dealing with. Such situations beyond their control created stereotypes and prejudice that became barriers. Being Indigenous added to the racism they experienced and the discrimination they had to deal with daily.

Indigenous and racialized youths felt that ‘privileged’ students often lack understanding of the effects of cultural stereotypes, racial prejudice, and bigotry. They make offensive comments and insensitive jokes which reflect ignorance of reality and are not corrected by teachers. This creates a sense of entitlement for them, while minimizing the damage and trivializing the bigotry.

The students said that teachers, youth workers, and counsellors who are uneducated on the issues racialized and minority youths are dealing with, fail to comprehend the impacts this has on personal identity, self confidence and mental health. This is why some youths did not bother approaching and opening up to them about what they are going through. They felt micro-aggressions were not acknowledged as harmful in their schools and were expected to “educate” and “forgive.” Attitudes must change, and true leadership is required to address systemic racism and oppressive structures that created the problems and maintained the status-quo.

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*\* The RMYC believes that hiring diverse educators who reflect the community and student population will improve the school climate by increasing cultural and racial sensitivity. Inclusion will break down barriers and discussing problems, sharing stories and ways to deal with racial tensions will provide opportunities to gain experience from others. Awareness of racial problems, learning best practices to address discrimination and strategies to combat Anti-Indigenous racism will enhance reconciliation.*

**8. Mental Health & Addictions -- Lack of Community or Positive Role Models:**

A substantial portion of the youth involved with the RMYC have experienced trauma and identified mental health as a priority. Childhood exposure to neglect, violence, substance use, addictions, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, poverty, grief, and loss to suicides were mentioned as contributing to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

A summer student staying at the RMYC Transition House lost a sibling to violence in Thunder Bay a couple of years ago and was attending the court case over the summer, when she lost another sister in the city last August. She did not get grief counseling and was struggling mentally and emotionally. It has been a roller-coaster ride for her, and we later learned that she was indulging in alcohol for comfort.

Another student told us that she was introduced to cutting and self-harm by a friend at school who invited her to the bathroom and slashed her wrists right in front of her. The friend was going through personal problems, and this was her way to cope. We found out that many students working with us covered their arms and thighs to hide scars from self-inflicted cuts. All shared related stories of depression, pain, loss, grief, and abuse.

We also learned that all the Indigenous youths in our programs were on medications, had tried using hotlines, had been referred for counselling or had been to treatment. They said that inadequate supports, lack of interventions, the absence of counseling services, or long waiting periods to get help led them to abuse alcohol, drugs, and prescription pills. Once they started using substances to numb pain, they became dependent on them to cope, and it became extremely hard to quit.

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The absence of positive role models to talk with and provide guidance was mentioned as contributing the void in their lives. Some told us they had no older, positive siblings to open up to until joining RMYC, where they found peer support. Missing family affection, or genuine appreciation by the community for trying hard under difficult circumstances led to negative thoughts and emotions that affected their mental wellbeing.

From what we heard, there is a shortage of free or affordabletrauma-informed and evidence-based therapy/mental health counseling on reserves and in Thunder Bay. The youth preferred in-person contact and connections that are consistent, and not hot-lines where they talk with total strangers. They also need professionals who are culturally competent and can understand what they are going through to earn their trust.

A sizable number of students grew up without healthy adult role models in their lives to guide them, teach them manners, show them healthy lifestyles and positive relationships, tell them to avoid substances, provide spiritual guidance, and create a balance in life to enhance their mental health. They were overwhelmed by the social pressure to succeed at all costs but lacked supports to be the best they could be as individuals. It was hard to struggle alone and try to survive to make their families proud.

Not having adult allies and significant others saying to them, “I care about you” or “I love you,” made life incredibly stressful. This is how toxic or abusive relationships and bad friends drew teenagers desperate for connection and affection. All the Indigenous students confessed to having suicidal thoughts and several had contemplated killing themselves. Abusing substances, being intoxicated were common forms of escapism.

The RMYC applies a youth-to-youth approach using Peer Mentors and role models to make a difference. We believe that positive peers can help to fill the void when loving parents or older siblings are absent. Creating safer spaces and providing one-on-one support for a shoulder to cry on did help. We ran mental health workshops led by university and college students. More experienced peers shared personal stories as reference to inspire those feeling hopeless and with no sense of direction.

