

**SUMMER EXPERIENCE AT THE MULTICULTURAL YOUTH CENTRE**

**Background:**

The Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC) was formed in 1985 by youths from across northwestern Ontario involved in events organized by the Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario (MANWO) to celebrate the United Nations International Youth Year. Today, the RMYC is proactive inclusive youth group working to help young people learn ways to becoming leaders and positive role models through pro-active programs, forums, workshops, and other activities.

In 1992, the RMYC established a Youth Centre in Thunder Bay to serve as the head office, and a youth drop-in centre. This was complemented by a training facility to provide leadership and organizational skills. The youth learn to consult with each other and have a voice to talk about issues of mutual concern. They work with their peers to promote social justice, develop programs, plan activities, and organize events that encourage healthy lifestyles, help each other with school work, discuss careers and employment prospects and so forth. They also share ideas and information to enable them to make wise choices and responsible decisions so that they become empowered to be part of the solution to the problems they face.

The Youth Council trains young leaders to facilitate workshops, lead discussions, organize summer camps, make presentations, and hold performances in schools and at community festivals to celebrate diversity. The RMYC has become a resource on multiculturalism and promotes equity and social justice among social institutions.

The Youth Council runs many programs and hosts various events in the community throughout the year. Using a youth-to-youth approach, most of the activities are organized by high school students. Due to funding constrains, the RMYC cannot afford to hire staff, and relies on volunteers to plan and organize activities. The MANWO Executive Director, Moffat Makuto with the help of the board of directors provides guidance and supervision at the Youth Centre. MANWO also provides liability insurance and legal guidance since the Youth Council executive is made up of minors.

During the school year the RMYC co-ordinates and organizes activities that enhance student wellness and achievement. This includes running the After-school Program at Dennis Franklin Cromarty (DFC) High School to keep students busy after classes, provide a safe place to hang out, learn social skills, and stay in school and graduate.

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During summer, there are students hired under Summer Experiences/Summer Jobs for Youth programs to gain work experiences on employment expectations and job skills. The Youth Council runs leadership camps like Girl Power and Band of Brothers, which are designed to involve children and youth in positive participate in various events across the region. All activities are run from the Multicultural Youth Centre, a store-front location in the south core business area next to Victoriavill Mall.

**Working at the Youth Centre:**

I was hired under the 2014 Summer Experience Program as a Youth Out-Reach Worker to work with a team of other student at the Youth Centre. In this capacity I was responsible for organizing social and recreational activities for children and youth for the summer. Normal work hours are from 10:00am to 5:30pm with about half an hour for lunch, and a short afternoon break in between.

Walking into the Youth Centre, one is greeted by the aroma of fresh donuts donated by Tim Horton’s (Waterloo Street) for the youth who drop-in each day. There is also a sign by the entrance the reads: “Mutual Respect. No Swearing, No Put Downs, No Negative Talk to Self or Others!” This sets the expectations for everyone dropping in.

There is also another sign which reads: “Everyone here makes us Happy…. Some by Coming and Some by Leaving.” It is pleasure to watch the reaction on the faces of some visitors and how some bad attitudes change when they read it.

On my first day at work, I met ten other students, many of them Aboriginal who had never worked or volunteered anywhere before. They were anxious about being employed for the first time, and did not know what to do. Having been involved with RMYC for the past two years, I realized that I had been hired to also serve as a team leader and a mentor for the new younger students. The added expectation was to use my positive peer influence to help them feel comfortable and learn valuable work-place skills.

Everyone working at the Centre learns to be nice and respectful to others. Therefore working with peers challenges you to try and get along with everyone, making new friends, supporting others and helping each other out. To begin work with each day, we all assemble around in a circle. Our team leader, Samantha Smith, who also happens to be the RMYC President, welcomed use all. She asks us to introduce ourselves, and we had to do an ice-breaker of the day. You say your name, the school you attend, age, where you were born or live, ect. This is followed by sharing something funny or trivial such as what you ate last night, what you watched on television, or anything exciting you did. All this is intended to get everyone talking, and get to know more of each other better. It really worked, because as time went on we all bonded quite well, and there was team spirit among us.

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After the daily introductions that varied a lot because we all took turns to lead thwe morning opening meetings, we discussed activities for the day. We reviewed the calendar of events, adding new activities and evaluating what we did the day before. There were also announcements, reminders, and assignments to be completed. These meetings allowed us to plan activities, develop, and enhance our social and public speaking skills.

In my case, I often talked about my plans for the day and up-coming events. I also asked my co-workers for help to promote the activities I was organizing, and assigned some tasks I needed help with. This became my routine as the Youth Out-Reach Worker.

**Activities:**

As part of my out-reach, I would consult with children, youth and parents in public housing neighborhoods on their priorities and activities our Youth Council could organize for them over the summer. We specifically targeted Limbrick Place and Windsor Place, as well as the neighborhoods around the south core where our Youth Centre is located. We hosted community barbeques to bring the residents out for informal chats, and conducted surveys. We also distributed leaflets in the houses to promote our events, share ideas, and get feedback on what we were proposing to do.

