



Youth Voices Matter in North Oakville

What do you get when you put ten young people in a room with eight adults in a community hub that looks more like a sprawling suburban house in the middle of a bustling neighbourhood?

A meeting of the North Oakville Youth Development Council.

Why is this group important?

They are redefining what it feels like to grow up in one of Ontario's fastest growing and diverse communities.

On a dreary March night I made the climb to The Loft in the Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre to join the Council as they gathered for their monthly meeting. About half of the group had already arrived and the well-used sectional couch was filling up with talkative young people chatting about their recent event and checking their phones. Remarkably enough as the “adult allies” (as they are fondly referred to by the group) joined the huddle they tended to gravitate to the more structured chairs located around the room – a sign of age I’m guessing.

I met most of the group members at an event the previous weekend so their faces were familiar and I shared an awkward smile with two or three of the youth while I settled in to observe the meeting. What was it about this group that sets it apart from other initiatives I wondered? How did they create this atmosphere and how did their story begin?

In early 2015 the North Oakville neighbourhood (which is defined geographically as south of Dundas Street, north of the Queen Elizabeth Way, west of Trafalgar Road and east of Neyagawa Boulevard) was identified by a committee of professionals as a “vulnerable neighbourhood with great opportunities.” The committee included representatives from the region, police service, youth serving agencies, and school boards. Their concerns for North Oakville included reporting a high number of bullying incidents, interactions between youth and police, calls for Children’s Aid Society support, referrals for mental health support and a high social risk index score.* This neighbourhood also reported low social cohesion which translates into the ability to work

together toward the well-being of all of its members with inclusion, trust and a feeling of belonging.

The original committee included youth, Halton Catholic District School Board, Halton District School Board, Halton Police Services, Halton Region Health, Our Kids Network, and ROCK (Reach Out Centre For Kids).

On the bright side there were opportunities identified by the committee that included many community-minded professionals, the ability to access youth and the presence of a thriving neighbourhood centre. In an effort to build on these positives the Our Kids Network chose to focus its efforts on the North Oakville neighbourhood with a youth collective impact project when they applied for seed funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

Youth Action Plan Framework Themes

Addressing the need for space for unstructured hang out time for youth

Valuing meaningful and caring relationships between adults and youth

Strengthening connections between youth and community supports and resources

Through a series of community consultations involving approximately 75 youth, community groups, and agencies hosted by the Our Kids Network between 2015 and 2017 the Youth Action

*The Social Risk Index is the risk score for a certain neighbourhood based on the average characteristics of neighbourhoods in a larger area. Each neighbourhood in Halton is compared to the average characteristics of all Ontario neighbourhoods, so social risk in Halton is shown relative to social risk in Ontario. The index was developed by Statistics Canada and is calculated from nine census variables that relate to socio-economic risk factors. These variables measure education, employment, income, reliance on government-subsidized incomes, unemployment, family structure, mobility, language, and immigration. More information about the Social Risk Index can be found at ourkidsnetwork.ca.

Plan Framework for what became the North Oakville Youth Development Council (YDC) was created in the summer of 2017. There are three key themes that govern the Framework that focus on space, relationships and connections.

With the support of the community stakeholders YDC membership applications were circulated through area schools and community hubs. The goal of the recruitment was to have members aged 13-16 years old who reflected the youth of North Oakville and who were prepared to speak up and take action on behalf of their peers. As I learned more about their participation in community events, outreach at the local fall fair, and holding discussions about what it is like to access services in the community as a youth, it is obvious to me they have chosen these members well.

The reasons the youth give for becoming part of the YDC vary and are shared in a video created by the council. Harrison shared that he and his friends felt they had a voice and something needed to be said, but there was no person to hear them. This recurring theme of “youth voice” emerges when you listen to what drives the young members to be a part of the council – it’s the chance to have their voices heard, having a say in their community, to get more involved in their community and to empower young people. As YDC member Murad said, he values the opportunity to make North Oakville a better place for youth who are struggling with their problems.

One of the key themes in the Framework is ***“Addressing the need for space for unstructured hangout space for youth in North Oakville”*** and although we were coming that night for a meeting, I understand that The Loft is the official home base for the group outside of meeting times. The Council wants to seek collaborators to be champions and advocates in order to build an understanding of why youth space is important and how existing spaces in North Oakville like The Loft can be shared. Young people feeling safe, cared for and supported in their neighbourhoods are some of the foundational aspects of formal positive youth development practice and the YCD are making them a priority.

Laughter erupted from a room downstairs where members of a newcomer support group was assembled and before long the smell of late winter was overtaken by that of fresh pizza as Project Coordinator Siobhan Laverdiere bounded up the stairs with her arms full of boxes from the local pizza joint. Siobhan’s role is to guide the group in their efforts to improve youth well-being. In her words, “By building meaningful relationships in the

community it will increase the positive Developmental Assets.”

The Developmental Assets she refers to are the traits, values and experiences that all young people need to be healthy, successful and reach their full potential. This evidence-based framework was developed by The Search Institute and also helps inform the student surveys being administered in North Oakville schools and as well as defining the approach of the Our Kids Network across the region. The goal of this collective impact youth project in North Oakville is to increase the assets related to meaningful relationships by 10% in this vulnerable neighbourhood by 2020.

Lucy, this month’s meeting chair, called the group to order and reviewed to the agenda. She seemed small in stature at first glance, but Lucy addressed the group with a strong focus and spoke with an even tone that instilled a quiet confidence in her as our leader. The majority of the meeting dealt with debriefing the very successful “Youth Talks: Hear Us Out” event that was held the weekend prior to this meeting.