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*\* We must engage Elders for spiritual comfort and professionals for guidance and advice. Ceremonies, sharing circles, workshops and healing can foster mental wellness. Investing in supervised extra-curricular activities, physical exercise, social and cultural events, arts, and crafts will promote happiness and youths can grow up having fun, live healthy lifestyles and unabashedly become themselves.*

**9. Bullying / Cyber bullying and Violence:**

Violence has been normalized by social media and in some sports, but a majority of students involved in the summer program had first-hand experience with violence, assaults, and bullying. Some had witnessed family violence, seen fights at school, or were familiar with being ambushed. Many were familiar with bullying, being called names, threatened, harassed, teased, or shunned. This was devastating and some students avoided socializing, attending events, or participating in activities out of fear.

Instances of bullying and lateral violence linked to culture, race, religion, intelligence, and weight were common and just as hurtful. Cyber-bullying via social media was a big problem as falsehoods or confidential information was shared with the public, used to exhort favours and/or as extortion. This caused shame, fear, trauma, and depression.

A quarter of the summer students said they had transferred schools, or knew someone who had, because they could not manage the bullying, racial taunts, homophobic, and two-spirit comments. Group peer pressure was a factor when other students became passive by-standers and did not intervene. Things changed if someone challenged the perpetrator to stop. But the students felt teachers were not doing enough to stop bullying, or know how to deal with the bullies decisively.

*\* Schools should address bullying and teach responsible use of social media. Teachers and staff should deal with bullies decisively and run courses to train students as peer mediators to resolve conflict without violence. Sharing circles and restorative practices should be used to ease tension. Ontario’s Accepting Schools Act should be applied in the classrooms to create a welcoming, accepting, and safe learning environment for every student to succeed.*

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**10. Food Security / Insecurity:** The success of our summer school, and to a great extent, the Summer Experience Work Program can be attributed to our inclusion of food insecurity as part of our activities. From the RMYC’s experience with the After School Program, feeding students was an incentive to participate and socialize. Many came from disadvantaged, low-income families and welcomed the meals. We offered a simple breakfast with pastries donated by Tim Hortons which motivated students to show up for school early.

The RMYC Peer Mentors prepared lunch for students to have something to eat after summer school before joining the Work Experience Program in the afternoon. The students decided what to eat and made a budget to learn about food costs. The RMYC provided the funds and students took turns to do grocery shopping, learn to prepare a healthy meal given the high rates of diabetes, and food-handling skills to feed a group.

We observed that the students not involved in summer school looked forward to eating the leftovers. Some did not have much to eat before coming to work as the parents were counting on the RMYC feeding them as we did when they volunteered at the youth centre during the school year. The students’ wages were helping to supplement the family income and food costs. We noticed that students were taking leftovers home for their siblings, and the RMYC registered with the main local food back to collect food for struggling youths and their families. This complimented our community gardening initiative in 4 sites across the city. The aim was to engage youth in food production by teaching them to grow fresh vegetables. This made healthy eating more affordable and helped to counter the high incidences of diabetes that is rampant among First Nations.

*\* Food insecurity is a severe problem given the excessive costs of healthy nutritious food. Hunger is a reality and makes youths vulnerable and at risk of being lured by gangs. We should advocate for breakfast and lunch clubs at school and run after school programs with free food. Community gardens should be promoted to produce food locally at low cost. Greenhouses should be introduced in northern communities to grow fresh vegetables at affordable prices and reduce the high incidences of diabetes.*

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**11. Jobs and Employment:**

Working with diverse youths at the Multicultural Youth Centre made us realize the unique challenges students from diverse backgrounds face. We were able to observe the attitudes of Indigenous, racialized, minority, and privileged mainstream youths, and compare social values between Indigenous and immigrant students. Indigenous and racialized youths faced racism and had similar experiences with discrimination.

We learned from Elders that colonization and the Indian Act allowed the government to control Indigenous lives, what they did, and where they lived. They lost their pride, self-determination, and sovereignty, and were subjects of the Crown. They were this country’s original labour pool, but when many new European immigrants came to settle in Canada, the government sent them to reserves and gave them subsistence allowances which made them dependent on the state. This opened jobs for new immigrants and excluded Indigenous people from employment in the mainstream economy. In spite of living off the land and surviving by hunting, fishing, and gathering, and stereotypes emerged about Indigenous people being lazy and not wanting to work.

