

Graffiti artist encourages kids to 'keep it real'?



Nicholas Lynch learns spray paint technique with motivational speaker Laura Bronson, who tagged the message of "Keep it Real," on a mural at North Hastings Children's Services. Sarah Vance Special to This Week

By Sarah Vance

Over the past week, local schools, as well as Bancroft's Early Years Centre, played host to motivational speaker and graffiti artist Laura Bronson. Bronson is the director of Keep It Real, representing skaters and graffiti artists who are 'encouraging youth to be real.'

Bronson's multimedia presentation included messages of hope for children who may struggle to fit into traditional educational and social models. It also includes a skateboarding demonstration.

'Do you know why I went to school?' she asked kids. 'Recess...I went to school for recess, because we could just chill.' Now Bronson strives to teach leadership and identify social supports in a way that promotes a sense of belonging.

On Saturday, Youth Advisory Board members joined Bronson at the Childcare Centre to spray-paint a mural with Laura's 'Keep It Real' tag.

'Young people are identifying a need for graffiti walls locally,' said North Hastings Children's Centre executive director Jessica Anderson. 'They are speaking to ways they are being used in other communities.' North Hastings Children's Services acts as a hub for families, providing support through programs for parents and children up to the age of 12. NHCS started the Youth Advisory Board about a year and a half ago to provide a new voice for area young people.

One of the youth board's initiatives was a survey of youth opinion, as part of a Safer and Vital Communities project. Data from the survey of approximately 100 adolescents shows that only approximately half of them feel welcome in their town. One in five feels that there's a pronounced lack of local activities for young people. This in turn leads to public complaints about youth loitering and vandalism.

Accordingly, the advisory board has intentionally sought to create sites for activities and learning during evenings and weekends. A recent initiative was their 'beating boredom' project to identify local youth-friendly venues.