More than a Buzzword

BY JESSICA PAGE

This past weekend, while chairing a meeting of the National Youth Network during the 2009 Scouts Canada National Conference in Regina, SK, I took a moment just to look around at my colleagues in the room. Staring back at me were beaming faces of bright teenagers and 20-somethings, assembled from across Canada, here for one purpose: to improve Scouts Canada for the benefit of other youth.

These young people had sacrificed their weekends and at least one day of school or work to travel to Regina for this weekend of meetings and collaboration. They were there as active, engaged members of the highest levels of management of our organization. They were informed, confident, and valuable assets to all teams they were involved with. Some were Council Youth Commissioners, some were youth Board of Governor members, some were in attendance as the third elected voting delegate from their council, but they all had one thing in common: they were awesome!

Rebuilding the National Youth Network

It wasn’t always this way, however. As little as a few years ago our National Youth Network was not much of a national anything. A loss of priority and drive for youth involvement resulted in a near collapse of the once strong National Youth Committee from the late 90s. We only got to meet as a group for a few hours once a year, and there was little communication between meetings. While some Council Youth Commissioners (CYCs) that lived close together collaborated on projects, most worked in isolation. There were huge numbers of councils that had a CYC who wasn’t engaged in anything, or they didn’t have a CYC at all! In the fall of 2007, we realized that things needed to change, and we took action.

In two short years, we changed our attitudes and the way we work. Now:

- We meet together twice a year to further our initiatives, network, and team build
- We set concrete goals at the end of every meeting and check at the beginning of our next meeting to make sure we have achieved them
- We push and support each other throughout the year
- We are involved in setting priorities for all councils
- We communicate and collaborate with youth working on other national initiatives and committees, such as the Board of Governors, the International Relations Committee, and the Program Network
- We have the respect of the “adults” working at the national level and are recognized as an essential force required for moving Scouting forward
- We are moving out of the realm of “youth initiatives” and into positions of major importance!

And that’s just a look at the big picture stuff – these young people are making a tangible difference in their local communities, too.
Fostering the Future

So where did these stellar youth come from? They didn’t spontaneously appear as great leaders, that’s for sure. Leadership skills require practice, fostering, and mentorship to develop. Some of us, myself included, were fortunate enough to move through various leadership positions of our Movement over a period of years, gaining confidence and responsibility as we learned lessons from those Scouting leaders around us. Others only recently joined the Scouting Movement, and gained their leadership ability from school and community opportunities. Still others were thrown into the role of CYC with little prior leadership experience and, through commitment and the support of the rest of the team, have grown by leaps and bounds during their term to become the confident CYCs they are today.

The current National Youth Network is great, but we need more keen young leaders developing at the local level so that they can be ready to move into positions of greater responsibility later on. How can we do this? Well, it starts right at the program section level.

Let Little Billy and Bonnie Lead!

Cubs, Scouts, and even Beavers have the capacity to lead their peers if given the opportunity. Why not put a White Tail Beaver in charge of teaching the colony a new game? How about having a Sixer run the badge work activity tonight? Shouldn’t you give senior Scouts an opportunity to plan their own backpacking trip? The Venturer and Rover programs should be entirely youth-led. By giving children and youth opportunities to step outside their comfort zone and lead their friends to success, you will be instilling confidence and building the foundation for lifelong leadership development — and that is what the Scout Method is all about! Keep in mind that things might not go as initially envisioned, but that does not equal failure. In fact, “rolling with the punches” can lead to some of the most spontaneous fun! Besides, how can one fail if he is learning and growing from the experience?

Taking the Next Step

If a young person would like to get involved in a more structured way, they might consider becoming an Area Youth Commissioner (AYC). These are usually (but not always) Venturer-aged youth who do a variety of extra activities above and beyond the normal Venturer program. An AYC is part of the Area Service Team, and helps support local initiatives such as camps, promotional campaigns, and training events. He or she also has a big role in listening to the youth of the area to make sure they are enjoying the program, and suggesting improvements if needed. Your Council Youth Commissioner is a great resource for the AYCs, and the National Youth Network recently completed an excellent “AYC Welcome Package” (see page 10 in this issue for more information), which is an invaluable resource.

What’s It All For?

At the end of the day, the mandate of Scouts Canada is to foster the growth and development of young Canadians, and leadership development is part of that. Ultimately, this will benefit all of Canada as young people with strong Scouting values move into other sectors and become community leaders.

Additionally, these young people will contribute to a stronger Scouts Canada today. As Canadian society continues to change at an ever-increasing pace, we need leadership that is closer and more in touch with our target demographic: kids! Scouts Canada is already taking action in this area. In fact, I am writing this article not as a current member of the National Youth Network, but an alumna. At that same meeting in Regina, at the age of 24, I was elected to become the youngest ever “officer” of Scouts Canada. It’s a big role (if the Chief Commissioner goes down, I have to step up!), but my years of Youth Commissioner experience and strong mentorship from my peers have prepared me well.

I have gained so much from my leadership development roles within Scouting, but I don’t want to be an anomaly. Let’s continue to foster youth leadership development at all levels of our Movement by providing opportunities for young people to practice leading. After all, Scouts learn best by doing! 

— Jessica Page has held a variety of youth leadership positions and is the former Deputy Executive Commissioner – Youth and Chair of the National Youth Network. She is currently the Vice Chair – Strategic of the Board of Governors.

So many Acronyms... What do they Mean?

AYC = Area Youth Commissioner: Often a local Venturer who wants to get involved with the Area Service Team, provide youth input on issues, and empower young people in his/her area.

CYC = Council Youth Commissioner: A strong youth leader who works both at the national and the council level to support youth initiatives, mentor young leaders, and direct the organization.

NYN = National Youth Network: A blanket term to include all youth working at the national level (i.e. CYCs, International Relations Committee youth members, etc.), but it often refers specifically to CYCs and the team of Deputy Executive Commissioners for Youth who support them.