Indigenous youths today suffer from the intergenerational impacts of residential schools, the legacy of colonization, the 60’s Scoop, and the Indian Act. Many are not proud of their identity, and struggle to integrate into Canadian society. When the RMYC approached Indigenous youths to work, many were scared. It was a challenge for them to join the urban workforce. They struggled to adapt to workplace norms such as punctuality, work-place etiquette, attendance, performance, and so forth. Many of the students we hired were distracted by social media and required constant supervision.

*\* Adequate investment is needed to expand programs and opportunities to train youths to acquire skills for future jobs, and proper orientation is required to prepare them for a changing and diverse workplace. All levels of government, organizations and individuals must commit time and resources to implementing the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action and address the injustices faced by Indigenous people so that they are able to participate in all aspects of Canadian society.*

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**12. Boredom:**

It isn’t that there is nothing for youth to do, the problems include access, affordability, safety, and whether food will be provided. There are no school busses or affordable free rides for youths to attend activities after school and on weekends. Out-of-school sports and recreation are expensive, and few organized activities are free. Ice hockey, floor hockey, soccer, baseball, basketball, are all team sports that require co-ordination, supervision, and transportation. It is difficult for youths living in distant neighbourhoods to make it from one end of town to another without help with transportation.

Students felt that Thunder Bay was not safe to move around alone at night. They knew of young people who had been jumped and viciously assaulted. The Seven Youth Inquest into the deaths of seven First Nations students who were attending school in the city highlighted the need for safer and healthy activities to keep students busy after hours. ‘Idle hands are the devil’s playground’. Bored youths are at risk of getting into trouble, causing damage, and creating social problems with devastating consequences.

Getting to places to participate in activities was not easy for youths in families with no vehicle. Many RMYC members relied on the youth council’s vans to get them to meetings and events. While it would be much easier and cheaper to work with privileged youths who can come to our activities on their own, it would be cruel and unfair to ignore those who had no transportation to attend. Therefore, reliable, affordable transportation or easy access to activities within walking distance can level the playing field for all to participate and alleviate the scourge of boredom.

*\* We should be proactive at engaging and working with youths to enhance their talents and creativity. Having safe spaces in high-risk areas within walking distance for local youths to hang out, plan, organize, and participate in healthy activities, and get the help and supports they need, will greatly cut down on juvenile delinquency. We must invest in children and provide exciting opportunities to prevent them from being bored and falling through the cracks as easy targets for gangs looking for idle youths to recruit and introduce a life of crime and social problems.*

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**13. Shame:**

Our discussions on self-esteem, self-confidence, and identity revealed that shame had a powerful influence on the youth. When we brainstormed what they associated with the word, they said it triggered negative feelings and bad memories. They felt ashamed when something was fundamentally wrong, was embarrassing, or made them look awkward. When the issues they raised were often ignored in the community and not acknowledged by people in power, they felt belittled and insignificant.

Shame is an abuse we are taught to inflict upon ourselves. Pressure to be accepted, fit in, and belong, can be extraordinarily strong. Mass media/social media had a significant impact on youths. Students from poor, racialized, or marginalized families compared themselves with their privileged peers, and felt ashamed for not having what others had such as designer clothes, new technological gadgets, money, and material things. The youth equated shame with being judged, included, or excluded. Being different, overweight, having a disability or the level of intelligence affected how youths perceived themselves, versus how others saw them, and what they felt about it. Indigenous youths said there was stigma showing off a Status Card instead of being proud of their identity.

Being in developmental phase and lacking practical experience, youths were prone to making mistakes, and caring adults should be there to correct and guide them. Issues such as dropping out of school, growing up in foster-care, addictions, homelessness teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, poverty, crime, family problems, and mental health were liable to bring shame, fear, and embarrassment. This stopped them from reaching out, asking for help, opening up, or speaking out for fear of being judged, labeled, teased, stigmatized, or laughed at. Shame and sometimes self-pride got in the way and this had an impact on their ability to learn from their mistakes and move on.

*\*Young people need nonjudgmental, caring adults like parents, caregivers, coaches, teachers, workers, employers, counselors, and so forth to be aware of their issues and guide them accordingly. They also need peer support to be resilient, and positive role models to lead by example, influence and empower them to believe in themselves.*

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**14. Lack of Trust in the Community:**

Students were aware of the RMYC’s struggle to get funding to operate the Multicultural Youth Centre and its programs. Just a couple of years ago, the city refused to help, and put the building for sale because we owed property taxes. This made the youth feel that the city did not consider their youth drop-in centre important, and their efforts to help make the city better for children were not appreciated.

