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Action teams empower youth in communities

By Judy Haiven

IT IS AFTER seven in the evening and already dark as a middle-aged woman walks the two blocks from the store to her home. She tightens her grip on her purse as she walks by the video store. There is always a gaggle of teenagers hanging out in front, waiting to spew their foul language at passers-by. As she passes them, one looks up and smiles. He is tossing empty pop cans into a blue recycling bag. The woman walks on, puzzled.

The next day, standing in front of her Grade 7 class, the woman remembered that the kids in front of the video store did not curse at her. As she took her class to the school assembly, she noticed a few teens at microphones on the stage. The teens, who are not especially well-dressed or clean-cut, do a rap against racism. The students are enthralled. Then one teen urges his young audience to get involved in the fight against racism in Halifax. Some students nod, others look bored. "My class is too young to hear this," decides the teacher.

That evening, when she turns on her television, a local newscaster is interviewing one of the same teenagers she had seen at the school. He is talking about the Kirk Johnson case. Johnson, a well-known black boxer from North Preston, complained to the Human Rights Commission that the police had stopped him 29 times in a three-month period for what he called "driving while black." The teenager interviewed is not black, but is speaking knowledgeably about labeling people just because they are black. The teacher shakes her head.

Was the teacher finally catching teens doing something right, rather than wrong? Well, yes. In areas of Halifax and Nova Scotia's South Shore, a bold new experiment is taking place. Teams of youth from ages 13 to 18 work with volunteer adults in a given community. The adults are there as mentors and resources - not as organizers or leaders. The idea is that through guiding principles such as youth ownership, leadership and experiential learning, youth take on projects to change their communities for the better.

Historically, especially in smaller communities, relatively few young people have been allowed a "voice" in community affairs. Marginalized, stereotyped and alienated, they have chosen to "exit" the community. Thus, scores of young adults have left smaller centres for big cities like Halifax. The Youth Action Team project is designed to enable young people's voices to be heard and provide a youth-friendly base from which they can participate in social change efforts.

Heartwood Institute, a community youth development organization based in Dayspring, is a catalyst in this effort. Central to their mandate is helping to build experiential and participatory programs for young people which will support them in strengthening their communities. But unlike other more typical youth service groups, Heartwood wants the leadership and control to come from youth themselves; indeed, in the past five years, Heartwood has helped more than 15 Youth Action Teams get started. Instead of trying to fix "problem" youth, Heartwood is supporting youth as they redefine the problems.

For instance, when a culturally significant landmark was burned in Lunenburg two years ago, young people were censured as the culprits in the seaside town. Unwilling to allow these destructive youth stereotypes to go unchallenged, the Lunenburg Youth Action Team organized a march and vigil. Through the team's action, it became obvious that local youth were vital members of their community - building it up, not breaking it down.

Youth Action Teams are fuelled by core values that include following passions, building egalitarian relationships, making a difference and taking concrete action. As a first step, young people do an inventory of what they feel is needed in their community: What will sustain and grow the community? Which opportunities need to be available? What can they do to change things? This is in stark contrast to some service projects where youth are cajoled into helping projects unrelated to their passions, interests, dreams and aspirations. These experiences may leave young people cynical about their ability and motivation to make a difference.

Instead, a Youth Action Team decides what to take on, and it is their enthusiasm for the tasks which drives the project. Some groups have been engaged in creating youth festivals; others are trying to change municipal policy to create better space for skateboarding; and some groups have taken on community roles as environmental change-makers. As one young team member says, "This is our community; we want to change it. We're not going to depend on somebody else to change it; we're going to do it."

It is easy to see how this compares to the school activity model, where events and experiences are filtered through the school and professional teachers who want the students to perform some community service. Because the students are being led by teachers, they revert to being followers. As followers, notions such as true participation, experiential learning and creativity are not understood. The YAT approach turns traditional youth and adult roles on their head. As one of the youth team members noted, the adult's role is "more based on friendship than on being an adult . . . They are there in our lives when we need them, and they are actually taking an interest in our lives."

At a time in Canada when the Young Offenders Act has been tightened up and children as young as 16 are being tried in adult court, there is a fear of young people and what they do. However, projects based on young people's capacities, idealism, hope and engagement challenge many adults' deep-seated prejudices and may be the path to cut down on crime - and punishment.

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