GENERATION ZED:
LEADING THE WAY TOWARD AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

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On June 29th, I had the honour of speaking with a group of five inspirational Canadians under the age of 20. Despite the pandemic causing massive disruption in their lives and exacerbating an already uncertain future, each one of them reflected the strong spirit of resilience, adaptability, and inclusiveness that are hallmarks of this generation.

But let's start with what we know about this generation.[1] Almost all of them were born after the year 2000. Often referred to as "digital natives," they are first generation to grow up with the Internet as a more ubiquitous information medium than the newspaper or telephone ever was. Although most are too young to remember it, the first event that marked this generation was 9/11. Other significant geopolitical markers include the rise of global terrorism, the economic collapse of 2008, and one of greatest preoccupation to this generation – the global climate crisis. They are the first generation to believe that in their lifetime, they will be worse off than their parents were.[2] Given the significant amount of economic and political instability they witnessed throughout their childhood, it is not surprising that this generation is also characterized as being more anxious, more stressed, and more susceptible to mental health challenges.

The pandemic will most certainly be the hallmark of their generation, although most youth view the current health emergency as simply exacerbating pre-existing economic uncertainties and dispar-

1 On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far, pewsocialtrends.org

2 ANOTHER YOUTHQUAKE? Exploring the concerns, priorities, and political engagement of Canadian youth aged 15 to 30, April 25, 2019, Abacus Data.

ities rather than adding to them, according to recent surveys.[3] The pandemic may be doing the most damage in curtailing social connections, particularly among younger youth who are just developing their social skills, which are critical to mental health and wellness.[4]

> **"They are seized with the urgent need for change and believe in the power of the individual to effect it."**

While youth in this cohort are very concerned about future job prospects and the rising costs of living, they tend to have a broader world view and avoid prioritizing individual needs and concerns. This is likely due to their connectedness through social media, which heavily influences their perspectives about diversity, inclusion, and equality. They live more frugally for environmental as well as economic reasons and are more actively engaged in social justice causes such as the Black Lives Matter movement both at home and around the globe. They are more inclined to trust activist movements and community organization rather than governments to implement change. Most importantly, they are seized with the urgent need for change and believe in the power of the individual to effect it.



Tessa Erickson

Tessa Erickson sees herself as an 18-year old STEM student from Nak'azdli Whut'en First Nation. We see her as an important language and culture defender.[5] Although she grew up in a family and community strongly connected to their traditional culture, her father lamented the fact that few people in their community, including him, could speak their traditional Dakehl language due to their being sent away to Residential Schools. As had happened in so many Indigenous communities, he was concerned that as Elders able to speak and teach the language became fewer and youth were less

3 COVID-19 and Canadian Youth Impacts, Perspectives and The Recovery: A report based on a national survey of 1,000 canadians aged 15 to 30. A prorprietary survey conducted for a coalition of national youth serving agencies by Abacus Data in September 2020.

4 Youth and COVID-19: Response, recovery and resilience, oecd.org

5 B.C. teen creating app, summer camp to revive First Nations language, Canada's National Obeserver

frequently exposed to hearing the language, it might be lost entirely with this generation.

Ironically, Tessa grew up learning French as a second language and had an interest in learning others, including Spanish. She attributed her experience with the popular language app "Duolingo" as her inspiration for finding a way to revitalize Dakehl among her peers. When she listened to her father's concern, she knew she had to do something. She developed a plan to work with elders and create an app that could assist community members, young and old, in relearning their traditional language. The project would be supported by a series of summer camps because, as she put it, "I always remembered summer camps as being fun, and I wanted learning our traditional language to be an experience they enjoyed." Her father took her proposal to the band council and much to her surprise; Tessa received confirmation of a $50,000 grant just before the pandemic struck.



Emma Lim

Unable to continue with plans for summer camps, Tessa has been focusing on developing the app. She learned quickly that the technical aspects of the project would be too demanding for her to complete alone so she is working with a professional app developer. She has redirected her own energies towards building her own Dakehl speaking skills and working with Elders on the content plan. When we asked about where she sees the project going next, Tessa gave a slight shrug and said "When her own community's language is documented thoroughly, she would like to move onto other dialects and other languages across Canada… because speakers and the culture are fading and I would like to save [them] and revitalize [them] and I hope we can manage to get as many languages revitalized as we can."

Emma Lim is a 19-year-old Biomedical Science student at McGill who grew up in London, Ontario. Her father was from Hong Kong, and her mother Anishanabeh. As she tells it, she has been a climate activist since she was a baby attending protests with her mother. So, it was no surprise that Emma was among the first Canadian high schoolers to notice the challenge set by Greta Thunberg and organize a climate strike at her school. Through these events, Emma fostered deep connections with climate activists here in Canada and around the world who she considers her community, because of the inspiration and support they provide to her. For her, networks like this are the most underestimated part of social change. She says people tend to talk

about activism in terms of individuals who lead these movements as the result of individual leadership, when in fact "Every time you see an action, there's often hundreds and maybe even thousands of young people behind it."

Part of Emma's actions in 2019 included encouraging youth to pledge not to have children until governments took the climate emergency seriously and take meaningful steps to mitigate the current trajectory of global warming and other scientific indicators.[6] The startling petition attracted many headlines around the world, and thousands of signatories. A year later she was less sanguine about the future for the petition, feeling it may have served its purpose in raising awareness, but recognized there were other actions that also merited her time and attention. This is not to say the pledge was ever contemplated as a cavalier move, quite the opposite. The responsibility to future generations is at the very core of her motivation. "I am an activist because even if I don't think it's possible to win every fight, I do think its possible to shape a better world for my children," Emma said. "So that's what motivates me to get out of bed and plan an action… or start the pledge, it's the only thing we have – to leave something for our children."