The YDC event was organized to provide a platform for youth to share their experiences while supporting the theme of ***“Better connecting youth in North Oakville to the community and to resources.”*** For some of the YDC members it was their first event-planning experience and with the support of their adult allies they were able to deliver a meaningful and motivating program. One of our hosts for the evening, Cindy summed it up well when she said, “Great things can happen when you are empowered by your relationships, not limited by them.”



MCs for the evening Ayra and Cindy as they prepared to address the group.

I had the honour of attending the event along with 75 other community members and the turn out on a Saturday night in late winter at a time when the darkness seems to never end was impressive. The River Oakes Community Centre provided a warm and welcoming venue for a truly intergenerational event with participants ranging in age from five to well over seventy years-old. The YDC had carefully recruited the speakers from their networks across North Oakville to reflect the diverse tapestry that weaves together to form the reality of being a young person in the community.

Youth Talks: Hear Us Out Topics

Artwork for Everyone
Oakville Youth Development
Social Media Today
Strength Through Diversity
Life as a Teen in the 21st Century
Understanding Feminism - A Youth's Perspective
Behind the Mirror
Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth
Equity vs Equality

The messages shared that night were insightful, unapologetic, sometimes raw, and ultimately inspiring for the group assembled. In her presentation "Behind the Mirror" Noor illustrated that youth are often expected to take on the challenges of an adult without the rights and responsibilities. She also pointed out that behind a stressed out youth may be a child who needs to learn to communicate and express their needs in order to become the best version of themselves.

One of the presenters shared, "While participating in this event I felt valued because for about 8 minutes I had the stage. It was my turn to speak and I could share my opinions about world issues and what I thought with the community." This reflection made me think back to what Harrison shared with us earlier as his reason for getting involved with the YDC – that he had something to say and needed a platform to share it. With continued funding and support for the YDC events like Youth Talks: Hear Us Out could be held and the collective youth voice could have a more sustained impact. At the event I overheard a young mother in the crowd say to her friend that she hoped this type of group was around when her kids were old enough to participate – I guess we all have our fingers crossed.

The role of the adult ally is key when it comes to the YDC. The third theme in the Youth Action Plan Framework is *"Building more meaningful and caring relationships with youth in North Oakville"* and it is directly related to the project goal of increasing the level of meaningful relationships. I can attest to the fact that the simple act of having adults and youth attempt to work together does not guarantee a positive outcome. These allies take their role very seriously while they model respect and active listening gaining first-hand knowledge and building connections with the young council members to truly understand what North Oakville youth are experiencing.



Charlotte shared four ways adults can support LGBTQ+ Youth

During the meeting the youth recounted how two separate incidents, occurring in two different parts of the community, involving threats and violent actions were handled by local schools. The authentic concern and curiosity expressed by the adult allies for the potential impact of social media illustrated to me that a climate had been created with this group where the youth felt very comfortable being the authorities on the subject as they readily shared the value and pitfalls of school policies and procedures with their allies. Siobhan shared with me that the youth on the council have equal voice with the adults (if not more so) in the decision-making process. Hopefully this experience communicates to this group of young people how valued they are by their community.

As we checked items off of the night's agenda the group discussed plans for how the YDC intends to support Youth Week Activities in Halton. Providing opportunities for local youth to have positive interactions with representatives from the police service was a priority for the council. Participants explored various ways of involving both groups including the merits of a lunchtime table tennis tournament at a local recreation centre and a creative arts activity at the Oak Park Community Centre as a response to the earlier negative interactions that had taken place in the community.



Youth presenters shared their thoughts on equity versus equality

A recent study sponsored by leading national youth-serving agencies found that “70% Canadians feel that youth are unprepared to be civic leaders in their community.” It’s important to note that the study also found “Canadians think programs and organizations that give youth these types of skills and free up more of their time will have a big impact on preparing them to engage in the political life of our country.” The full study can be found online at abacusdata.ca.

The current Adult Allies include representatives from Halton Region Health, YMCA of Oakville, Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre, Town of Oakville, Oakville Optimist Club, and ROCK (Reach Out Centre for Kids).

The North Oakville Youth Development Council was created in response to an identified need supported by research and data. It is a made-in-North

Oakville solution focused on building meaningful relationships between youth and adults in addition to addressing the perceived void of prepared young citizens. This is a growing group where participants are gaining a valuable understanding of the importance of convening, representation, advocacy, action, responding to feedback and working together to improve their community while becoming more aligned and in tune with each other as a collective. The sense of pride and possibility in their community exhibited by these young leaders told me that they are committed to build momentum and awareness of what can be done to improve the realities of life as a North Oakville youth.



A diverse group assembled at Youth Talks: Hear Us Out

As many of us working with community initiatives understand, funding is one of the biggest challenges groups like the YDC face and just like the pizza in The Loft that chilly March night, it doesn’t last. The seed funding for this innovative project will soon run its course, even though they were able to secure some hold-over funding to see things through to October.

What is different from the disappearing pizza, is the fact that the seed funding has allowed the establishment of an impactful network of young people and adult allies in North Oakville. If passion and commitment can find a way, this group will continue to redefine what it feels like to be a young person in one of Ontario’s fastest growing and diverse communities.

For more information about the North Oakville Youth Development Council visit ourkidsnetwork.ca.

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Our Kids Network (OKN) is a Halton-wide partnership of agencies and organizations serving children and youth. OKN uses research and teamwork to address the issues that families face today. OKN plays an active role in encouraging the residents of Halton to invest in "our kids" because they believe the entire community shares responsibility for helping children and youth thrive.

Other sources cited include search-institute.org and abacusdata.ca
