FROM THE FAR SIDE OF THE MOUNTAINS:

Youth Engaged as Volunteers in British Columbia

ABSTRACT

Colleen Kelly provides meaningful insight into the world of youth volunteers. She maintains that young people will always be looking to get involved, but that today's generation is seeking concrete action as well as inclusion in decision-making in a forum where young voices are heard and their ideas realized. Community organizations must therefore find more effective ways of empowering youth by giving them greater responsibility and supporting youth-led initiatives.

COLLEEN KELLY

Colleen Kelly is the current Executive Director, Volunteer Vancouver. During the International Year of Volunteers (IYV) 2001, Colleen co-chaired the National Volunteer Initiative, one of the Joint Tables that was part of the Voluntary Sector Initiative. This Table developed a legacy for IYV, the Canada Volunteerism Initiative, which Volunteer Vancouver hosts in BC.

No matter what age range we use to define youth, I must admit I am a long way from it. So it is with some trepidation that I embark on an article about youth engaged as volunteers in British Columbia. Over the years I have learned the value of students talking to students about volunteering. Even twenty years ago, when I was presenting information about volunteering to schools, a class would listen very carefully to a sincere and caring young person – while I learned that I was only the 'mother figure' telling them to do something. So we knew it was critical to ensure youth were developing youth programs that worked for them. It is not about adults trying to engage young people. In the area of youth volunteerism, the messenger is at least twice as important as the message!

A good place to start is with one young person telling the story of another who had influenced her to volunteer:

> *To me, volunteering is giving with heart, and being selfless with your time, energy or money. There is no greater example to me of leadership and the volunteer spirit, or a good person, than my friend, Laurel Hogg.*
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> *To name a few of the contributions Laurel has given to her school and community, she has organized our school's multicultural week, volunteered for the Special Olympics, actively participated on the Kamloops Foundation Youth Advisory Council, and served her school as a Leadership Representative and Student Council Executive Member.*
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> *There are many things I could say about Laurel, but what I most value about her, is all she has taught me about what it means to volunteer. I have seen in Laurel a person I would like to be: a generous, compassionate, modest and respected person. There is a contentment within her that has come from helping others, a drive and ambition to continue to reach out to do more, and a realization of the need for her work, and the true effects of her contributions on others.*
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> *Laurel has tirelessly raised money for causes she believes in, given hours of her time to those with special needs in and outside of school, and raised awareness of the needs for cultural diversity. I am proud of her as an exceptional person, and prouder that she is my friend, teaching me the values of volunteering.*
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> Natalie Lidster
> Submission to 'Volunteers Grow Community' Story Contest, April 2004
> For the Canada Volunteerism Initiative in British Columbia

Benefits of volunteering

We know that those who volunteer when they are young are likely to continue volunteering throughout their lives (Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch, *Volunteer Management: Mobilizing all the Resources of the Community,* 1996). Therefore, it makes sense for coordinators of volunteer programs to involve young people. Youth involvement can be the key to growing a volunteer program. Volunteering contributes to young peoples' confidence, strengthens their skills and improves their job opportunities (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, *What influences youth to volunteer?* 2001). With these benefits in mind, youth involvement in volunteering may be the key to growing a strong Canada.

The not-for-profit landscape

According to a study conducted by D-Code (*Citizen RE:Generation: Understanding Active Citizen Engagement Among Canada's Information Age Generations,* 2003) Canada's Information Age Generation (15-34) is looking for new ways to get involved. Volunteering in its traditional and formal definition is not enough. Youth are interested in creating the solutions for root causes, not applying band-aids to their effects. 'Youth Engagement' is a buzz term in many not-for-profits and volunteering is certainly part of engagement; however, not in the traditional 'white-gloves-and-ladies-who-lunch' sense of the term. There has to be more value in the word *volunteer* to really engage the young people of this new millennium.

It is challenging to effectively engage youth. There is a significant difference between invitation and inclusion – between 'talking the talk' and 'walking the walk.' There are a multitude of youth focused organizations, associations, committees and coalitions that exist and compete for funds, attention and purpose. It is encouraging to see these organizations exist as their own youth-focused entities. But is this really the best strategy?

Isn't it really about inclusion rather than separateness? At the launch of the International Year of the Older Person at the United Nations in New York, many speakers addressed separating 'older persons' and that not including all generations in the discussions of 'older persons' was a huge error. Then, at a break, an octogenarian questioned our presence as young people. She didn't understand what we were doing there. Does this also have to be the common strategy for developing the engagement of youth? Separate? Different? Or inclusive? Part of the whole?

'Youth Engagement' is a buzz term in many not-for-profits and volunteering is certainly part of engagement; however, not in the traditional 'white-gloves-and-ladies-who-lunch' sense of the term. There has to be more value in the word volunteer to really engage the young people of this new millennium.

Are main-stream-age organizations ready, willing and able to consider youth more than a target market and incorporate their ideas, opinions and action to the future of our country? What do they need to do to get ready? How does Canadian society motivate youth to become involved in their communities? How do we make our organizations, our government, our decision-making practices open to ideas and direction generated by youth?