The youth council started the Community Breakfast and Race Relations Awards as youth-led community events to commemorate March 21, the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and needed money to continue hosting the events annually. Instead of supporting the RMYC to build on these functions, adult groups with money took them over, sidelining the youth in the campaigns. While we were all working together to eliminate racism and improve cultural relations, the youth felt slighted that their role as initiators of the events to mobilize their peers and the larger community to promote racial harmony was diminished. RMYC members questioned the community’s sincerity to support and empower youths as leaders to create change they want to see.

Other indicators sowing seeds of mistrust include the absence of Thunder Bay City Councillors during the Seven Youth Inquest, the city reneging on sharing gaming revenue windfall with affected charities, and inaction on recommendations from the Review of Roots of Youth Violence to invest in after school programs. Approving a bar license next to an existing youth centre also shows a lack of community support for safer spaces for youths to hang out and participate in programs that enhance their wellness, safety, and achievement. The RMYC’s petition with other groups to amend the zoning bylaw was futile, despite numerous reports of safety concerns in the area.

Thunder Bay City Council adopted a Children’s Charter on June 14, 2004, to ensure that the beliefs and values enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children are maintained at the municipal level. A detailed report with RMYC input was prepared by Child Advocate Councillor Frank Pullia, and presented to City Council on December 18, 2018, highlighted issues affecting children and youth in Thunder Bay.

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Upon taking office in January 2019, the new City Council did not fill the Thunder Bay Children’s Advocate post. In spite of relentless lobbying and RMYC meetings with the Mayor and City Councillors to appoint someone to fill the position, no action was taken. Major youth issues exist in the city, and not having a Child Advocate responsible for Thunder Bay Children’s Charter indicates lip service to the problems and a lack of commitment to deal with youth issues and to the UN Convention on children’s rights.

It was frustrating to the youth to feel that City Hall ignored their plight. ‘It takes a village to raise a child,’ yet privileged community leaders assume raising children was only the responsibility of parents. The RMYC regards children as the community’s most valuable human resource. They deserve to be heard and their issues should be taken seriously.

*\*The government of Canada’s apology for the role played by residential schools in destroying Indigenous families confirms the need for collective action to address youth issues and fund youth programs and services accordingly. We must tackle the growing numbers of children in foster-care and support community interventions and supports to counter criminal gangs and their influence in Thunder Bay. The city should invest in proactive programs and social services to stop negative cycles expanding. The RMYC should engage children and youth for input and feedback on issues that affect them. The youth council must advocate for the reappointment of a Child Advocate on City Council to collaborate with community partners to implement the Thunder Bay Children’s Charter, amplify youth voices and their concerns, identify where gaps exist, and work in partnership with other groups to address them. It is better and cheaper to prevent problems up-stream from getting downstream and causing more damage.*

**15. Youth Sexuality, Teen Pregnancy and Parenting Skills:**

We covered youth sexuality because a RMYC Peer Mentor and Student Ambassador fell pregnant and had a baby during the pandemic. While mentoring students online, she made notes about youth pregnancy and foster care. She felt that sex education, guidance and opportunities can prevent young girls from getting pregnant and disrupting their schooling to have babies they are not yet ready to rear.

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The youth were initially shy to talk about sex, but everyone acknowledged that kids often visited porn sites on the internet. This normalized sexual activities, but did not provide the necessary precautions of boundaries, self-protection, sexually transmitted infections, teen pregnancy and parenting. Exposure to pornography left some youths vulnerable to blackmail, abuse, exploitation and human trafficking.

All the summer students were aware of foster care, and a majority of Indigenous youths had experiences with child welfare services or had at one time in their lives been taken away from their biological parents. They knew of friends and siblings who had dropped out of school to have babies, only to lose them to care because they were too young and immature or lacked parenting skills. Losing children to foster care brought shame and was considered as failure to be a good care-giver. This had a devastating effect on young parents, made them feel worthless, and drove them to drink and use substances.