Stella Bowles began her quest for change when she was in Grade 6 and she couldn't understand why her mother wouldn't let her go swimming in the LaHave River in Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia. With a little research, she learnt that many homes in her community were dumping septic waste directly into the river through straight pipes.



Stella Bowles

It bothered her so much, that she continued to pepper her parents with questions, many they couldn't answer. In grade 8 they connected her with Coastal Action and a retired medical doctor, David Maxwell, who was conducting river testing in the region. He helped Stella learn how to do the testing for fecal bacteria and oversaw her research project to test four areas where kids frequently swam in the region. The results from her experiments confirmed that the river was not safe for swimming, in fact the water quality was so poor it wasn't even safe for it to come in contact with skin. The research project garnered her a silver medal at the Canada-Wide Science Fair.

6 Hundreds join student's climate-change pledge: No kids until Canada takes action, CBC.ca

For Stella, this wasn't the end of her project. Deeply concerned that more community residents needed to be aware of the dangers of the water and the impact of continued straight piping – being under-age to register on her own, she begged her mother to give her permission to set up a Facebook page. Eventually, her mother consented and with her Mom's help, Stella began posting about the dangers of swimming in the river. Stella attributes the power of social media as critical to garnering community attention and political support to address the problem. Within two years, all three levels of government came together to ban straight pipes altogether and embark on a $15.7 million dollar river clean-up project.[7]



Abhayjeet and Sukhmeet Singh Sachal

Today, the Municipality of Lunenburg is well underway to replacing the 600 straight pipes along the waterway with an estimated completion date of 2023. Still in high school, Stella has subsequently shared her story with other communities in Nova Scotia and around the world, traveling to places like New York, Sweden, and Equator. Although her travels have been postponed during the pandemic, she says she hopes to continue to help teach others how to conduct water tests and advocate for polluted waterways endangering their communities.

Abhayjeet and Sukhmeet Singh Sachal are brothers who immigrated to Canada with their families when they were 1 and 7 years old respectively. Sukhmeet talks about how those first few years in Canada were starkly different from the life he imagined, when he was often bullied and harassed simply because of the way he talked, the way he dressed, and what he ate. One could image such a challenging childhood would lead a person to be more introverted and cautious about standing out and standing up. But Sukhmeet chose instead to double down on drawing attention to himself in grade 7 when he noticed that Indigenous students in his school had an ever-tougher time than he did. In hopes of creating change, he spoke to a teacher about organizing a Pow-Wow Dance in the school

7 Girl's quest to clean up LaHave River nets $15.7M in funding, CBC.ca

as a way of highlighting and celebrating Indigenous culture. The event had such a positive change on the student community, it became a key annual event in the school calendar by the time Sukhmeet graduated from high school.

Now a 25-year old medical student, Sukhmeet has always been an inspiration and a mentor to his younger brother Abhayjeet, who is now 18. Abhayjeet's keen interest in understanding the impacts of climate change led him to apply for Students on Ice's arctic expeditions in 2017. While the experience definitely reinforced his commitment and concern for the effects of climate change, the greatest learnings came from the knowledge and lived experiences of his fellow Inuit participants. So inspired by his experience, he and his brother brainstormed about ways they could help connect more students from their own community of Delta, British Columbia, with Inuit communities in the North. They founded Break the Divide[8] that effectively operates like a virtual exchange program, connecting youth in different communities so they can discuss issues affecting their communities and ideally work toward collaborative projects that can effect change. Over the past year, they have expanded their connections to include Siberia, India, Taiwan, Bolivia, and Cape Town, opening up even more conversations about the issues that set communities apart, and the issues that bind them together. According the Abhayjeet, the bottom line is "If we foster empathy, if we begin to talk to one another and learn about one another and our problems in our communities, and we work together to solve these issues, then we can really break down racial, social, and geographic barriers."

These youth represent four examples of how Generation Zed is embracing our changing world. While their accomplishments at such a young age are exceptional, fortunately for us, their commitment to action is not. Indeed, we see this spirit all the time in Experiences Canada's programming[9] This is a generation that cares about their communities, understands the uncertainty and is fearless about taking action. What they need most from us, is our support – a connection to the past so they don't repeat our mistakes, an invitation to share their opinions and make a meaningful contribution, and an openness to letting them try new ways of addressing our challenges.

Most importantly, we need to facilitate ways so they can learn from each other. All of these youth spoke about the power of social media in sharing their own stories and being a source of inspiration to others. Indeed, one of the best things about this digital generation is their growing connectedness, awareness of the challenges and hardships faced by others, and the resulting empathy and compulsion to want to help and make a difference. They know the challenges facing their generation can be overwhelming and they know their world is not going to get better on its own but they refuse to become hopeless or lost.

> "We've grown up helpless. So there's that...," Emma Lim said with a catch in her voice as she

8 breakthedivide.net

9 experiencescanada.ca

> fought for composure at the end of the session. "For me, I feel I am an activist because I have no other choice. I have no other choice, because I am in a position where I am able to do something. And if I don't, I don't think that I could live with myself."

Compassion. Resiliency. Determination. Innovation. These are the true hallmarks of Generation Zed. And I have never been more confident and assured that our future will, in fact, be better with them in charge.