



The Connector

Summer 2008

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Mayor Miller joins Scarborough Village Youth Council to open new youth lounge

On June 12th, Mayor David Miller joined the Scarborough Village Youth Council to officially open a new Youth Lounge at the Scarborough Village Community Centre. This is a great step forward from two years ago when YOUTHLINK community outreach workers staff started a weekly drop-in for youth in the neighbourhood. The only meeting space available then was an empty gym for a couple of hours a week at the Scarborough Village Community Centre. Every week, a core group of 25 youth gathered to talk about community concerns and how they could contribute. Right away, they said, "We have no place to socialize and nothing to do."



Youth Council members celebrate the official opening with Mayor David Miller

Since then, YOUTHLINK has played a lead role in expanding youth programs in the neighbourhood including developing a Youth Council, starting an African Drumming Program, a Martial Arts program, a Studio Recording program and a Cricket program.

The newly formed Youth Council began the process to secure space for a full-fledged

Youth Lounge in the Centre and, thanks to partnerships with the City of Toronto and several community agencies, the lounge was officially opened in June.

The new Lounge offers a welcoming space to relax with three computers, a foosball table and other games, comfortable couches and eye-catching wall art. A second room provides space for various weekly programs, including the Youth Council who continue to meet there every Thursday hatching new plans to improve life for youth in their community.

Calendar notes

Scarborough Community Festivals

Eglinton East-Kennedy Park
July 19
Scarborough Village
Aug 9

Positive Parenting Program

July 22—Sept 9

Youth Skills Zone Summer Session

July 8 — Sept 11



A Note from the Executive Director...

The new youth lounge is an exciting achievement in Scarborough Village. Not only does it provide a physical space for youth to gather, it sends an important message to our young people that they are a priority in the community. This sense of acceptance and belonging is vital to adolescents as they navigate their own path to maturity. Each of the programs and services that YOUTHLINK offers provides this acceptance and place of belonging for our youth and supports them in so many different ways to make positive choices for their future.

On pages 4 and 5, Jamie Rhiness, who worked as a Peer Educator at Inner City, provides a moving account of just how important this support can be. Thank you, Jamie, for sharing this with us.

In June, Board members, staff, youth, donors and community partners gathered at our Annual Meeting to celebrate our accomplishments over the past year. (Photos on pg 6) Once again my heartfelt thanks to each of you for your contribution to making YOUTHLINK a welcoming space for youth to find their own voice and make positive life choices.

Sandy Birnie

"It is important to give queer, trans and questioning youth a safe place to ask questions and explore who they are and what voice they bring to the Scarborough community."

SHOW YOUR SCARBOROUGH PRIDE

On June 26th, the 4th Annual Pride Scarborough celebration took place from 12-3pm, raising the flag for the first time at the Scarborough Civic Centre. MPP Brad Duguid spoke to more than 150 people who gathered to celebrate the vibrant contribution of queer and trans peoples to Scarborough's diverse cultural scene.

Pride Week has increasingly become part of Scarborough's landscape, thanks to the efforts of the dedicated youth, community activists and social agencies who form Pride Scarborough's planning committee.

YOUTHLINK's Ronni Gorman, Community Outreach worker, has chaired the committee for three years. Ronni also co-facilitates YAAHA! (Youth Advocating Anti-Homophobia Awareness) a local group that is active throughout the year and provides a safe, affirming space for queer/trans youth and their allies.



The Pride Scarborough Planning Committee

This year, Pride Scarborough held a youth event for the first time with musical performances, a drag show and a barbecue at L'Amoreaux Community Recreation Centre.

"Queer and trans people have made significant contributions to the worlds of culture, business, politics and academia. It is important to give youth a safe place to ask questions and explore who they are and what voice they bring to the Scarborough community," organizers say.

Pride Scarborough and YAAHA! also took part in the Toronto Pride Parade and Dyke March downtown.

This year's events received support from the Lesbian and Gay Community Appeal, the Pride Toronto Access and Diversity Grants, the City of Toronto, the Scarborough Village Neighbourhood Action Team and the Circa Entertainment Venue.



