

Young Manitobans

GIMLI YOUTH PRACTICE ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

For the past four years, high school and university aged students in the RM of Gimli have stepped up their involvement in community affairs through a program they named “Youth Community Partnership” (YCP). The aim of the program has not been to increase volunteer hours of youth, although that happens naturally in this initiative, but rather to engage youth as leaders and decision-makers on a variety of issues important to them and their community.

Local “adult” community leaders and activists met back in 2005 to consider how to mobilize the energy and passion of youth. It was decided that the most effective project would recruit youth “on their own terms.” With the strong support of Gimli High School, focus groups and questionnaires solicited student opinion on their town. What did they like or dislike? What were they involved in or not? What would they keep the same or change? From this process, a report was written and students were invited to form a group that would work with the results and contribute to the betterment of their community.

The issues identified by youth, and still true today, included recreation, transportation, environment, education, employment and the role of youth. The local recreation centre was in disrepair, there were students living outside Gimli who were unable to participate in local activities, there was concern about rural education measuring up to what was provided in urban centres (although students saw the school as a very positive place), there was frustration with the menial and minimum wage nature of jobs, and students were concerned that adults and seniors saw and treated them as loiterers, shoplifters and troublemakers.

The aim of Gimli YCP has been to support and train youth to tackle these issues as active citizens. With strong acceptance from the RM Council, YCP has sent a youth representative to Council the past four years, as well as naming members to the local environment and recreation committees. YCP members have participated in a “My Ideal Gimli” visioning session and then attended local strategic planning sessions. They have also had a bearpit session with local MLA **Peter Bjornson**, met with the weekly Interlake Spectator newspaper, and sought the opinion of the Mayor and local businesspeople on a number of issues. YCP has held two well-



Global Connections - YCP members and author of this article Zack Gross pose lakeside with three Tanzanian visitors who've come to solicit support for a youth environmental education project related to Lake Victoria.



A cheque presentation by Manitoba Government MLAs and Cabinet Ministers to Evergreen School Division, Gimli High School personnel and a YCP and Enviro Club representative for the preparation of a course on Lake Winnipeg Environmental Issues.

attended Community Consultations to report on its activities.

Taking positive, concrete action on the issues of importance to them, YCP members have applied for funding and implemented a number of small projects related to teen health and environmental issues. Funds from Green Manitoba and from the Environmental Youth Corps allowed them to take on two summer projects, one to educate the public about Lake Winnipeg pollution issues and another to retrofit showers, toilets and faucets in 40 Gimli homes




Peter, Cody, Zev and Luke discuss a community issue at a YCP high school workshop.

YCP members take seriously their role of making a difference in their community and this program has proven to be a training ground for tomorrow's leaders.

with water conservation kits. YCP also received a small grant from the Interlake Regional Health Authority to survey students on their eating habits and then distribute healthy snacks around the school at lunch time.

In the area of recreation, to fill a gap that many students felt led to teen alcohol and drug problems, YCP has held three band concerts, highlighting local young musicians while raising money for environmental causes. YCP has also built a relationship with the Gimli Recreation Centre and hopes to have youth events, or just opportunities to hang out in the lounge there, on a regular basis. YCP members have also made presentations to local schools and visiting groups on their organization and on the issues that concern them.

On global issues, Youth Community Partnership has worked with the RM, teachers, business owners and local congregations to form a Gimli Fair Trade Committee and achieve "Fair Trade Town" status on July 1, 2009, a status that only seven communities in Canada currently hold. Fair Trade products ensure that producers are paid a living wage, that the environment is not harmed by production, and that a premium goes back into Third World communities to provide education, health care and other benefits. Fair trade products include many foods (coffee, tea, sugar, chocolate, etc.), as well as clothing, sports balls and handicrafts. The RM's resolution includes green and fair trade purchasing and a future twinning and development assistance relationship with a community overseas. YCP members have been fundraising and grant seeking toward this.

These efforts have earned YCP recognition in recent years, including the Premier's Voluntary Service Award and the Excellence in Sustainable Development Award. More important, however, has been the experience and satisfaction of being involved in one's community as an active citizen. YCP members take seriously their role of making a difference in their community and this program has proven to be a training ground for tomorrow's leaders. 

Zack Gross is an "adult" mentor of Youth Community Partnership.

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