Summer camps for teens were a priority. Therefore I teamed us with the Girl Power and Band of Brothers programs to run day camps for boys and girls of ages 10 to 18. This was intended to complement activities for the younger children the Boys and Girls Club runs at Vale Community Centre in Limbrick and the facilities at Windsor. Being a youth-led group, we targeted teens and were quite effective in reaching out and engaging them to tell us what they wanted to do, what they enjoyed and what would make a difference.

Planning for the camps was a true learning experience. For activities at the Youth Centre, it was easy because this is our base. If we were running the camps elsewhere, we had to prepare what to take with us, and make sure that we did not forget anything. For the fieldtrips, we had to train everyone how to handle different or difficult situations. Safety was a priority, and we all had to learn how to supervise participate, and where to go in case of emergency. We had the contact numbers of the local Action Committee members we liaise within the neighborhoods since they are familiar with the area and know the participants quite well. This was a valuable partnership for us.

We also insisted that all out members put on the RMYC Youth-In-Action work-vests for easy identification. This proved to be a badge of honor where we worked because is easily identified our members from the other youths just hanging around. The RMYC is well known in the community, and it was easy to get the support we needed to promote our activities. This helped to make our activities popular and the events successful.

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**Neighborhood Outreach- Running a Typical Event:**

The strategy the RMYC has used successfully for out-reach to connect with parents, children and youth in high-risk neighborhoods are social barbeques with games and sports for the children. This enabled us to meet with families and solicit their input into our activities. After deciding a convenient date and time to host the event, we would develop posters and sent a team to drop them in mailboxes of the targeted areas.

During the meeting on the day of the barbeque, we review tasks and do the last minute assessment of who is present and the jobs for the day. Then we begin packing all the supplies for the event into our two vans. The barbeque starts at 2:00pm on clear sunny day, and we head off to the neighborhood soon after the lunch break. We arrived at 1:30pm and immediately begin to set up the barbeque equipment, food, and refreshments. We also take out the sports and recreation supplies – soccer balls, Frisbees, hula-hoops, skipping ropes, sidewalk chalk and so forth.

We bring along a sound system for announcements that we are here, and play music. We have an information table promoting out activities and for registration. The co-coordinators of Girl Power, and Band of Brothers summer camps stand at the table to talk with the people. I go with some co-workers door-to-door and invite people to the event. We also sign up some participants for the camps from their homes. Many are initially reluctant to open the door and talk to us, but once they see our blue RMYC Youth-In-Action vests, they gladly oblige. Many say they will meet us at the barbeque.

By the time we get back to the site, the music is playing, and kids are running around with balls, Frisbees, and hula-hoops in the playground under the supervision of some of our members. There is already a long line-up of people waiting for hotdogs. The team at the information table is already talking with parents and children who have passed through and talk with someone before they can proceed to get the food and refreshments. Everything is very orderly, and we announce that they should keep the place clean—No littering! In no time, we go through 240 hot-dogs, two pitchers of juice and three cases of water.

Little kids are everywhere playing games. It was fun to watch them interact, laugh, smile, and play together. It was a little harder to get teenagers involved. So we asked them to help us supervise the kids. Some do help, and we talked with others about the things they would like to do or talk about. Outings and hikes, swimming, movie nights, talent shows, paintball, and sport camps seem to be very popular. We sign up those interested and asked them to help us to plan and organize the events and activities they want.

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I talked with parents about the challenges they face in the neighborhood, and what can be done about it. Safety and crime are concerns as well as gangs and the high incidents of alcohol, drug, and proscription pill abuse. They wanted more positive activities for teens. Many parents are aware of the RMYC and our efforts to involve parents in supervising their children at night, that everyone should work together to make neighborhood safe.

I joined the kids in a game of soccer, and we did the Macarena, Chicken and YMCA dance, substituting YMCA for RMYC. Before we knew it, it was 4:00pm already, time for the function to end and pack up. With lots of extra teen hands to help cleanup the grounds, we were done in minutes and unloaded by 5:00pm.

We ended the work day with a warm-up meeting. We discussed how the barbeque went and got feedback on the event. The Girl Power and Band of Brothers co-coordinators signed up fifteen teens for the summer camps, with another six potential participants. I got to meet the local RMYC neighborhood contacts and we talked about organizing some follow-up activities to keep in touch. Everyone else felt that the event went very well, and there was a consensus “Thumbs Up” that it was enjoyable day in spite of the heat.

At 5:30pm we did our normal chores cleaning up our workspace. Then it was time to fill in our worksheets before going home. As I waited for my ride, I pondered at all the exciting things that transpired on the day and what tomorrow would be like. Working at the Centre surrounded br positive peers has been a real growing experience for me. It provided me with an opportunity to gain life skills which gives me hope that I can make a difference.

By Janna Kakegamic