Marching with Mayor Miller in Toronto's Pride Parade

Graduation Day marks turning point for youth

On June 12th, a special Graduation Ceremony was held in YOUTHLINK's courtyard at 747 Warden for twenty students who completed Centennial College's Ontario Basic Skills program.

The eight-month program is geared to young people between 18-24 who had struggled with high school and left early. It enables students to upgrade their skills in communications, math and computer literacy and obtain a certificate that gives them the required credentials to apply for a college certificate or career training.

The barriers facing these young people often go beyond academic challenges and touch aspects of their personal lives. That's where YOUTHLINK comes in.

Sharron Williams, from our Community Team, works with these students both in and out of the classroom, offering life skills workshops on topics such as anger management and self-esteem and helping them find community services that can support their needs. This might include referrals to YOUTHLINK's counseling services or co-op housing; other times, it means helping students access food banks, employment centres or other community programs.

This combination of academic and social support has proven very successful in motivating these young people to complete the course, credentials in hand and further their career plans.



“Siberian Initiative” study tour spends day at Inner City

Early in June, Inner City once again joined the global dialogue on HIV/AIDS when staff hosted three visitors from **Siberian Initiative**, a non-governmental organization promoting HIV/AIDS prevention and education in the Altai Krai region of Siberia.

Altai Krai is located close to the borders with Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and China and there is deep concern about the growing rate of HIV/AIDS infections in the region.

Volnov Veniaminovich, Alexey Starostenko and Natalia Vagaytseva spent the day at Inner City as part of a study visit to Toronto to build partnerships and deepen collaboration on prevention and treatment programs.



Volnov Veniaminovich,
Siberian Initiative

The week-long tour included stops at the Ontario AIDS Bureau, Voices of Positive Women, South Riverdale Community Health Centre, the Hassle-Free Clinic and YOUTHLINK Inner City.

The day-long meeting was coordinated by

Inner City’s Diana Walker and included presentations from staff and partner agencies on the range of services at Inner



Altai Krai, Russia

City, our philosophy of service delivery, the peer education program and the importance of having partner agencies deliver services in the Drop-In itself.

Volnov and Alexey are also members of the Russian Federation’s Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS and were particularly interested in the mental health issues affecting our youth, how we maintain a positive relationship with law enforcement, the peer educator program, and healthy sexuality workshops.

Inner City has an international reputation for our integrated service model and harm-reduction approach for street youth. Last fall, a delegation from Bosnia visited the program. In 2006, staff were very active at the Toronto International AIDS Conference, presenting workshops and providing tours of Inner City to delegates from around the world.



YOUTHLINK partners with Amnesty International on new community mural

This year, the world celebrates the 60th anniversary of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, a document that has provided the benchmark for human rights and dignity around the world.

To mark the anniversary and raise public awareness about human rights, Amnesty International’s Toronto chapter has launched **Project: Urban Canvas**. Their goal is to create 30 murals throughout the city that visually depict each of the 30 Articles in the Declaration.

YOUTHLINK is sponsoring a mural in Scarborough Village that will focus on Article 27 (see sidebar). Throughout the summer, our Community Outreach team will work with local youth and professional artists to create the mural.

This is our third mural project and the second for Scarborough Village. Community murals offer a unique way to engage youth in positive, creative activity and leave a lasting impression that reflects pride in the neighbourhood.

Scarborough Village, one of Toronto’s priority neighbourhoods, has been a particular focus for YOUTHLINK and our programs support a youth council and drop-in lounge, martial arts, a drumming group and cricket.

It is also home to many new Canadians who have emigrated from countries where human rights are of deep concern. This mural reflects our commitment to human rights both at home and globally.



Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

Universal Declaration
of Human Rights
Article 27(i)

"I had to give trust a try"

Reflections of an Inner City Peer Educator



Jamie speaking at our Annual Meeting

So you wake up to the street cars rattling above you, as they cross the bridge keeping you sheltered from the rain or snow.

Pigeons painfully cry in vain as they are pecked at by the others. The dusty ground is contaminated with PCB's. You don't know if it's this or the exhaust fumes billowing down, that cause your nagging morning cough.

