



regional multicultural youth council
multicultural association of northwestern ontario

Community Perspectives Report

THE REVIEW OF THE
of youth violence

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS
AND CONCLUSIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

volume 3

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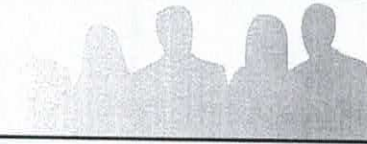
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Chapter 4:

Community Stories



Thunder Bay: A Youth-to-Youth Approach

“Young people need to be supported by healthy communities, where there are chances for intergenerational dialogue, where neighbours know each other and where they feel people care about what they do.”

— respondent to online survey

As we travelled around Ontario, we met many individuals who were working hard to make a difference in their communities — far too many to include all their stories in this report. The following five stories, however, are presented as representative of the work going on at the grassroots level. We are not saying these are the best solutions, but we are hoping that they may start you thinking about things you could do in your community. If nothing else, they will let you know that you're not alone as you grapple with trying to find solutions that will meet your communities' special needs.

The Regional Multicultural Youth Council has provided a voice for youth in Thunder Bay and small isolated communities across northwestern Ontario for more than 20 years.

The council was formed by a group of young people who participated in activities organized by the Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario to celebrate the international year of youth in 1985. The council, led by founding president Melanie Goodchild, an Aboriginal high school student from the Pic River Ojibway First Nation, adopted a vision of youth from all backgrounds working together for a common future.

Ever since, the council has maintained its commitment to a “youth-to-youth” approach to enhancing the well-being of children and youth and improving social conditions in the communities where they live.

The youth executive runs the council and speaks for the group on public platforms. The youth leaders represent children and youth on civic committees and organize forums for youth voices to be heard on issues of interest or concern. They plan activities and involve their peers in organizing events in the schools and in the community. The council liaises with professionals for advice and collaborates with various groups and agencies.

“In this organization, young people are always standing in front,” says Moffat

The youth have talents and potential to be caring, resourceful and responsible.

Makuto, executive director of the Association, the parent organization of the youth council. “The youth have talents and potential to be caring, resourceful and responsible. They need our support to become knowledgeable and capable leaders.

The council engages young people and challenges them to be part of the solution to problems affecting them. It has hosted youth conferences, organized focus groups, promoted peer mediation to resolve conflict, and conducted surveys and interviews on creating safer communities. It has compiled information and produced resource material to improve police-youth relations, make schools safer, improve safety in local neighbourhoods and increase security at bus terminals. In 1998, it began a “girl power” initiative that has expanded across the region, to address gender issues and encourage young women to realize their dreams.

The council does its homework and comes up with recommendations. For example, it has urged governments at all levels to address poverty, put in place addiction prevention programs, provide funding for after-school activities, support life skills training and job experience programs for youth, and fund drop-in centres as safe places for young people to hang out and grow together.

The Multicultural Youth Centre, which has operated in Thunder Bay since 1992, is the headquarters for the council and a youth drop-in. It provides a welcoming place for young people to be involved in positive activities, get help with homework, meet good role models, learn about resources for youth ...

... in the community, and get information to make wise choices and informed responsible decisions. The centre coordinates youth leadership sessions, runs stay-in-school activities, and hosts many social and recreational functions and youth entrepreneurship training.

There are more than 100 young people actively involved in the council's peer leadership initiatives. Their work in schools and communities touches thousands of others.

Many of the council's activities are related to promoting understanding across cultures and races, such as youth-led presentations to promote anti-racism, participation in events recognizing the contributions and struggles of Aboriginal peoples, and information and resources to celebrate African/Black history month. Several of its young leaders have been recognized for this work.

The need to fundraise takes a constant toll. The council itself uses bingos, car washes, dances, craft and food sales, and donations to cover operating costs, but these distract from its program objectives. "I feel that my talents and positive influence would be better used helping my peers, rather than selling candy bars to raise rent money," says Martin Zhang, high school student and current council president.

Meanwhile, the multicultural association tries to cobble together project funding from a variety of sources. But one-time grants do not provide sustained support for programs, and so the association turned to a less orthodox method. It opened a restaurant adjacent to the youth centre to help raise funds to pay for staff and keep the lights on at the drop-in.

The association also receives some funding from fees paid by First Nations for orientation, tutoring, recreation and other services for students who come to Thunder Bay to continue their schooling. But that revenue covers only those individual students.

"We must invest in the next generation," says Makuto. "We need to support all children, reach out to youth who are vulnerable and at risk, and help those whose families, neighbourhoods and communities are marginalized. If we don't provide positive alternatives, the gangs are waiting for them out on the streets with their own welcome wagon."