ENCOUNTERS WITH CANADA

ABSTRACT

Founded in 1982, Encounters with Canada encourages cultural awareness and national pride among Canadian youth. This article describes the program and speaks to the positive impact it has had on the lives of its many former participants.

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It's Sunday night and 130 high school students from every province and territory in Canada have gathered in the cafeteria at the Terry Fox Canadian Youth Centre in Ottawa to play a few icebreaker games and get to know one another.

For many this is their first time away from home, their first time to Ottawa, and their first time out of their home province. They are participating in the Encounters with Canada (EWC) program, a weeklong youth forum that brings young Canadians together to learn about each other, their country and themselves. As the games begin the group giggles nervously, carefully watching each other to see what to do.

"When the students first arrive, they are nervous and shy," explains Linda Brunet, Director General of EWC. "But by the end of the week everything has changed. They have all new friends, and they're having so much fun they don't want to go home!"

As a program of the Canadian Unity Council, a non-profit organization based in Ottawa, EWC aims to teach youth about Canada through visits to Canadian institutions, guest speakers, workshops and, most importantly, through their interactions with each other.

"We have a wonderful program here with lots of activities," explains Madame Brunet. "But what really sticks with the youth are the people they meet and the friendships they make. That's where they really learn about all the different regions of Canada."

Michael White is a retired high school teacher from Bathurst, New Brunswick. In the past eight years, he has volunteered as a "monitor" with the EWC program a total of 16 times. Monitors come to the program for one or two week stints. Acting like homeroom teachers, they lead activities, accompany students on trips, chaperone dormitories at night and act as general guides for the youth involved.

According to Mr. White, one of the program's unique strengths is that it allows young people to get first-hand experience learning about Canada.

"They get to meet young people their own age from across the country and experience first hand the stories and lives that each one of them has," he says. "In many cases it allows them to mature and experience what being away from home is like. They also get to experience our great country's political and cultural landscape, meeting our leaders and seeing where and how we are governed."

The first two days of the program are all about Canadian institutions. Participants visit Parliament and the Senate. They watch question period from the press gallery of the House of Commons, and meet with their Members of Parliament. They also get a tour of Ottawa, and visit at least one of the national museums located in the capital.



The rest of the week is focused on one of 11 different career sub-themes, such as Arts and Culture, Science and Technology, Law, RCMP and Medicine and Health. But, no matter what kind of career interests participants may have, the trip to Parliament Hill remains an important event.

"The most intriguing aspect of the program for me was visiting parliament and watching question period," says Zoiey Cobb, a 19 year-old political science student at Memorial University in Newfoundland, who came to EWC in October 2001. "The experience actually made me want to learn more about our political process."

Many students have that same experience, says Ken Purvis, another EWC monitor and regional coordinator for recruitment for the Thompson-Okanagan region of BC.

"The day in and around Parliament is like a crash course on how Parliament works. You come away from that day having been in rooms that parliamentarians use, hallways they walk, rooms they work in, and actually listening to Pages, MPs and Senators speak," he says. "Just standing by the eternal flame, looking back at the Peace Tower… you don't forget that feeling."

Aside from the political aspects of Canada, participants also get a healthy introduction to Canadian diversity and the importance of cultural awareness and acceptance in Canada. Every Wednesday night participants dress up in costumes and perform in a type of variety show called Canada 360°. The event allows students to present the uniqueness of their own region of Canada to the others through skits, songs and general silliness. On a more serious note, the week includes guided discussions on multiculturalism in Canada, and the challenges of linguistic duality sponsored by Exchanges Canada and Canadian Heritage.

"Without a doubt, the importance of both of Canada's official languages and Canada's cultural diversity become obvious," says Mr. Purvis. "For those that are bilingual, they have lots of opportunities to practice those skills. The talent show, the provincial skits and conversations with other participants… all give them a sense of the importance of embracing diversity."

And perhaps this is part of how EWC has become such a resounding success. Founded in 1982, the program has seen more than 65,000 young people come through its doors in the past 22 years. While program themes and activities have changed, the effect it has on its participants remains the same.

"The week that I was there, it had a political theme culminating in a mock parliament," explains Scott Spencer, a mechanical engineer from Nelson, BC who participated in the program in 1985. "I was elected Premier of Manitoba and had to learn a great deal about Western Canada. Having grown up in egocentric Ontario, it was my first exposure to the issues facing the rest of the country. As an adult I have made a conscious decision to raise my children in the west so that they get a more balanced view of Canada and the world."

Mr. Spencer also says EWC was his first attempt to seriously use his second language. The people he met from Quebec and the eastern provinces inspired him to pursue bilingualism. He now speaks five different languages as a result of his travels and hard work, and his experience isn't that unusual.

"Many anglophone students say that as a result of their experience here, they have a better understanding and a more positive desire to learn a second language," explains monitor Michael White. "As well, many francophone participants say they better understand the anglophone students and appreciate the efforts they make to speak French. They also say that they didn't experience any of the negative attitudes they were led to believe existed between the two language groups."

There is no doubt that the personal relationships and interaction participants share during their week in Ottawa encourage and reinforce their appreciation of Canada and all its peoples.

"What I remember most about Encounters is the friendships," says Ryan Pyne, a 19 year-old university student at Mount Allison University in Sackville, NB. "We had an amazing time together and developed life long memories. I realized how similar we, as teenagers, were no matter what region of the country we came from, in terms of goals, dreams and simply wanting to have a great time and obtain a greater appreciation of Canada."

According to Director General Linda Brunet, this is exactly what the program aims to do.

"We want young people to learn about Canada and everything our beautiful country has to offer, so we provide them with lots of opportunities to see and do things they wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity to do," says Mme. Brunet. "But, the best way for them to learn is to meet people from all across the country and share their stories. They discover Canada through each other, and that's what really stays with them."

At 4:30am on Saturday morning, the EWC participants gather in the foyer to say good-bye to the first group of students catching their early plane ride home. After an entire week together in Ottawa, they say good-bye with hugs, e-mail exchanges, promises of meetings and many, many tears. The warmth and friendship exhibited is a huge contrast to the shy, timid group that met in the cafeteria just seven days ago.

"What I remember most about it is the people. I made the most incredibly diverse group of friends from all over the nation. We laughed and cried. Some I have seen since I left. Some I just remember from their pictures," says 21-year old Shannon Comeau of Charlottetown, PEI. "Even though we were all from different lifestyles, provinces and sometimes spoke different languages, we made an incredible bond through this program. I felt that my most important lesson was that Canadians are all the same type of fun, caring, patriotic people, and for that I was proud to be Canadian."