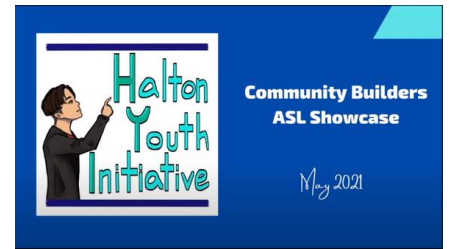


Authentic Youth Engagement Workshop – Oakville Public Library Presentation Notes

My name is Armen Svadjian. I'm on staff at Oakville Public Library and it was a pleasure to be involved with the Halton Youth Initiative project for over 2 years. Working with the youth volunteers, as well as Lily, Siobhan, and fellow adult allies was a huge learning experience for me. I'm grateful to Lily for the chance to talk briefly on the topic of "Maximizing the positive impact on issues that matter to young people." I'm just going to share a few points/statements about impactful youth and unpack each one a bit.



ASL Project with Silent Voice available on HYI Youtube channel (picture linked)

Impactful youth are engaged. This is right in the title of my topic – “issues that matter to young people”—so it’s saying the obvious but I think it bears repeating. Our job isn’t to tell young people what they should care about. Well-meaning adult allies can make helpful suggestions and give direction, but we shouldn’t force. For the projects to have maximum impact, the issues should be meaningful to youth, resonate with them, inspire them.

Impactful youth are informed. What do I mean? In 2021, a group of youth involved with HYI wanted to raise awareness around American Sign Language. But they felt convicted that before advocating they first needed to grow in their knowledge. So they didn’t rush out to tell their peers all about ASL – instead they took the time to immerse themselves in the world of ASL. At the start of each meeting a different youth would express something new they learned in ASL, share videos, and so on.

Impactful youth are humble Youth also appreciate learning directly from people in the communities they wish to champion. As a librarian I’m grateful for the rich resources we can quickly and conveniently access. But as we know, reading a wiki article or watching a video doesn’t make someone an expert or an advocate. So with the ASL project it was encouraging to see youth members ask about the possibility of connecting with folks in the deaf community, not simply as an outreach opportunity but also as a learning opportunity. We spent 6 weeks learning ASL with the good folks at Silent Voice Canada, a charity who work with the deaf community and their families in an ASL environment. During our journey with Silent Voice we sharpened our ASL skills, had many opportunities to ask questions, learn, laugh, build relationships, have our assumptions challenged, and in the process find a great service opportunity for the youth, which involved raising money for youth to attend summer camp at Silent Voice.

Impactful teens value the journey I appreciated Lily’s reflection question “how do you measure impact/success?” If our measure of success is tied to things like efficiency, productivity, and reach then we’d have to count much of the work of the HYI as moderately successful. If those things are what truly matter, then the best thing to do would be for adult allies to ride over the ideas of youth and just tell them what to do and how to do it. But of course that’s a really limited and unhelpful metric. How much money is raised for a camp, how many people come out to an event– these things aren’t unimportant. But investing in youth means taking a long game approach. And when we do that, we see these activities/projects in a more balanced way. We then recognize that time spent for example, learning ASL and about the deaf/hard of hearing community is incredibly valuable and a necessary step to being effective advocates. We recognize that trusting youth and empowering them to take ownership and try on different hats and discover their passions and unique gifts and even make some mistakes is setting them up for a life of flourishing. And suddenly we aren’t so crushed when only 5 people engage with a social media post.

Halton Youth Initiative – co-creating a model for Authentic Youth Engagement with youth and community partners