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Youth and Community Relationships

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Youth and Ecological Restoration Program

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Abstract

The Youth and Ecological Restoration Program helps vulnerable youth build healthy community relationships with both the human and natural worlds. Through restoring local watersheds with community members, the youth gain a sense of worth, belonging and place.

Introduction

Located in the Comox Valley on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada, the Youth and Ecological Restoration Program (YER) involves youth with community members to restore the environmental health of local watersheds. The 20-hour program provides one-on-one work experience, training and support for youth under nineteen who are experiencing challenges connecting with school, community and employment. Since 2004, one hundred youth have participated in the first phase (YER I). They have worked with seventy-one community groups and hundreds of community members. In 2007 a second phase (YERII) was initiated for YER I graduates, which three youth have completed.

YER is based on my own experience as a youth, when I was constantly outdoors, surrounded by the healing powers of nature. The creation of YER included referencing other youth and outdoor program models and consulting with community youth work professionals. When I started my qualifications included: Restoration of Natural Systems Diploma from University of Victoria; Negotiation and Mediation Certificates from the Conflict Resolution Program at the Justice Institute of BC; and twenty years experience with Ecological Restoration and Restorative Justice. The actual YER work has required me to hone and increase my skills to include ecologist, counselor, teacher, mentor, coordinator, fundraiser, administrator and program promoter.

Large numbers of youth today are so detached from the natural world that it has been identified as a “nature deficit disorder” (Louv 2005). With the breakdown of families and social systems, many youth are also deprived of stable and consistent human connections (McCluskey and Mays 2003). Vulnerable youth often feel segregated and alone, which can lead to difficult behaviours (Sapon-Shevin 2007). YER offers youth a combined approach for healing relationships with both the human and ecological communities.

The YER vision is to include youth at risk in a wider circle of community relationships, in both the human and natural worlds. Involving youth with caring adults and meaningful work guides them in learning positive values and building personal confidence (McCluskey and Mays 2003). Introducing youth to the natural world nurtures freedom and creativity, inspires their senses, and takes them outside themselves (Louv 2005). Encouraging them to build healthy relationships with both the social and ecological communities strengthens their sense of place and belonging.

Youth and Ecological Restoration Program History

YER was originally funded from July 2004 to March 2006 through Queen Alexandra Foundation for Children, Child Welfare Advisory Committee (CWAC) under the Vancouver Island Strategic Investment Initiatives Fund (SIIF). SIIF guiding principles recognize that each community has unique characteristics, knowledge and experience to address prevention and early intervention for youth at risk. The criteria also included providing integrated and collaborative services for youth that support a community's capacity to build healthy relationships.

YER is considered one of the most successful SIIF projects. A CWAC support letter states that YER provides a high quality service to youth and makes a positive difference in their lives. Due to the program's success and its support within the Comox Valley community, the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) funded the program from April 2006 to March 2008. MCFD funding has been established for an initial six month period starting in April 2008.

In 2007 YER Phase II funding was granted through the Vancouver Foundation's Children, Youth and Families Advisory Committee. Many youth participants had asked to repeat the program, so there was a need to develop an expansion. YER II provides youth with an opportunity to build on the skills and experiences they gained in YER I. The second phase also allows a longer term evaluation of the program's effectiveness through additional interviews with graduates.

Youth and Ecological Restoration Program Description

YER has been in operation for almost four years: YER I since July 2004; and YER II started in August 2007. Both phases of the program emphasize deepening youth's understanding of the natural world and improving their sense of belonging within the community.

Youth and Ecological Restoration Program Phase I (YER I)

YER I youth meet "at risk" criteria and are referred from the following agencies: Ministry of Children and Family Development; Comox Valley Community Justice Centre; Comox Valley Alternate Schools; Community Mental Health Professionals; John Howard Society; and School Work Experience Programs. There is no rigorous referral process, only a phone call is necessary and youth are always accepted into the program. Transportation, a homemade lunch, work tools and wet weather gear are all supplied, and reminder phone calls a couple of days in advance to ensure attendance.

