



# HeartWood

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## Putting Teens at the Top of Rural Communities' Agendas

Retaining Youth in Our Rural Communities through Volunteerism,  
Civic Engagement, Employability and Entrepreneurship

“Rural communities that want to survive must put the development of their young people at the very top of their agendas. The heart of that development is respect and responsibility... If they have grown up believing that the community truly belongs to them, that they are respected and trusted as well as loved, that the community provides the soil in which they personally can flower, then they will probably want to raise their own children in that same place, in that same way” (Cameron, 2010).<sup>1</sup>

What would it take to put teenagers at the very top of our rural communities' agendas? How do we create genuine opportunities for youth to be involved as contributing citizens, to volunteer, to be of service, to feel a sense of belonging? How do we build employability and entrepreneurial qualities in young people? How can we create the conditions in our rural communities that encourage young people to want to stay, or to move back to raise their families?

The purpose of this discussion paper is to stimulate decision-makers to consider the meaningful roles teenagers can have in our rural communities. It identifies strategies that support and increase young people's commitment to our communities. The value added to encouraging youth involvement, often overlooked, is that young people can be a strong asset to creating vibrant communities for *all citizens*.

## Background

Statistics show that many rural communities in Nova Scotia have decreasing populations. For example: the highest out-migration age bracket is youth aged 18-24.<sup>2</sup> Nova Scotia currently is the province with the highest percentage of seniors and the lowest percentage of youth.<sup>3</sup> Between 1996 and 2003, Nova Scotia saw a decline of 23% in both the child and parent age groups.<sup>4</sup>

As young people finish high school, it is not uncommon for them to desire travel, adventure or educational and work opportunities away from home. This is a normal rite of passage that communities should support, so that when youth return to their home communities, they bring back with them the

- 1 Cameron, S.D. (2010). *A Million Futures*. Toronto, Canada: D & M Publishers Inc.
- 2 Nova Scotia Community Counts. Retrieved from <http://www.gov.ns.ca/finance/communitycounts/>
- 3 Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/>
- 4 Nova Scotia Community Counts. Retrieved from <http://www.gov.ns.ca/finance/communitycounts/>

new skills and life experiences they have acquired while away. So, how do we ensure that they come back or seek other rural communities to commit to? It may be helpful to re-phrase this question as: *How can rural communities become vibrant places where young people choose to live and raise families?* Some of the factors that may help them make such a choice include:

- The vitality of the local economy (employment, entrepreneurial opportunities, etc.)
- The degree to which the community involves young people in community life. The more engaged youth are in their communities, the stronger their bond and sense of belonging. They may still leave for university/college, jobs or adventure but they are far more likely to return.
- The attractiveness of the community to young people, i.e. what the community has to offer in the way of activities, youth-friendly spaces, peer social networks, positive public attitudes towards youth and so on. A 2009 violence prevention project for girls and young women in Antigonish and Guysborough Counties<sup>5</sup> identified that what teens want most from their communities is “*something to do, a place to hang out, and someone to talk to*”. These are simple amenities, but ask yourself: How many communities intentionally - and substantially - provide these to their young citizens?

Community engagement and employability are linked since people who are “*personally engaged in and motivated by their learning and work tend to be productive, optimistic and energetic. These qualities most frequently find expression at the family and community level in ways which make positive social contributions. The flipside is equally logical. Individuals who are experiencing frustration and failure...are likely to engage in destructive behaviours such as violence and vandalism. Disengaged individuals often pose significant threats and result in high costs to communities and society as a whole*” (Bezanson, 2003).<sup>6</sup>

*“If you are involved before [you leave], you have a better chance of coming back. You know what’s here, what the opportunities are. Also, if others start to stay, the trend will start. In order for that to happen, we need to provide young people with more options. If you’re not interested in sports, arts, etc., there should be other things for young people to get involved in”* (Youth Participant, Chéticamp; Towards a Rural Youth Engagement Strategy, NS Rural Team 2002).<sup>7</sup>

Generally speaking, there is a sense of disconnection between today’s youth and adult-run organizations and communities. This is largely due to the lack of opportunities for contact, interaction and participation, which leads to a decrease in mutual understanding and appreciation. A lack of youth involvement in the essential tasks and processes of the community compounds this disconnection. “*Traditionally within public and private organizations young people have not been seen as a group that should or could contribute to decision-making processes. This exclusion has often resulted in systems that do not serve youth’s needs, increasing the potential for young people to feel alienated*” (Pittman, 2000).<sup>8</sup>

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5 Sandler, W. (2009). Violence against women and girls: A rural response. A preliminary report on participatory action research with girls and young women in Guysborough and Antigonish Counties. Antigonish, NS: The Antigonish Women’s Resource Centre. Retrieved from <http://www.antigonishwomenscentre.com/reports.htm>

6 Bezanson, L. (2003). Connecting career development and learning. *Working Connections Symposium Paper*. Toronto, Canada.