If you're lucky, you have a cigarette, or a swallow of something to keep you from regretting surviving yet another lonely winter night. Your frozen, shaking hands clumsily load your pack. You're in a hurry to use a bathroom, and to hydrate yourself before a monster headache begins to catch up with you. The quicker you can get this done, the sooner you can start the whole miserable routine once again. You figure you would be used to it by now. That you'd have toughened over the years. Instead, the cold is hitting you harder. The alcohol is proving much more difficult to keep down, and illness comes upon you more frequently and sticks around longer.

Where is everyone else this winter?

Am I the last of the bridge trolls?

You cast a glance around the bridge to see the ghost shanty town that you once shared with dozens of other kids. Now you share it with three stray cats, and some terminally tortured pigeons.

You take your time walking to the drop in. It'll be another forty five minutes until it opens and the cold has a harder time sinking into your bones when you're mobile. As slow as you may be moving with that heavy pack strapped to your shoulders, some citizen is in even less of a rush to get to the office. He or She knows you're behind them, but they are having some argument with the spouse over the bills. They're stressed about being down to their last few grand, and might have to cut that trip to the Caribbean short this year.

It must be rough living under a roof.

You play up the pariah "Excuse me, Body bugs coming through..." The citizen makes way post-haste and you pounce at your chance to get ahead.

On your way you check the parking meters for the

time, dreading your inevitable early arrival. You grab the city's free dailies to assist you in passing the time. You skip past the bad news for the horoscopes, to find out that you'll soon find romance with a co-worker, and that finances will shortly take a turn for the better. Good news. The plus seven sleeping bag could always use some help warming up for the night, and you would always enjoy some bank leftover for beer the next day, before the DT's kick in. Something tells you that this isn't what the astrologer had in mind, but eh, a guy can dream.

A panhandler sees the butt you've found in a frozen snow bank, between your fingers, and asks you for a smoke. You politely inform him that you're in a like situation, although you consider yourself superior for actually braving the elements, instead of sleeping in some shelter.

Doesn't he see my pack? Do I not look dirty enough?

You've just been mistaken for a middle class backpacker and not the hard core, hard drinking hitch hiker you think you are. This irks you. Sure you've shed the punk rock uniform. The patch pants, the piercings, the Mohawk. But shouldn't something still shine through?

Your mind wanders to more pressing concerns. It's too cold to use soap and water on the wind shields, so you'll have to grab a bottle of washer fluid. Jesus might have been able to turn water into wine, but you're the only one around lately that can turn washer fluid into a bottle of malt liquor.

At last you find your way to the colorful alley that is home to YOUTHLINK Inner City. One of the places that has kept you alive throughout the years, even at the times you didn't care to be. Inside is food, a shower, and dry socks. You can keep in touch with friends and family over the internet, and even give someone a call. Still, outside stands a group of shaking shelter kids, using language just as colorful to describe their disdain for the "cold hearted" staff, blatantly refusing to open the shelter twenty minutes early.

You shake your head at the fact that they awoke with a warm toilet readily available. They spent a night in a bed that would be more comfortable if a guy could sleep through the whining, or the fighting. The feeble shoving matches and tough talk sparked by shady drug deals, or some kid with something to prove. You think about the squeegee punks, hitchhikers, and train hoppers fighting for

By Jamie Rhiness

fun. We call it sparring. Of course, where are they now? We were the bullied, not the bullies, so nothing about this kid impresses. It's all drama, street soap opera. The mindless distraction, that keeps a person from knowing their real enemies, the courts, the cops, the government, and the rich trying their best to get out of paying their wages.

The clicking sound of a lock unlatching signals that staff is now prepared for another thankless day of complaints and verbal abuse.

The two quickest on the draw rush to the computer. Another set, to spend a solid half hour in the wash-rooms. Staff pleads with the rest to sign the stats sheet, explaining that this is how the drop-in keeps its doors open. A handful of people may listen.

Inside you have all kinds of people from all sorts of backgrounds, punks, metal heads, hip hoppers. Former dealers, former users trying to stay away from making money or current users trying to sleep off days of making money, or current users trying to sleep off days of making it. There are kids killing time until the shelter opens, and kids killing time until a dealer turns on their phone.

Then there's the odd squeegee kid waiting for the cops to leave the Queen-Spadina corner. It's a mismatch of people that on the street shouldn't work, but for survival's sake does. Staff try their best to keep our personal prejudices and old beefs from escalating into full out physical conflict, on most days they miraculously succeed.