This impacted Indigenous people the most. According to Census 2016, 53.8% of Canadian children in foster care were Indigenous, but accounted for only 7.7% of the child population. Nationally, Indigenous children accounted for 7.7% of all children 14 years of age and younger, yet more than three per cent of Indigenous children living in private households in 2021 were in foster care compared to the 0.2% of non-Indigenous children. Child welfare statistics reveal that there are more Indigenous children in care today that those who went to residential schools. There is a shortage of good foster homes, and many newborns have preventable disabilities such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders or suffer from drug-addiction withdrawal symptoms.

There was also a ‘crossover effect’ where many kids in care ended up in the justice system rather than post-secondary education. A recent report revealed that 98% of girls in Saskatchewan youth jails were Indigenous, and upward of 70% of inmates in Manitoba jails were Indigenous. 50% of all women in federal prisons now are Indigenous, despite Indigenous women making up only 5% of Canada’s female population. A majority of women offenders are survivors of physical and sexual abuse and trauma.

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*\* There must be a collective effort to address sex crimes in Indigenous communities. We need strategies to instruct girls and young women about sexuality and parenting to stop the cycle of foster care from expanding. The RMYC should promote Girl Power and Band of Brothers programs, run workshops to provide kids and teens with relevant information about sex and boundaries, make presentations to enable them to report when abused, and support them to make responsible decisions and wise choices.*

**16. Trauma:**

All the students had heard about trauma and knew that it was a fundamental problem. We discussed traumatic experiences as extreme stress and distress. Incidences can cause terror, horror, intense fear, helplessness, and stress reactions. The impacts of events that cause trauma may stay with the individual for a lifetime, and can be triggered by similar encounters and memories that remind victims what happened to them. Trauma events affected how the youth behaved, their attitudes and relationships.

Many students associated trauma with scary events such as extreme violence, being attacked, vicious assaults, sexual abuse, rape, torture, being trafficked, witnessing a tragedy such as an overdose, a blackout, murder, or suicide, being threatened with a weapon, involvement in a serious accident, or exposure to a near-death experience. Some had firsthand experience with these situations, and it changed their lives, how they saw themselves, and the world around them. It was mentioned that the impacts of trauma may not be immediate, but can take days, months, or even years after the incident that affects their behavior, attitude, perceptions, relationships, and lifestyles.

We shared a study by the RMYC founding President Melanie Goodchild for the Girl Power Program in Nishnawbe Aski Nation communities. It revealed that 75% of victims of sex crimes in First Nations communities were females under the age of 18; 50% of those were under 14 years old; and almost 25% of those were younger than 7 years of age. Incidences of child sexual abuse in some First Nations communities were as high as 75 to 80% for girls under 8 years old. This was a major problem that contributed to the high incidents of mental health concerns, youth suicides, and substance abuse.

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It was also hard to find good trauma-informed practices to work with the youth. The youth resented working with different counselors and repeating their stories each time. They were reluctant to open up and share their problems with new workers which left their problems unresolved. In the absence of good accessible professional help, many turned to self-medicating using alcohol, drugs, or pills to cope.

*\* The RMYC should encourage youths to report traumatic incidents in their lives and seek the professional support they need for mental wellness. We should create safer spaces for youths to support each, help each other to cope with trauma, share stories about hope, and exchange experiences to become resilient.*

**17. Volunteering, Community Activism:**

It is a goal of the RMYC to help youths to stay in school and graduate. We provided high school students with opportunities to do the 40 hours of community service they needed to graduate, and reached out to shy, Indigenous, racialized and minority students who struggled to find placements. Volunteering gave the youth a chance to be involved in the community, show their talents, develop skills, make friends, and have fun. This was an opportunity to gain practical experience for resumes, to explore career options, and develop personal contacts for references.

We promoted the Multicultural Youth Centre as a safe place to volunteer as well earn course credits as placement students taking course assignments. There was a formal learning process with guidelines and an evaluation process for academic grading. We provided volunteers and students placements with an opportunity to learn about the youth centre and our services. They also learned work-place etiquette, developed special work-skills, and were able to explore other career options. The peer mentoring approach and a diverse team was a sample of an inclusive environment to work.

*\* More opportunities are needed for youths to volunteer and use their talents to make a contribution and have a stake in what happens in their community. Students need support to graduate and Indigenous, racialized, minority and marginalized youths with limited options to thrive require equitable chances to learn, grow and prosper*

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**18. Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation:**

The work environment was generally peaceful and harmonious, but we had a few incidents that created tension. Rumours, gossip, and postings on social media created misunderstandings, and several students were not talking to each other due to cheating and souring relationships. To maintain a productive workplace, we addressed the problems before they became significant issues affecting more people.