7 Warner, A. & Langlois, M. (2002). *Towards a rural youth engagement strategy* HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development.

8 Pittman, K. (2000). Balancing the equation: Communities supporting youth, youth supporting communities. *Community Youth Development Journal*, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://www.cydjournal.org/2000Winter/pittman.html>

Imagine if the opposite were true: if the community abounded with multi-generational events, if adults and youth shared natural meeting spaces and if they were able to regularly find common ground on which they could act together towards shared goals. Unfortunately, for a growing number of young people, it is a sad reality that they have very little meaningful involvement with adults beyond their immediate families and the classroom.

What follows are four strategies to increase the opportunities for youth to participate and to build meaningful and enduring relationships with, and within, their communities. These strategies also increase the opportunities for rural communities to reap the benefits of an engaged youth population.

## 1) Youth Volunteering

There is evidence that when young people have a positive (i.e. fun, rewarding, meaningful) volunteer experience at an early age (e.g. 10-13 years), they are more likely to continue volunteering as they get older, and in many cases for their lifetime. The positive ripple of volunteering goes beyond the young people involved and has an impact on the community as well. Creating opportunities for youth to be involved in positive activities, and for the community to recognize and support this participation, has been acknowledged as a preventative measure in decreasing youth crime and delinquency.<sup>9</sup> Some communities have taken strong and active measures to engage their young people in this manner.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the common elements in these community-based initiatives include:

- Volunteer opportunities that are youth-friendly and that are easy and comfortable to join. Initially they may be organized by adult-led groups; however, as comfort and skills increase, youth leaders take more of a role
- Opportunities that involve learning, working with others, mentoring by adults and/or older youth, and incrementally developing skills and self-confidence
- Recognition by organizations that they will benefit through the involvement of young people
- An emphasis on participation skills, although leadership ability naturally follows. This is in keeping with the World Youth Report published by the United Nations in 2004, which said:

*Focus on the promotion of participatory skills for all, not just leadership skills for the few. Leaders will always emerge, but all children and young people need the chance to learn the multiple skills of listening and collaborating in groups if they are to discover that they can play very different roles in building communities and achieving change. (World Youth Report 2003, pp.286-287).*<sup>11</sup>

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9 *Perspective on youth crime in Nova Scotia.* (May, 2006). Retrieved from the Nova Scotia Department of Justice website: [http://www.gov.ns.ca/just/publications/documents/Youth\\_FinalMay906.pdf](http://www.gov.ns.ca/just/publications/documents/Youth_FinalMay906.pdf)

10 A very good example of this kind of work is the *Youth Central* initiative: <http://youthcentral.com/>

11 World Youth Report 2003: The global situation of youth people (2004). New York: United Nations Publications. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/worldyouthreport.pdf>

## 2) Civic Engagement through Service Learning

Service Learning is a form of volunteerism especially suited to engage young people of varying ages in a community-building context. It involves two main elements:

- A service; which requires the young person to step outside of him/herself and do something that is of benefit to others, and
- Experiential learning; which is learning by doing with a process of reflection to draw out lessons and generalizations that can be applied to a future experience. Katimavik<sup>12</sup> is a good example of this approach.

Although service learning often has academic connections (e.g. to curriculum objectives), it is primarily used as a leadership development tool that teaches civic engagement.<sup>13</sup> Typically, a group of young people identify a genuine opportunity in their community.<sup>14</sup> They then proceed to address that opportunity, often with the support of adult mentors. The service learning experience could be spending quality time with seniors at a care facility, organizing a fun day for younger children, stacking winter firewood for a person with disabilities, helping out in a community garden, researching and creating a guide on youth services, designing a skate park, and so on.

The key elements of the service are: planning, organizing, contacting/communicating with community representatives, teamwork, taking action/initiative and follow-through. As part of the experiential learning process, the group members reflect upon their experience in order to draw out lessons, insights and generalizations that can be applied to their next experience and to other situations in their lives. It is easy to appreciate how a service learning activity helps young people take their place in the community, understand more clearly how they can be civically engaged, and begin to build the kind of positive relationships with adults that will prove beneficial in other contexts (e.g., finding a job, applying for university/college, etc).

Some of the outcomes of such service learning experiences for youth include:

- Individual and group skill development (decision-making, problem-solving, etc.)
- Increased self-concept and self-worth
- Development of interest and capacity for active citizenship
- Adult validation of youth as engaged citizens
- Career exploration and job-related skills

*“Kids aren’t as involved with programs that connect them with their community, and they have to find that connection somehow. I think that’s the most important thing about service learning – it’s your opportunity to take responsibility for the state of your community”*

(Sandra, student at Sir John A. MacDonald High school, on her experience with service learning 2003).<sup>15</sup>

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12 For more information: <http://www.katimavik.org/>

13 For examples, see work of the National Youth Leadership Council: <http://www.nylc.org/?gclid=CMeA67T9tJwCFado5Qod4XP0Kg>

14 *Community* can refer to geography, interest-based, cultural, language or ethnic origin, or dependent upon personal circumstance.