A diversity of youth are referred to the program; most of them are not fitting into mainstream social and educational systems for a variety of reasons. Some are doing community service hours for a range of crimes such as: shoplifting, drug trafficking, assault, breaking and entering, sexual abuse and vandalism. Others have mental health issues and antisocial behaviours that

include: schizophrenia, attention deficit hyperactive disorder, fetal alcohol syndrome, speech impediments, depression, violence and learning disabilities.

All youth sign a work agreement with the YER Coordinator, making a commitment to complete the 20-hour program. One hundred youth have participated in YER I, with a ninety-five per cent completion rate, which is considered high for the types of youth involved. The youth voluntarily participate for a total of twenty hours at five hours a week over a four week period. They get to know various Comox Valley watersheds and ecosystems, and perform ecological restoration work with approximately four local organizations.

Ecological restoration activities include salmon enhancement, habitat restoration, watershed assessment and monitoring, and community environmental education. The twenty-seven groups that have been assisted in their environmental efforts comprise: environmental and stewardship organizations; Comox Valley service clubs; and municipal, regional, provincial and federal government agencies. Each youth works with an average of fifty community members.

On YER I completion, it is mandatory for the youth to give an oral presentation for a community group about their experiences with the program. Youth have presented speeches to thirty-nine Comox Valley organizations, ranging from pre-schools to senior citizens homes to local service clubs. The audience numbers have ranged from three to eighty people. Youth are awarded with a YER I certificate and crest; letter of reference; and receive a fifty dollar honourarium or fulfill community service hours. Completion of the program is considered a successful achievement.

YER I evaluation has been critical to determine how effective the program is for the youth. A questionnaire was created to ask the youth three sets of questions: at the start of the program; on completion of the work experience; and after the presentation. The questionnaire has been invaluable in collecting data for the annual YER I reports and other promotional activities. Debrief questions are also conducted with the youth participants at the end of each work day. These help them to review what they have learned and are the source of their presentation notes. An informed consent form is signed by the youth and their caregivers at the initial meeting, giving permission for use of the interview content, while maintaining confidentiality issues.

The program has five main goals: building healthy community relationships; gaining valued work experience; improving ecological knowledge; increasing personal and social skills; and enhancing communication skills. These are listed below with quotes from youth participants to illustrate some of the learning that has occurred.

Goal # 1: Building Healthy Community Relationships

- “Everything is connected, everything I’ve learned in this program has taught me that we are all connected and every choice we make impacts everyone and everything around us.” (Participant # 46)
- “When you give your energy to help your community, it makes you feel good inside and warms your heart.” (Participant #15)

Goal # 2: Gaining Valued Work Experience

- “I liked the best taking the water temperature, dissolved oxygen and water levels with the dissolved oxygen meter. Everything needs to be in the right order for scientific data collection.” (Participant #26)
- “I learned how to drive a bobcat, which is amazing because I didn’t think they would trust me to drive it, but they did and I spent six hours moving a monstrous pile of gravel into the stream.” (Participant # 57)

Goal # 3: Improving Ecological Knowledge

- “Roots of trees hold up river banks, trees provide shade, leaves fall off trees into the creek and rot and aquatic insects eat leaves and fish eat insects.” (Participant # 38)
- “Sustainability – to keep something the same without being harmful. Like say I had a plant, you would have to sustain it as in keep it healthy and make sure it grows and make sure no one harms it.” (Participant # 45)

Goal # 4: Increasing Personal and Social Skills

- “You are always supposed to be safe in what you are doing and careful with another person’s equipment and respecting other people and their feelings. Relationships with people mean being kind if you are working in a group and not breaking the rules.” (Participant # 44)
- “That you shouldn’t just quit and keep on trying and then it will always work out for you if you keep your head up. I thought you were going to get mad at me when you came. You just looked out for me and knew I could do it and I did.” (Participant # 72)