We watched a video about peer mediation “Working it Out,” which we used as a resource to teach the youth to talk things out and learn to settle arguments without using force or violence. Having peers mediating the situation as neutral observers helped to diffuse tension, calm the climate, and allow for reason to take over, this got the issue resolved without holding a grudge or the need for revenge.

We also practiced the sharing circle where everyone had a voice and took turns to talk. Only the person holding a symbolic item, such as a feather, could speak each time, which maintained order and respect. This allowed people to listen to each other, let things cool down, and allowed reason to prevail. We promoted restorative justice as a way to deal with problems and repairing the damage by offer restitution where necessary and facilitating healing. These were effective alternative ways to solve problems without aggression, put-downs, threats and violence.

*\* We should teach the youth mediation skills, communication skills, and how to listen to each other so that they can resolve conflict without resorting to violence. We should allow healing to eliminate the desire for retaliation.*

**19. Peer Mentoring, Youth Leadership and Organizational Skills:**

Since 1985 when the RMYC was formed by MANWO as a legacy of the United Nations International Youth Year, youths have been challenged to be involved in creating the change they want to see. Youths communicate well with peers because there is no generation gap, and know what is going on within their age-group. However, they lack experience to strategize and the finances to plan and organize themselves successfully.

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Part of the summer work experience involved training students to be leaders, and to use positive influence as a strategy to change unhealthy habits and attitudes among peers. We wanted them to reach more young people and create a ripple effect to make a difference. We taught them skills to communicate, analyze situations, and take action to be part of the solution to the problems they faced.

The youth checked in when they started work, and checked out at the end of the day, which encouraged them to talk. Young people today are used to texting, and we trained them to speak up and engage in oral discussions to express their thoughts and opinions. They had to talk as a way to practice making presentations to peers, decision- makers, the media and so forth. This was intended to help them during interviews.

The RMYC believes in youth empowerment, and training pools of young leaders to collaborate with peers in youth centres, community halls, schools, churches, and other facilities where children and youth feel safe will reach out and engage more kids and teens. Supporting them to form youth groups in schools and local neighbourhoods and encouraging them to use convenient and accessible facilities to organize their own activities and run programs will help to enhance their physical and mental wellbeing.

The RMYC has successfully used a youth-to-youth approach to gather information and ideas, and work with young leaders to plan activities and organize events. Peer role models serve as ring leaders who motivate and inspire others to take action. They lead by example and use positive influence as pressure to change unhealthy habits, give youth hope, and make a difference. They also serve as significant others among the youth and help vulnerable kids to avoid unhealthy lifestyles and risky behaviour.

The RMYC has trained Peer Mentors who coach and guide other youths who need help. Peer Mentors at the youth centre welcome new members and volunteers and provide orientation to familiarize them with the youth group. We also use Peer Mentors as Student Ambassadors to connect with students in schools and support them to hang in there until they graduate.

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The RMYC introduced the Student Ambassadors at Dennis Franklin Cromarty First Nations High School in 2017 and made the After School Program a success. Student Ambassadors help to prepare snacks, involve their peers to plan the activities they enjoy, work with them to organize events and encourage them to participate, keep busy, and stay safe after school. They are trained to talk with their peers, particularly those who are lonely, shy, and seem to be struggling at school. They refer students to the support services available and link them with tutors and other resources to help them thrive in the city and do well in school.

The Peer Mentoring/Student Ambassador initiative the RMYC has used to run the After School Program at DFC was a success story. With funding from Pathways to Education Canada, the RMYC has since partnered with Lakehead Public Schools, Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board, and the Nishnawbe Aski Nation to run the Program in all Thunder Bay high schools in order to enhance student wellness, safety and achievement. The aim is to create inclusive safer spaces with snacks for disadvantaged students to realize their full potential to learn and graduate from high school.