I tried to spend as little time in these drop-ins as possible. If you can't already tell, I have a lot of pride. By ten or eleven, I'd be out the door, making a couple more bottles, then getting drunk in a park or alleyway, until all could be forgotten. Then I'd wake up under a bridge to start it all over again.

I started as a teen in a small town drinking, thumbing, or just doing anything at my disposal to kill the boredom. By winter of '07, nothing cut it, and I just couldn't take another night under the bridge, or another run down the Trans-Canada.

Still an extreme transition like this would take six months for me to grow into. I'm leaving a life where I've travelled tens of thousands of kilometers, had three lifetimes worth of fun, but also lost ten years and more friends and loved ones to count.

I had to give trust a try, and I had to give shelters a try. (Now I realize that shelters can be a lot worse

than any bridge I've stayed under. As a matter of fact, I've been in correctional facilities with more personality and less restrictions.) It's within this time that I took part in the Peer Program at YOUTHLINK Inner City. It's because of this that I got to actually know some of the kids that I had been misjudging all of these years.

I was from time to time taken in by former peers. The things learned from staff and peer alike doesn't just go away after the program ends, and I could list many examples of how this has helped. Out of respect for Leah, Alan, and all of the staff, I had to learn how to deal with conflict much differently than is customary for the hard drinking hitchhiker I've been all these years.

I learned a lot about myself and a bit about the world outside the one I've been living for so long. I've even been meditating on the fact that those citizens might actually have genuine problems, regardless of the size and location of the roofs they live under.

I've hung up my squeegee, and shed my ambivalence about wanting no more than some company to share my misery with, and some leftover bank for the ten o'clock beer run.

So now I lay on our new couch by the window, on a humid Sunday afternoon, to write this speech. After my girlfriend and I make supper and do the dishes, we'll take in a movie, and eat ice cream, before turning in for the night.

Tomorrow, I'll probably head in for my shift a bit early to grab the free dailies, that will tell me to expect a new budding romance and that my finances will take a turn for the worse. I'll ignore this as always, choosing instead to strike up a conversation with some of the folks waiting out front, who always ask me how the new place is coming along, and that they are happy for my girlfriend and I.

They'll tell me about the new job or apartment prospect and I'll continue to be amazed at how hard we all try, no matter how hopeless the papers or charity advertisements at times make us sound. I'll start one of my few remaining shifts a little saddened that a part of my life is ending, but I'll be comforted with the fact that a place like Inner City exists to help keep the street kids fed, clothed, safe, and sometimes even alive, even at the times we didn't care to be.

Jamie Rhiness worked at Inner City as a Peer Educator in 2008. He shared his story at our June Annual Meeting and kindly permitted us to reprint it in The Connector.

Annual General Meeting
June 18, 2008

HIGHLIGHTS



- 1 Anita McBride, Past-President, accepts tributes as she steps down from the Board.
- 2 Wayne Connell, Dorset Park Youth Leader
- 3 Linda Chin, Social Advocacy Chair
- 4 Krystyna Kott, Audit Committee Chair
- 5 Sue Dallhoff, Board President
- 6 Scarborough Village Roots n' Riddims Drumming Circle
- 7 Teri McCoppin, Treasurer
- 8 East Indian Classical Dance performance
- 9 Big Sister Jane Reeves recalled highlights from her many years of service.
- 10 Sandy Birnie, Executive Director
- 11 Jamie Rhiness, Inner City Peer Educator (see text of his speech on pp 4-5)
- 12 Big Sisters listen to highlights from past year.

Note: Robyn Siannas also shared her experience as a parent in our Family Support Program for Youth with Intellectual Disabilities. No photo available.

Thanks to our supporters, BluesLINK 2008 reaches new heights!

Thank you! Our third annual BluesLINK 2008 was held on April 13th and was a huge success. With the help of dedicated volunteers, the backing of Toronto's top blues musicians and the blues community, generous donors and supporters, we raised over \$11,000 towards programs for vulnerable youth and their families across Toronto.

