

the networker

Vol. 21 Issue 3

Fall 2006

The Quarterly Newsletter of The National Youth in Care Network

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Atlantic Canada Youth in Care Network Development Retreat



If Anne of Green Gables's fate was in the hands of today's Canadian foster care system what would become of her? In August on the island of Anne of Green Gables, Canada's most famous foster child, the current generation of youth in foster care from the Atlantic provinces met to make a difference in the Canadian child welfare system.

The National Youth in Care Network offered a four-day leadership summer retreat for youth leaders from the child welfare systems of Prince

Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. The purpose of the retreat was to create a youth in care network that will span the Atlantic region. According to Sarah MacDonald of Prince Edward Island, former president of the NYICN and co-facilitator at the retreat, a youth-to-youth network will help break down the isolation and stigmas associated with

growing up in government care. "A network can provide a more hopeful and positive image of children and youth being raised in government care. Essentially, we are the same as other children."

There are currently over 80,000 children in government care in Canada. The NYICN believes that a youth-friendly space where youth belong can provide tremendous healing and offer hope for change for the next generation of children coming into foster care. For many children, support ends when they reach a cut-off age ranging from 16 to 18 depending on the province or territory in which they reside.

"While most youths can rely on support and guidance from their parents until they are into late twenties," said Andrée Cazabon, former youth in care and artist in residence with the National Youth in Care Network. "Youth from care are often left to raise themselves through one of the most crucial phases of life. A youth network can provide some support through this stage. It can also help to advocate for essential needs as youth prepare to leave care including safe housing, positive relationships, access to post-secondary education, healing from the past, independence skills, etc."

The PEI Department of Social Services and Seniors provided in kind support by securing the use of a local camp, preparing logistics and providing on-site staff support.

"The Department of Social Services is pleased to assist the National Youth Care Network in offering a leadership summer retreat in Prince Edward Island for youth in care and former youth in care," said Minister Chester Gillan. "I commend the province's Director of Child Welfare and staff of Child and Family Services Division for their commitment to an initiative that will mentor youth in developing their own network of support."

This retreat is the first of four over the course of the year to mentor the creation of the network.

On behalf of the National Youth in Care Network, and the youth who participated in the retreat, we would like to thank the following sponsors who made this retreat possible:

- Newfoundland and Labrador Child and Family Services;
- Prince Edward Island Child and Family Services, Montague Office, and Tyne Valley Youth Centre;
- Youth Employability Project and Henry and Berenice Kaufmann Foundation;
- New Brunswick Department of Family and Community Services.

The Revolutionary East Coast Youth Network

By Lucas Kreft, Halifax, Nova Scotia

From August 23rd to 27th, youth from across Atlantic Canada came together and decided: it's time for change!

Representing Eastern Canada were four youths from New Brunswick, two from Nova Scotia, three from Prince Edward Island, and one from Newfoundland and Labrador. Our minds will come together to create a youth in care network. This network will strengthen our voices for youth in government care and provide help for youth transitioning out of foster care. This was the first of four retreats in the coming year and a half, and we will be getting together at WorldForum 2006 in Vancouver in November.

This retreat was inspired by various youth in care networks inside Canada and out, and organized and co-facilitated by Andrée Cazabon, part-time staff at the National Youth in Care Network, and filmmaker of *Wards of the Crown*. Andrée, youth leader and co-facilitator Sarah McDonald and the other support staff were helping us to create a peer network through group leadership exercises, and that's what they got!

The first day of the retreat, with a solid coat of bug spray, the group decided on a code of conduct and guiding principles for the entire retreat. Our mission that we chose to accept included: creating a safe environment for us all along with the support staff (no sexual contact, no

drugs, weapons, un-supervision [excluding bathroom breaks], stealing, violence and intimidation of others. The whole retreat went without incident and all of this was tolerated! The principles guided us to work as a team, because there are 80,000 youths to represent across the country. Our agreement on these principles helped us listen to our individual issues and respect confidentiality. With all of that work behind us on day one, it was time for a second coat of bug spray and various downtimes. For myself, it was time to cook BBQ for 13...

Day two came on a soft note, until discoveries of new mosquito bites and hot showers (cold for some). It was time for breakfast and the need for a shower system organizer. After a brief "make anything you want breakfast", it was time for labour. The exercise was to envision "who are we serving". To answer this question we had to think about ages, geography, language and then what are the issues among youth. There was a mandatory vote to create the geography of our network. All voted in favour of Newfoundland and Labrador,



Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and PEI being represented. We were shown how to “raise the blue” for finalization (hand like a fist, thumb extended straight onto your nose/pinky extended, wiggle pinky and quote “Wikki, wikki”). For language, it was decided a “wikki, wikki” includes francophone representation. Finally a “wikki, wikki” was decided for age range representation. 16-28 was decided for voting members, and other ages for non-voters.

On day three we brainstormed issues that this network can work to improve. (We thought of over 80.). Some individual ones include: foster parents should be more involved with social services and kids, more funding for activities (not having to pick one sport), the need for coaching re: breastfeeding (they didn't show me how), giving options and telling consequences to help youth make right decisions, kids going hungry, how kids are treated in group homes (this needs to be looked into), more permanent workers from start to end, increasing the age of care to 24, and foster parents loving and treating foster children as their own.