***\**** *We should invest in developing young leaders, role models and peer helpers who engage their peers in positive activities. Training is needed to acquire skills and build self-confidence and mobilize themselves to speak out and use the press and social media to amplify their voices and raise the profile of their priorities.*

*\* We should ask our governments, relevant authorities, and decision makers to fund safer places for youths to access information, services and supports to enhance their wellness, safety and achievement, and support youth groups that can organize activities that help to stop unhealthy habits and break negative cycles. Incentives are required to rewards trained young leaders and peer helpers in order to retain their services. Compensating them for their time, skills, and effort will retain them for longer periods and reduce the talent-drain to other sectors competing for young talent. We will benefit from peer leaders who connect well with children and youth and are more effective at making positive impressions on vulnerable and at-risk youths.*

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**20. The Pandemic:**

The pandemic had a devastating impact on the youth. Various focus groups the RMYC hosted during the year and the surveys we conducted revealed that mental health and academic performance were adversely affected by social isolation.

We asked the students to write down anything they associated with the pandemic, and the list included the following words: fear, scared, COVID-19, frustration, virtual learning, loneliness, quarantine, masking, zoom meetings, vaccines, washing hands, stress, social distancing, Omicron, distress, lock-down, sleep, bored, drink, and sanitizer. During the discussions, the students talked about how they were impacted. Masks were confining and the lock-downs restrictive. They missed being with their friends in person and became very dependent on social media. On-line learning was a challenge for them because they were used to being in a classroom with a teacher. The closure of schools took away many supports they relied on such as someone to explain what they did not understand, access to food and snacks provided at school, use the gyms and other school resources such as counseling services. Many said they could not complete their assignments, and some dropped their courses altogether.

Access to the internet was a problem for some, and others lacked the technology such as phones or laptops. We are grateful that Pathways to Education provided i-Phones and computers the RMYC shared with underprivileged students. This allowed Peer Mentors to connect with students and provide comfort and support. Food security was another major problem and there were sponsors in southern Ontario that sponsored meals for underprivileged students who attended our weekly study groups at the Mandarin Restaurant. The study sessions with peer tutors were immensely helpful for students who did not have anyone at home to help them with schoolwork online.

*\* The pandemic exacerbated mental health issues among the youth, and the RMYC feels that students should be empowered to form groups to support each other and learn to deal with stress in positive ways. Youth need safe spaces to hang-out, have something to eat, enjoy themselves, hold sharing circles, access resources, and get guidance they need to enhance their mental, emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing.*

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**Special Activities, Learning Opportunities and Outcomes**

The RMYC organized unique events such as fieldtrips, picnics, day camps, gardening projects, and presentations with guest speakers to enhance the learning process and add excitement to the summer program.

We took students to the Fort William First Nation Health Fair where various health agencies in Thunder Bay promoted their services. They were also recruiting prospective students to join the health field. Several students were interested to follow up and explore the options being offered.

We made a field trip to Gull Bay First Nation to participate in the community festival. The students supervised the children's play area, organized activities at various stations, played games with youths, sold raffle tickets, and prepared and served food. We were impressed when five youths sponsored by Kasabonika Lake First Nation said they learned so much from the event and wanted to go to their community's festival in late August to help organize similar activities for children and youth.

We organized barbecues for youths who came to pick up garbage for our neighbourhood clean-up campaign, and hosted picnics in community housing projects to interact with residents and sign-up children and youth for the RMYC Girl Power and Band of Brothers Day camps. These events trained youths to talk with strangers, promote the RMYC programs to families, and sign up kids and teens for the summer day camps the summer students ran in city neighbourhoods. We worked with local residents at Limbrick Place, Windsor-Picton neighbourhood, Simpson-Pruden area, and Carrick House on community gardens to promote food security.

We invited guest speakers to make presentations as well as share their experiences with the students. Three RMYC past presidents, one of them, the current NAN Deputy Grad Chief Bobby Narcisse, talked about their involvement with the youth council, and how it influenced their personal career paths and current lives. This raised the summer students’ awareness of the unique projects initiated by the youth for youth.

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We organized trips to the Thunder Bay Public Library to use the resources available and arranged a presentation on filing income tax returns with the Canada Revenue Agency. We also covered credit card use and sustainable budgeting to teach youths to monitor their finances and make sure that their expenses do not exceed their income.

The Students Commission of Canada sent a team of four staff who promoted youth engagement strategies, the Canada We Want forums that link youths from coast to coast to coast, and the “Art of Work” job training program which complemented our summer employment program. We also worked with three Carleton University students who took turns to visit Thunder Bay as part of a research project titled *“Youth Futures: Bringing together Indigenous and Western approaches to promote youth resilience and prosperity in First Nations communities”.* They spent four weeks mentoring youths, and facilitating workshops on mental health, youth empowerment and goal setting.