I suggest organizations are excited about the *idea* of incorporating youth in their programs and services to better serve the community. There is a significant difference between inviting youth to the table, and listening and incorporating their ideas and perspectives. It can be challenging for not-for-profits to create environments and opportunities for positive youth engagement. If the answers to the questions in the previous paragraph confirm that youth involvement is worth our time and energy, we ought to more closely examine the 'how' of engaging young people as volunteers.

A role for volunteer centres

If a volunteer centre has a youth volunteer program, it often consists of making presentations to students about the value of volunteering. While this is admirable, it is not effective if there are not organizations that can involve them as volunteers. So the 'how' of engaging youth could mean a different role for volunteer centres. Volunteer Centres could work with organizations to focus on the strengths in the existing volunteer program, and help them find ways to be flexible to incorporate additional and different practices that work for youth. For the most part, positive youth engagement requires adults, who are used to being in control, to let go and step outside of their comfort zone. I believe there is a role for a volunteer centre to work with organizations to involve young people; to help the adults in the organization be flexible and 'let go' while also managing the risk.

One strategy to facilitate this change is through promotion. For the past seventeen years Volunteer Vancouver's Annual Awards Dinner has recognized two young people for their commitment to community through the Leaders of Tomorrow award category. These young people initiate their own fundraising events, sit on Boards of Directors, start diversity clubs in their schools, lobby politicians on behalf of groups who often cannot, and provide incredible energy in the community.

Mandatory volunteering

At a volunteer centre we consider this frequently used phrase the ultimate oxymoron. In British Columbia, a young person's first exposure to community involvement may not be their decision. There is a requirement for high school students to complete a minimum of 30 hours (up to 150 hours in some programs) of community service work experience for high school graduation. This requirement is imposed both on the youth and on the organizations where they will carry out their volunteer work.

During the International Year of Volunteers, 2001, I had the privilege of listening to individuals across Canada offer their ideas on ways we could encourage volunteer involvement. Most believed the community service requirement for high school graduation (also mandatory in Ontario) is a good thing. And it *can* be! The trick is for the young person to find a meaningful volunteer opportunity that is about building their self-esteem, learning something new and really contributing to the community where they live. The challenge is for community organizations to involve these young people for a short period of time and ensure a good experience that still really furthers the mission of the organization. This is not an easy task.

A story of positive youth engagement

Almost 7 years ago, the Vancouver Foundation launched its Youth in Philanthropy program to engage

young people in philanthropy, volunteerism and community development. *Students Who Care,* a program run through the Victoria Foundation, helps to build future leaders that understand their community and the value of volunteerism. Participants learn critical thinking and leadership skills and are encouraged to question their own values. The program taps into the energy, insight and skills of youth and gives them the *ability to create change* (*Victoria Foundation Youth in Philanthropy Program brochure*). It was difficult for the Foundation to give that kind of control to the youth group. The Foundation actually encouraged the youth council to make recommendations to provide funding to community groups. That is a very different way for Community Foundations to do business. And guess what? The youth councils make great decisions – as do other advisory councils comprised of collective expertise from the community.

In addition to the Victoria Foundation program, the Vancouver Foundation's own Youth Philanthropy Council is dedicated to supporting youth oriented programs through grants and volunteerism. This Youth Council has awarded over half a million dollars to youth projects over the past 5 years.

There are currently 18 Youth Advisory Councils across the province with more in various stages of development. Their areas of focus (for which they receive training) include: grant making, fund development, and leadership. There is something unique about this particular youth program; it gives young people both the tools and the power to create change. They distribute real dollars in order to make a real difference. With the support of Community Foundations of Canada, Youth in Philanthropy has now spread across the country, and over 40 community foundations are now actively engaging young people in strengthening communities and improving quality of life.

There are many examples that illustrate how young people are involved in their community as volunteers. They are self-directed when it comes to living what they believe. There are many youth organizations in British Columbia that engage young people and truly focus on youth working with youth. Some other examples of these organizations are:

- Check Your Head
- Spirit Bear Youth Coalition
- Katimavik
- BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres Youth Council
- Leaders of Tomorrow, Vancouver Board of Trade

Semper quaestionis

Young people will always be searching to be engaged in a meaningful way, even as my generation was back in the 60s. Every generation finds a way that works for them – and the good news is that all Canadians benefit from the young people who look for ways to be involved in their community.

In British Columbia, youth engagement is often about the environment. It is often about HIV/AIDS prevention. It is often about drama in many new and different forms. Volunteering is part of this engagement and certainly the community benefits. Although I cannot call myself a youth, I am privileged to work and play and live with many young people who are engaged in the search. They are making this province and country a pretty cool (or is it 'hot'?) place to be in 2004.

Websites of Interest

- Volunteer Vancouver – www.volunteervancouver.ca
- Vancouver Foundation – www.vancouverfoundation.bc.ca
- Community Foundations of Canada – www.community-fdn.ca
- Check Your Head – www.checkyourhead.org
- Spirit Bear Youth Coalition – www.spiritbearyouth.org
- Katimavik – www.katimavik.org
- BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres Youth Council – www.bc-payc.com
- Leaders of Tomorrow – www.leadersoftomorrow.bc.ca