Guests were treated to fabulous music by the Gary Kendall Band, Marg Stowe's S'Women Blues and Lucian Gray and guests, and Danny Marks who also emcee'd the event. Highlights included a special performance by Roots n' Riddims Drummers, a wonderful silent auction and specially created artwork donated by Seneca@YorkU Graphic Design Students.

Special thanks to our sponsors who included the Sorbara Group, the McBride Family, Paula Simonetta, Culinary Cravings, Ruth's Cakes and Pastries, Jeff Healey's Roadhouse, TCD Communications, Greg Yaschyshyn Photography, all our Silent Auction donors and our wonderful volunteers. Kudos to organizers Peter Shepherd, Lori-Ann Veira, Anita McBride, Cathy Y-Wilson and, of course, Roger Smith (Mr BluesLINK!) for a terrific event.



Top to Bottom:
 Roger Smith
 Heather Morgan
 Gary Kendall
 Danny Marks

Monthly giving: an easy, powerful way to give

What does it mean when you join our monthly giving circle? You are helping ensure that YOUTHLINK's programs are there for youth when they need us most. Knowing we can count on your gift each month, no matter what the amount, helps us plan for our future needs and reduce our administrative costs. It's easy, secure and you can cancel any time.

It's surprising how your monthly gift grows into a significant contribution over the year:

- ✓ **Just \$10 per month** becomes \$120 each year
- ✓ **\$25 per month** becomes \$300 each year—less than a dollar a day!

Ready to join? It's easy and secure. **Complete the form below** or **sign up on-line** at www.youthlink.ca. Need more information? Visit our website or call 416-967-1773.

Yes, I would like to become a monthly donor and support vulnerable youth all year round. I authorize YOUTHLINK to automatically withdraw from my account on the 20th of each month: (Circle one)
 \$50 \$25 \$15 \$10 \$_____

Please take my donation from:

- my bank account (enclose a sample cheque marked VOID)
- VISA Mastercard

Cardholder Name _____
 Card # _____ Exp ____/____
 Signature _____

Name: _____
 Address: _____
 City: _____ Postal Code: _____
 Phone: _____ Email: _____

Thank you! Please send this form to:

YOUTHLINK,
 747 Warden Ave.
 Toronto, ON M1L 4A8

Charitable receipts are issued annually for the total of your monthly gifts.



www.youthlink.ca

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Feedback welcome!

Send your comments to
connector@youthlink.ca

Helping vulnerable youth make positive life choices

YOUTHLINK offers a unique range of services and programs for vulnerable youth between the ages of 12-24 and their families or caregivers living in Toronto. Some programs respond to the individual needs of youth and their families while others focus on youth and community development. Services span a continuum from prevention and early intervention through to clinical counseling.

Our programs and services for youth ages 12-24 include:

- Individual and group counselling, parent support groups
- Family Support Program for youth with developmental disabilities
- Treatment Residence for girls 14-18
- Supportive Co-op Housing throughout Toronto
- Violence prevention and leadership development programs in high needs communities and schools in Scarborough
- Inner City Drop-in/Resource Centre for street youth
- Youth Skills Zone employment and life skills program

Founded in 1914 by the Big Sister Association of Toronto, YOUTHLINK is an accredited community-based children's mental health centre and United Way member agency.

Would your employer match your donation?

There are hundreds of "Matching Gift Companies" in Canada. These employers encourage their employees to make philanthropic gifts to charities and will match their gifts on a one to one basis, or even higher.

Many apply this policy to donations from past employees, board members, directors as well as spouses, widows and widowers.

Visit our website and click on Donate for a list of "Matching Gift Companies" and details on how to apply. If your company is listed, you can double your donation just by asking!



DONATE TO YOUTHLINK

Here is my donation to help youth at risk in Toronto get the support they need. Please send me a charitable donation tax receipt.

- \$30 \$50 \$100 \$250 Other _____

I am paying by:

- Enclosed Cheque [Kindly make cheques made payable to YOUTHLINK.]
 Credit Card

VISA/MasterCard # _____ Expiry Date ____/____

Signature _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ Postal Code: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Charitable donation tax receipts are issued for all donations of \$10 or more.

Mail to: YOUTHLINK, 747 Warden Ave, Toronto, ON M1L 4A8

To donate on-line,
visit us at
www.youthlink.ca