We devoted considerable time discussing the challenges faced by Indigenous children and youth to help non-Indigenous students understand background factors. We shared information the RMYC compiled to enhance reconciliation which highlighted the differing perspectives between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups with respect to150 years colonization since Confederation. This was important for everyone to reflect on what they saw on the streets, the cultural stereotypes and racial prejudice we have in society.

The RMYC Co-President, Tisha Duncan who was part of the summer team shared the following with her peers:

“Being an Indigenous youth is hard, I am sure all of you who are Indigenous can relate. I want to take some time to acknowledge our pain:

\* 48% of Indigenous people have frequent thoughts of historical trauma

\* 1 in 4 Indigenous peoples think about broken treaties daily

\* 1 in 3 Indigenous peoples think about loss of language daily

\* 1 in 5 Indigenous peoples think about loss of land daily

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When we have suicidal thoughts, it is our spirits and minds reacting to colonial violence. We are not insane or crazy for not wanting to exist in a space meant to annihilate us. Our mental and spiritual pain is valid. For us, culture revitalization is suicide prevention. Language revitalization is suicide prevention. Food security is suicide prevention. Mental health awareness is suicide prevention. What we struggle with and the pain we feel is not fair. It's not fair. But this is a reality Indigenous youth face – and our voices need to be heard”.

The evaluation on attendance and work performance was quite good. A majority of the students readily adjusted to the work routine, but some struggled with punctuality due to problems with transportation. Paying attention was a problem as most students were obsessed with social media. We had to prohibit i-Phones use during normal work hours. There were Initial problems with insubordination as some students were not used to RMYC members they volunteered with during the school year become their workplace ‘bosses’ over the summer. Things improved after group discussions on work-place expectations and one-to-one talks, which were more like counselling sessions

Five students did not complete the summer program for varying reasons. One student had group anxiety and could not manage large group situations. Two did not have stable home environments and had irregular attendance which led them to drop out after the first month. One student lacked motivation to come to work regularly we dropped her out. We sent a student sponsored by YES Employment Services back due to social-media postings and unbecoming bevaviour incompatible with RMYC values.

Seven of the nine students who signed up for summer school lasted the 5 weeks of the program. All submitted their assignments, but we were not able to get confirmations on how many earned full credits. The students credited the incentives we provided and the peer support as key factors for staying right through with the summer school. All the students were pleased with the program and would participate again. All the RMYC executive positions open were filled by summer students who wanted to volunteer with the group this school year. Eighteen signed up as Peer Mentors/Student Ambassadors.

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**CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

The RMYC has relied on young leaders to promote the group, organize activities, and run programs. We were able to organize the summer work program and summer school for 46 students because we relied on peer mentors, peer helpers, and team leaders to help out. A review of how the program was delivered was positive with a high student retention rate. Participating students credited empathy, peer support, and flexibility for keeping them interested in the activities and ability to learn new skills.

The RMYC is proud that its work has been acknowledged locally, regionally, provincially, nationally, and internationally, and earned awards for the young leaders involved. Initiatives such as the Orientation Program to welcome and mentor First Nations boarding from remote northern reserves to urban school have been endorsed by Nishnawbe Aski Nation Chiefs in Assembly who passed a unanimous resolution supporting the youth council to work with First Nations youths in Thunder Bay and across the region. This collaboration has been greatly beneficial to foster reconciliation.

Indigenous groups have sustained our youth council’s programs and services. However, as a multicultural group serving diverse youths, we need operational funding to work with everyone and sensitize them to diversity and equality. Children and youth are a dependent population with no financial capital to organize their own activities or rent safer spaces such as the Multicultural Youth Centre to hang out, plan activities, organize events, and run programs. With growing numbers of Indigenous, racialized, and minority children in-care falling through cracks, positive alternatives are needed to counter dysfunctional homes, street life, and at-risk youths becoming damaged parents.

The RMYC is appealing for investing in proactive inclusive youth initiatives such as the summer program that help disadvantaged youths. and level the playing field. Funding the development of culturally competent young leaders and teaching them to practise equity and social justice will have a transformative effect when they are in positions of authority to make decisions that will enhance the wellbeing of the human race.