15 *Linking community with education: An introduction to service learning.* (2003). Retrieved from the HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development website: <http://www.heartwood.ns.ca/tools/ServiceLearning.pdf>

### 3) Youth Employment

The Conference Board of Canada<sup>16</sup> published a document, entitled “Employability Skills 2000+”, that identifies the skills and attitudes that are, and will continue to be, most desired in the Canadian work force. Skills such as listening, organizing information, having good self-esteem, being responsible and knowing how to learn have been deemed as *essential employability skills*.

In Nova Scotia, research conducted by HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development<sup>17</sup> in the area of youth employability also found that employers were uncertain how best to recruit and retain young employees, and employers felt that young people had to be better prepared with appropriate skills, attitudes, appearances and expectations to enter the job market.<sup>18</sup>

But where are our young people supposed to acquire these attributes? Youth, when they were consulted during this research, were often bewildered as to how they could get their foot in the door:

*There is definitely a bit of a Catch 22 situation where you can't get the work without the experience, but how do you get the experience if you can't get the job to get the experience?"*

(Youth participant, Digby Youth Employability Pre-Operational Research Scan, 2006)<sup>19</sup>

The key elements that are present in service learning (as well as other forms of volunteerism) provide an excellent vehicle for preparing young people for employment and civic responsibility. Youth who have been involved in school, sports, youth groups or community programming acquire skills, contacts, leadership skills and confidence and use these to land their first job. In a sense, they don't need much support to do this since they already have many of the attributes to get started.

What about the rest of the youth population? Every young person needs opportunities to have a positive and rewarding first-time job experience. This would help support their ongoing and progressive involvement in the work force. How can your organization or company provide employment opportunities for youth, especially for those youth who need support to build their essential employability skills?

### 4) Entrepreneurship

Youth energy, enthusiasm, vision, and willingness to take risks are the very qualities necessary to undertake bold and innovative initiatives. These are seen as key entrepreneurial qualities that young people may not recognize in themselves. These qualities can be used to create youth-focused businesses such as a recording studio, or building skateboard decks<sup>20</sup> as well as businesses that serve the entire community such as a cafés or market gardens.

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16 <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/topics/education/learning-tools/employability-skills.aspx>

17 <http://www.heartwood.ns.ca/>

18 A project, completed by HeartWood, in the Annapolis Valley with the NS Community College and the Regional Development Authorities that involved research and focus groups on youth employability with youth, employers and community-service organizations.

19 Bernier, J. & LeVert-Chiasson, I. (2006). *Digby youth employability pre-operational research project: Community scan*. Prepared for the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) by HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development.

20 <http://hgskate.ca/>

This same entrepreneurial spirit can be tapped not just for monetary gain but also for the betterment of the community. This is often referred to as “*social entrepreneurship*”.<sup>21</sup> An example of social entrepreneurship could be the creation of a youth-run café,<sup>22</sup> which encourages youth ownership and skill building. These ventures are often run as co-operatives, not-for-profits or registered charities. Social entrepreneurial initiatives tap into young people’s commitment for social justice, sustainability and community development. These ventures can lead to an increase in the relevancy and vibrancy of rural communities, which attract other young people and families.

Strategic support from adults can encourage and stimulate a young person’s skills and talents. Adults can provide suggestions on how their passions can become a business venture. This may involve very specific guidance in seeking out training or community granting opportunities to start small businesses.<sup>23</sup>

## Putting it all together: Seven steps to keep youth at the top of our agendas

How can the whole community work together to create opportunities for youth to volunteer, to take action and make a difference, to work and/or to be an entrepreneur? Here are a few suggestions:

- Spend time doing things with youth and find out what excites them, what they are passionate about and what they envision for their communities.
- Find out what’s already going on in your community, the province, and the country. There are many successful projects and initiatives in Nova Scotia that use the principles and processes named above. You can learn from what others have done and you may be inspired to try something similar – or something a bit different.
- Work to change public perceptions of youth. Bring youth to public meetings you are attending so that they are visible and are supported in expressing their voice. Do service projects with youth so that they are visible to the public and are noticed as positive contributors to community. Share these positive stories via letters to the editor or other media.
- Build relationships between youth and adults and between groups that may not ordinarily mingle. In this way we enrich the social fabric of the community and make it a better place for all to live.
- Encourage partnerships by forming dynamic collaborations in your communities to support youth development. Community groups, youth serving organizations, the municipality, parents, business people and young people themselves can partner to use existing resources in new ways, to take small actions that mobilize others and to begin leveraging new resources.
- Organize developmental learning experiences that lead young people from simply participating in youth-friendly programs or events, to progressively getting more involved and eventually taking leadership roles.

