

## Coffee House sessions help youth mental health

By Mike Riley

On Feb. 22 and 23, Youth2Youth Hastings Prince Edward, put on two virtual coffee house sessions to help young people with any mental health issues they may be struggling with as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The first two Coffee House sessions, thought up by Youth2Youth ambassadors Kyrstin Gordon, Gabrielle Sheridan and Melissa McKnight, focused on self care and were a big success. Two more Coffee House sessions were also held on March 8 and 9. These last two sessions were focused on stigma and mindfulness.

Youth2Youth HPE is a group led by youth to spark innovative thinking and work with community leaders in the creation of solutions to problems affecting today's youth. Youth2Youth HPE runs under the umbrella of the United Way HPE. Jodi Cooper, the director of community impact with the United Way HPE, says that Youth2Youth HPE works with local youth, non-profit organizations and the broader community to create new resources and experiences for youth so they have a chance to succeed.

"In order to create change for youth, we need them to lead the initiatives that address the issues that they care about. We focus on key youth issues that empower youth and encourage them to take a leading role in grassroots change," she says.

The Coffee House sessions, also called Mugs and Emotions, focus on self-care, and ran on Feb. 22 from 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. for youth ages 12 years to 16 years, and on Feb. 23 from 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. for youth ages 17 years to 24 years. They were the idea of the three Youth2Youth ambassadors; Gordon, Sheridan and McKnight. Gordon and Sheridan are second year students at Loyalist College in the Child and Youth Care program, while McKnight was, but has taken a year off to work full-time.

Gordon, Sheridan and McKnight got into Youth2Youth when Kaitlyn Lalonde, the Youth2Youth coordinator, came in and talked to one of their classes about the organization and what it does. They subsequently applied to do their placements with Youth2Youth virtually.

According to Cooper, the girls worked for several months to develop a model that was supportive, inclusive and safe. They also partnered with Brittany Thompson from the Enrichment Centre for Mental Health to help build the model. The Enrichment Centre for Mental Health in Belleville is a non-profit agency that through direct services, education, advocacy and consumer involvement enhance mental wellness and quality of life in their community. Thompson will also attend each session as both guest speaker and as counseling support.

"As much as we are passionate about mental health and we were part of CYC, we needed someone with more of a professional background to help us make sure we were covering all the bases," said Gordon.

For the March Coffee House sessions, Alicia Preston from Mindful Roots will be the guest speaker. Lalonde helped the girls secure the services of Thompson and Preston for the coffee house sessions.

"As coordinator, my job is to work as an ally for the group and to help them implement their incredible ideas. They had someone in mind, but it didn't work out. So, I helped them network with the community and Brittany [Thompson] was more than willing to help out. It's been incredible," she says.

Youth2Youth is best known so far for creating two successful youth summits in the area, engaging over 300 youth in conversations and solutions to issues important to them, according to Cooper. In addition to the Coffee House sessions for February and March, Youth2Youth will be hosting its third speed friending event sometime this spring. Cooper says that they've already held two very successful speed friending sessions to connect youth and help them make friends during the pandemic.

The first two Coffee House sessions went really well.

?It was really intimate, really fun. There was a lot of engagement and a lot of really good feedback. They really seemed to enjoy themselves so we were really happy with that,? said Sheridan.

Two more Coffee House sessions were held on March 8 and 9, and focused on the topics of stigma and mindfulness. McKnight said that after these sessions, they were going to gauge changes they can make and different topics they'll choose for later sessions.

?We kind of want to stay broad but specific, so it's kind of hard to think about. We would love to do more, it's just working it out,? she says.

Gordon says that doing more Coffee House sessions has definitely been discussed.

?The option has been opened up to us by Kaitlyn and Jodi [Cooper]. The three of us are super passionate about mental health, as we have our own personal experiences with it, within ourselves and within our close circles. So if we wanted to do more we can, but we don't have to if we want to stick with the four of them,? she says. ?It'll just come down to scheduling and something that fits in those lines.?