

Youth Action Now – From Dreams to Reality

In a country as culturally diverse as Canada, finding ways to explore common values and aspirations presents a challenge. Canadians whose families have passed on pride in their cultural heritage have added a dimension of richness to their children's lives; but often people outside the culture have no way of sharing that richness. Other Canadians have had the experience of losing their cultural memory over time; or worse, because they have suffered discrimination, they are ashamed or unable to tap into their cultural legacies.

The benefits of learning about other cultures go far beyond social stability: A recent study by researchers at Stanford University demonstrates the positive impact on creative thinking among groups of racially diverse college students and among those who report having friends and classmates from other cultural backgrounds [Antonio et al 2004]. Hope for such learning is on the horizon in Saskatchewan – the land of living skies – where youth are soon to begin a unique cultural dialogue.

A two-year project called “Youth Action Now” (YAN) is creating opportunities for Saskatchewan youth between the ages of 15 and 30 to celebrate or re-learn their cultural background and to experience and adopt aspects of other cultures. At the same time, the project is asking young people

what they think about multiculturalism and its place in their lives. In so doing, Youth Action Now is presenting the cultural threads from which to weave a pattern for a future which is culturally rich and mutually respectful.

Saskatchewan is the ideal setting to pilot test a project like Youth Action Now. The provincial government has made a firm commitment to its young people – to retain them in the province and to listen to them. Saskatchewan's relatively small population (less than one million) makes it easier to spread the message about a new initiative and the cultural mix of its residents is as diverse as almost any other province in the country.

Perhaps because of its proportionately large Aboriginal and Ukrainian populations and its agricultural heritage, many in the province feel a strong tie with the land and, through that tie, an awareness that everyone's actions affect everyone else. In addition, the province's youth are used to taking the initiative for setting up projects. Programs such as *Street Culture Kidz Regina* [Simpson 2000], *Saskatchewan Youth Network Against Racism* and *Working, Living and Playing Together*¹ have depended on the energy and interest of youth to address social conditions; initiatives like these helped prepare the ground for YAN.

The idea for Youth Action Now grew from discussions organized by the Ukrainian Canadian Congress – Saskatchewan Provincial Council (UCC-SPC) and the Multicultural Council of Saskatchewan (MCoS). Both of these groups wanted to address the issue of youth out-migration using the theme of multiculturalism as a starting point. Their goal was to work toward implementing change at the policy level to make the province

more attractive to youth while highlighting the multicultural make-up of its communities.

For more than a century, Ukrainian Canadians have contributed to the life of our communities and they also have experienced discrimination. They take great pride in the efforts of Senator Paul Yuzyk, whose maiden speech in the Senate in 1964 began the drive to develop Canada's Multi-

One man's story

Lorin Gardypie was 6 when he was removed from his Aboriginal community and sent to a residential school where he remained until the age of 16. Though he is thankful that the experience took him away from a community rife with alcohol, violence and neglect, it offered only a rigid, rule-bound existence which provided no emotional support or spiritual guidance. He was not allowed to speak his native Cree or celebrate his heritage in any way; his one emotional outlet came through sport. When Lorin left school, his dream to become a professional soccer player was cut short by the racial discrimination demonstrated by a provincial coach.

For several years, Lorin played soccer for money for teams in western Canada. He moved to Alberta and his life gradually became taken over by alcohol, drugs and violence. In his mid-20s, he had a spiritual awakening while attending a North American indigenous games event in Minnesota. Says Lorin: "The athletes were parading in front of a crowd of more than 4,000 Aboriginal people from across the continent, and a man in traditional regalia stopped in front of the reviewing stand and proudly lifted his eagle staff. I had never seen a traditional dancer and I felt the hair lift across the back of my neck. I knew at that moment that I belonged to these people, that I wanted to be a dancer and that I had to change my life."

Lorin returned to Saskatchewan and began to follow the Pow Wow Trail,² watching and learning the dance traditions of his people. "The pow wow is a celebration of life," says Lorin. "You must dance with a good heart, good intentions and growing humbleness. We believe that we are able to heal ourselves and those we think about when we are dancing." In 2003, Lorin was hired to be the dance program coordinator for Wanuskewin Heritage Park, a national historic site which preserves the heritage, culture and lifestyle of the Northern Plains Cree. Today, at the age of 34, he balances his Wanuskewin responsibilities with his commitment to the Pow Wow Trail. He agreed to perform for a Youth Action Now event in Regina, and once he met the coordinators and the youth who were being trained as project leaders, he accepted the invitation to work as a YAN advisory committee member. Focusing on the life-affirming aspects of his own culture has helped Lorin to turn his life around, and he is eager to share that message with young people.