Goal # 5: Enhancing Communication Skills

- “People can have different opinions, but we need to listen to each other, go around our differences, find things to agree on and then work together.” (Participant #13)
- “The most important thing I learned was how to communicate with people if I don’t know them.” (Participant # 37)

One youth’s YER I presentation notes were published in The Island Word newspaper and Watershed Sentinel magazine. An excerpt from the publication follows:

“Wendy’s program worked for me. I was forced to be patient, learn new concepts, accept inevitable truths, pray for change, and enjoy the moment. This experience slowed me down, which resulted in it being easier for me to confront myself and begin to fix my personal problems. I think today’s youth need support, not answers, and daily doses of river water, forest floor, huckleberries and sunshine.” (Participant # 78)

An annual YER community celebration is held to honour the accomplishments of the youth who have participated. There have been four of these celebrations and there is always a good turnout of supporters. Over the past two years, pizza, pop, coffee and a homemade celebration cake have been contributed by local businesses and individuals. We start the event by sitting in a circle and having each person share a special place or experience with nature. An overview is given of the year’s activities from the youth, community organizations and the YER coordinator. After that we socialize, share food and have fun.

Youth and Ecological Restoration Program Phase II (YER II)

YER II is in the preliminary stages of development. Entry requirement is that youth be graduates of YER I, and they be genuinely motivated to build on skills they gained in the original program. Youth who show initiative and interest to continue their learning are given priority placements. The focus is on a specific environmental project to learn more detailed ecological information, research techniques, and collaboration and communication skills.

For YER II completion, the youth lead a guided tour of the project site and are presented with a YER II certificate and hooded jacket, a letter of reference and a fifty dollar honourarium. Three youth have completed YER II, and more projects will take place in the spring of 2008. The 2007 projects were: establishing a Garry Oak forest ecological plot; and radio tracking summer chinook salmon in the Puntledge River. Guided tours of both projects happened September 30th on BC Rivers Day.

YER II plans include conducting longer term evaluation of YER I graduates to monitor if their participation in the program led to any improvements in their lives. Questions were developed to coordinate with YER I goals and meetings will be established to conduct interviews with the program graduates. Youth who participate in YER II will also be asked preliminary, post work and post presentation questions to document knowledge they have gained.

Future Options

YER has proven to be a cost effective program that delivers consistent and dependable results. One of the most difficult tasks of many valuable programs is to solicit annual funding. My hope for YER is that more sustainable funding will be secured to allow the delivery of this worthwhile program to continue, so that our most vulnerable youth will learn how to create a better future for themselves and their community. Options for YER future development include the following:

- Continue to operate YER Phase I and II to benefit Comox Valley youth at risk.
- Promote YER in other parts of BC through presentations at conferences and forums by the coordinator and a couple of youth participants.
- Create a YER internship program to train previous graduates in working with youth at risk.
- Hire a second person to assist with YER program organizing, facilitation and delivery.
- Make DVD of YER participants conducting program work for illustration at presentations.
- Produce a training manual and program to educate others to replicate the YER program in their communities.

Conclusion

YER is a unique and innovative program, based on connecting youth with the natural world and the human community. The youth are treated with dignity and respect, and allowed to learn at their own pace without judgment. Involving them with meaningful work and caring adults supports them in building self esteem and a sense of belonging. Youth develop a sense of place by making contributions and being involved with the social and natural environments in their home place. Engagement in these cultural activities connects youth with the larger community, enhances their personal insights, and has the ability to transform their lives (Basso 1996).

Helping youth to feel a sense of inclusion contributes to building a whole community; healthy relationships are the very heart of healthy communities (Sapon-Shevin 2007). A whole and healthy community has no separation between the human and natural worlds; it is based on relationships of interdependence and cooperation with each other and the Earth, leading to balance and justice for all (Starhawk 2004). Through their involvement with YER, the youth have traveled a journey together with their community, side by side down a very good path, and have come to experience a better relationship with the people and place called home.

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