

Summit empowers youth to take action for change



Some of the youth and their adult mentors who travelled on the bus from Bancroft to the Youth Summit on Sept. 29. / NATE SMELLE Special to This Week

By Nate Smelle

More than 150 youth from throughout Hastings County converged on the recreation complex in Tyendinaga Township on Friday, Sept. 29 for the area's first ever youth summit.

The morning session was highlighted by a keynote address from motivational speaker Ryan Porter that focused on youth empowerment, engagement, volunteerism and helping youth develop the skills they need to get involved in their communities. After lunch, the youth broke off into smaller focus groups to engage in a conversation facilitated by experts in each of the eight areas of concern determined by the youth themselves. The issues the youth identified as being of greatest importance include: the environment, youth poverty, gender equity and diversity, sexual education and substance abuse, mental health, social media, filling community gaps and economic development/entrepreneurship.

As the lead youth member on the summit planning committee, Maddison Ellis played a key role in organizing the event. She said the idea of having youth in Hastings County organize a summit focused on the issues that matter to them, came to her after attending an OMAFRA conference in Stratford last summer while she was working as an intern for Hastings County.

Ellis said what made this summit different from the one she attended in Stratford was that it was organized primarily by youth. In a nutshell, she said the summit was intended to bring youth together to identify problems plaguing their communities, and to help them come up with creative and innovative solutions to these issues.

"We want to give youth a platform to have their voices be heard," said Ellis. "This is really day one of a long-term plan. It's a starting point to get the conversation started. We're not sure exactly what's going to come out of it, but the youth are going to tell us what direction they want to go in."

Having recently completed her master's degree in public administration after earning an undergraduate degree in sociology at Trent University in Peterborough, Ellis plans to pursue a career shaping and implementing policy for the government. She said the large turnout and the level of engagement the youth demonstrated at the summit far exceeded the organizing committee's expectations.

"A lot of people overlook youth," Ellis explained. "They might think that youth don't have anything to add or contribute but they do, and this is the venue to do it. This is going to make them feel empowered and motivated to speak their minds and share what they have to say."

As one of the elected officials working with the planning committee to organize the summit, Bancroft's youth liaison Councillor Bill Kilpatrick was up before sunrise to catch the bus with the youth attending the summit from Bancroft. Kilpatrick said one of the most important things for the organizers was to ensure that the summit was truly a youth-led initiative, planned and implemented by the youth themselves.

He said the organizing committee surveyed over 200 young people to find out which topics they believed needed to be discussed. From there, he said the youth could establish an action plan of tangible things that they could do to make those action plans a reality. Reflecting on the summit afterwards Kilpatrick said, "The biggest outcome from the summit is that through

networking, discussion, and planning, the youth come away with a sense of empowerment and go back to their communities and implement them. Furthermore, through their actions inspire other youths and adults to take actions of their own. The fact alone that over 150 young people give up their first PA Day of the school year was inspiring in itself and shows a concern, dedication and commitment that these young people have to boldly tackle some very difficult issues that currently face the world they are inheriting. For me, they inspired hope for our collective future.?

Sam Riedl of Bancroft has been working with Kilpatrick and the youth summit planning committee for the past six months to make the most of this unique opportunity for local youth. Beaming with enthusiasm as he helped the crew of volunteers and his fellow organizers clean up after the summit, Riedl shared his enthusiasm to work with the newly formed youth network to change communities throughout Hastings County for the better. Now that the first step has been taken, he said he is excited to see where the next steps lead.

?I would like to see everyone here go home, go online, and Facebook message every single person that they met here today and say what the heck are we going to do now? That's the only way something is going to get done. We spend so much time waiting for somebody else to do what we want to do, which is not okay. It's really just dependent on people getting their butts in gear. I want to see the youth here go out and make that change. What this means is that we can now start getting people to take those first steps to make the change they want to make.?