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21 See the work of Youth Venture, a global initiative of Ashoka which added a Canadian program in 2008 at: <http://www.genv.net/en-ca>

22 <http://glyv.org/glcafe.html>

23 CEED, the Centre for Entrepreneurship Education and Development, has a proven approach to supporting young entrepreneurs, who go on to create job for themselves and others. <http://www.facebook.com/ceed.ca>

- Seek out or create your own peer support networks that will help you with your youth development or youth engagement initiatives. Look for resources and training that build the capacity for youth engagement and community partnerships to evolve.

Together we can meaningfully engage and retain youth in our rural communities. What will you do to put youth at the top of your agenda?

*This discussion paper was inspired by the following article, written by Silver Donald Cameron that appeared in the July 19, 2009 issue of the Sunday Herald. It can also be found in his current book, A Million Futures.*

*In this article, Cameron writes about a Quebec community that, 15 years ago, launched a partnership of youth, parents, the municipality, and local businesses that has had amazing results - not just for young people, but for the whole community. Silver Donald Cameron concludes his piece by asking: why not here in Nova Scotia?*

DARRELL DEXTER wants to keep young people here by creating a province where they can make a living, and where they will also want to live. Me, too. So I'd like to take him to Plessisville, Que.

Plessisville, pop. 9,000, is the home of La Samare, the remarkable little rural high school that has won more Millennium Excellence scholarships than any other public high school in Canada. It's surrounded by smaller communities, which provide about half the students of La Samare. And those small communities have given rise to a remarkable organization designed to "foster independence, initiative and a sense of responsibility among young people of 12-18 years."

Partenaires 12-18 began in the hamlet of Lyster about 15 years ago, says Gilles Cayer, the organization's co-ordinator, a compact, dynamic man in his forties. A group of parents, disturbed by such obvious signs of youthful discontent as vandalism, drinking and drug use, asked the municipality for help. The municipality agreed to provide a space and staff time to help youth and adults get together.

The group then did a brilliant and simple thing. They asked the young people what they needed and they listened deeply to the answers.

The kids said they wanted sports and recreation, trips and similar activities. Very well, said the adults, how can we get those things? Let's organize. They established Partenaires 12-18 as a partnership of youth, parents, the municipality, local businesses and others.

Coached by the adults, the young people learned to create organizations, set goals, make and execute action plans. As they gained confidence and experience, they took on more daunting challenges creating peer mentorship networks and counselling services such as suicide watches. They identified a need for summer jobs, and realized that local businesses couldn't

possibly employ them all so they studied entrepreneurship, and began creating their own micro-businesses.

Partenaires 12-18 spread to the nearby communities, and set up an office in La Samare. It drew grants and sponsorships from companies, development agencies, the Ministry of Health, foundations, the school board and the police. One foundation official, visiting from Montreal, was stunned to see 14-year-olds confidently engaged in organizational development running meetings, taking minutes, naming boards of directors.

He was “on a cloud,” grins Gilles Cayer. “He said he had never seen anything like it.”

Cayer views himself not as an animator, but as an “accompagnateur” who accompanies the young people on their journeys. What’s visible to the community, he says, are the social, cultural and sporting activities, but what’s at least as important is the constant counselling between the young people and with others. One example is Cayer’s own practice of encouraging students to apply for Millennium Excellence awards.

Partenaires 12-18 is dedicated to three objectives: meeting the specific needs of rural youth, alleviating the social problems caused by the decay of rural communities, and retaining young people in their communities. The model ultimately spawned sister organizations across Quebec.

Locally, delinquency has dropped almost to zero, says Cayer. And Partenaires 12-18 was recently the subject of a scientific study. He stresses the word “scientific.” It showed that more than 60 per cent of participants in Partenaires 12-18 remained seriously involved in community service. Over 90 per cent regularly voted in elections. More than 90 per cent were proud to have been recognized for their achievements, and that recognition had motivated them to continue. Two of La Samare’s three current Millennium Excellence winners had been nurtured in Partenaires 12-18.

And most participants returned to their communities after studying elsewhere.

The moral is pretty clear. Rural communities that want to survive must put the development of their young people at the very top of their agendas. The heart of that development is respect and responsibility. The pimply teens soon emerge as scientists, teachers, entrepreneurs, doctors, adult citizens with a major contribution to make. If they have grown up believing that the community truly belongs to them, that they are respected and trusted as well as loved, that the community provides the soil in which they personally can flower, then they will probably want to raise their own children in that same place, in that same way.

As in Plessisville, so in Parrsboro, Pomquet and Plymouth. Why not here?

Visit Silver Donald Cameron’s website at <http://www.silverdonaldcameron.ca/>.