After we had the 80+ on a list, we prioritized them into categories. Those were ranked as: 1 Respect & Support, 2 Exiting Care, 3 Safety, 4 Stability & Belonging, 5 Family, 6 Healing, 7 Education, 8 Financial Support, and 9 Stigma.

We then decided on a name: *Revolutionary East Coast Youth Network*. “Wikki, wikki”, motion carried and a logo will be adopted in the future.

With the retreat coming to an end, the days seemed like months. A constant warm numbness from scratching the bug bites felt great but everyone was starting to fatigue. We thought of good and bad qualities for representatives in our network. Then qualities we would and would not like in our support staff. Our final workshop included projects to brainstorm that will be achieved in the provinces, including: working with youth, both younger and older, to see where they're coming from and how they feel about things; a social worker rewards day, and having Youth Achievement Awards in every province, bringing kids in care onto the board, informing the media about problems, getting an office for each province/region, having an Internet web page for communication, and an outreach program for teen moms (for milk, diapers, etc.)

For the next retreat we are looking for two more from Newfoundland and Labrador and one or two more from Nova Scotia. There will be a total of four floating seats (seats not assigned to provinces; instead, they're reserved for youth who represent differences: GLBTQ (Gay/Lesbian//Bisexual/Transgendered/Queer), Aboriginal, Special Needs, Francophone.

Without the support of social workers, friends, family and individual funders this retreat would not have happened. Thank you! This is a start for us youth in and out of care to have a voice. Be heard. And create awareness for change. We live in an amazing country, and it's about time we have an amazing network.

Reflections on The Atlantic Canada Youth in Care Network Development Retreat

By Amanda Murley, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and April Bishop, St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

Amanda: Upon arriving at the National Youth in care Network retreat held in P.E.I. I was unsure of what to expect. However, after a few days, I had an understanding of why I was there and it will leave a lasting impression on me for the rest of my life.

The retreat was held for four days and in this time youth were able to create a safe environment, in which we felt comfortable to share our experiences, our passions, and our visions. In a short period of time we were able to determine the issues faced growing up in the child welfare system, as well as the vision for our network and our goals.

The high light of this experience for myself would be meeting the other youth that attended and realizing how much insight each of us has to offer.

The retreat was such an empowering experience. It provided a way for youth

from the eastern provinces to come together and to have a voice. It also provided a way to build a support system and most of all created lasting memories for all of us to take home and share.

Some might ask what is the importance of such an event? And I would reply, by allowing youth in care to recognize the power of their voice, and to let them see their unlimited potential we are creating change, and giving hope where many have not felt hope.

April: "I took home the fact I learned more about my leadership role with the program. I love the fact that I am finally on the way of doing the things I've always wanted, which is being involved with youth, and finally knowing I'm going to make a difference in my life, and in the lives of others."

Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks Update

Submitted By Nicole Herbert, FBCYICN

Here's just a taste of what we're up to...

World Forum 2006: Future Directions in Child Welfare

The purpose of this year's World Forum is to bring together individuals involved in child welfare systems from around the world and discuss new trends, promising practices and innovative approaches to prevention and response to child abuse and neglect. The FBCYICN has taken on

planning and organizing a youth component to the conference that will ensure young people participating in the event have a voice that affects change and a meaningful experience in general. The Forum will be held in Vancouver BC from the 19th – 22nd of November 2006.

For more information about the Forum, please visit www.worldforum2006.ca or contact:
Gab Laurence – Conference Planning Consultant - worldforumyouth@fbcyicn.ca

Employment to Freedom Program

The Employment to Freedom program has been under development for the last four months and we hope to officially launch it after our October Steering Committee Meeting. At the moment, there is one Youth Project Staff and myself working on two projects related to the program. The first project is the Employment Resource Guide full of community resources that will make finding and keeping a job easier for young people in and from care. The second project involves creating an Employment Kit to compliment the other community kits available through the FBCYICN (eg. welcoming kit for youth coming into care / independence kit for youth leaving care).

For more information about the Employment to Freedom Program, contact:
Tatiana Sean – Employment Program Coordinator - employment@fbcyicn.ca

Dream Fund

The Dream Fund is an educational and vocational bursary to assist youth in and from care financially in reaching their “dream” goal(s), that will be available through the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks in 2007. In addition to developing the criteria and materials for the Dream Fund bursary, I am also responsible for collecting, researching and compiling educational resources for youth to access as well as assisting youth in finding various post-secondary options and helping them to fill out application forms. We are currently working towards a big fundraiser in December that will coincide with our annual Holiday celebration and a youth art show.

For more information about the Dream Fund or other scholarships and bursaries, contact:
Michelle Kim – Dream Fund Project Coordinator - dreamfund@fbcyicn.ca

For information about other FBCYICN projects and initiatives, go to www.fbcyicn.ca or call us Toll Free at 1-800-565-8055.

The networker
Volume 21 issue 2
Fall 2006
Published by the National Youth
in Care Network
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The networker is published
quarterly by the National Youth in
Care Network, a national
voluntary organization dedicated
to voicing the opinions and
concerns of youth in care and
promoting the improvement of
services for this group. Letters to
the editor and submissions should
be addressed to:

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