Says Lorin: "When I attended a cross-cultural YAN gathering in northern Saskatchewan, I learned a lot about the beliefs and traditions of other cultural groups. That kind of exposure helped me to respect the way others work in society. This project is also an excellent opportunity to help youth who are fighting discrimination. I want to inspire people to search for their identity and their culture because it will help them to discover who they are, where they came from and where they're going."

culturalism Act. YAN will allow Saskatchewan's young people to expand on Senator Yuzyk's legacy by exploring the cultural values that lie at the heart of what it means to be Canadian.

Says Wade Luzny, General Manager of MCoS: "Our youth have a different sense of what the word multiculturalism means than did their parents and grandparents, and our thinking needs to evolve along with them. When new Canadians arrive, it is vitally important to them that they pass their cultural heritage along to their children. Over successive generations, however, people begin to pick and choose the aspects of culture they will adopt. Given the wide selection of cultural influences in Canada, youth are adopting those pieces of culture – music, art, dance, sport, business – that fit their personal passions. It's no less multi-

cultural, but it's eclectic and fluid, in contrast to the 1970s definition which suggests that every national identity will remain discrete and static."

In addition to asking youth to define more fully their understanding and experience of culture, YAN organizers are hoping that participants will gain a sense of their own ability to bring about change, and of the importance of volunteering their time to multicultural causes and organizations. Says Danylo Puderak, Executive Director of the UCC-SCC: "YAN is about making connections – not only between people of different cultures but also between young people and their own cultural backgrounds. The YAN vision is that every young person has a future in a multicultural Saskatchewan and a diverse Canada."



Lorin Gardypie performs a sneak-up dance at the Youth Action Now project launch at Michael A. Riffel High School in Regina.

Getting started

In January 2004, funds from the Department of Canadian Heritage and support from UCC-SPC and MCoS got the project on its feet. Victoria Morris and Lee Reaney, the project's two staff coordinators, have plugged into a wide variety of youth and educational networks to build a 12-member volunteer advisory committee and a team of 25 youth leaders. Advisory committee members are continually on the look out for ways to involve youth from their own cultural backgrounds and personal networks, and they have provided ideas and feedback which will help keep the project on track. The youth leaders will spend the fall and winter of 2004-05 organizing and facilitating 19 youth forums. These will be held at high schools, colleges and universities, and cultural centres across the province.

Forums will reach a maximum of 120 people at one time. Each one will be split into three sections to assess youth awareness of Saskatchewan's cultural mosaic, encourage learning about culture on a global level and connect youth with their own and other cultures. Says Victoria: "Essentially, the project is looking at multicultural awareness and its impact on employment, cultural and other opportunities. We want youth to look at what's currently happening, what's working well and what can be done to make Saskatchewan more prosperous and more culturally vibrant."

"We hope to reach about 2,000 people through the forums and another 2,000 through a survey instrument," says Victoria. "The specifics of how we will gather, report and summarize the information are still in the design stage. By the fall, we will have prepared and tested a forum format and the survey will be ready to implement. We're finalizing an overall communication strategy, refining our project website, choosing forum sites and preparing for a fall meeting with the province's Youth Advisory Committee. It's been a busy summer!"

Once the forums and surveys have been completed, the information will be summarized and presented at "The Gathering" – a May 2005 event at which youth, community, education, business, government and multicultural leaders will discuss the recommendations which have been brought forward. The Gathering will coincide with Saskatchewan's centennial celebrations in 2005, and its goal is to formulate a "Blueprint for Action" – the public unveiling of ideas which will increase youth connections to, and awareness of, opportunities related to multiculturalism and broadened global perspectives. In the last six months of 2005, Saskatchewan youth will bring the project full circle by undertaking their own initiatives based on the recommendations of the Blueprint for Action and, with the assistance of some project funding from Youth Action Now, a chance to turn multicultural dreams into the reality of community projects.

Not all smooth sailing

Flo Frank, a community and youth training consultant, was hired to conduct 'train the trainer' workshops with Youth Action Now's community facilitators. She helped articulate the group's basic understanding that "Martin Luther King had a dream about equality, Pierre Elliot Trudeau had a vision for the future of Canada's youth and we – the young people of Saskatchewan – have a plan."

At the introductory training session, there were 20 different ethnic groups represented among the 25 trainees. The excitement and enthusiasm of working with one another was clouded initially by minor frictions over differences in age, school background and abilities. Says Flo: "It was better to begin by having everyone discuss their backgrounds and experience, since they all live with racism and multiculturalism every day. Some of the participants mentioned that they were a bit ashamed of their cultures or of the fact that their parents and grandparents had not yet learned to

“speak English. Some were dealing with the pain of watching their multigeneration family farms being sold. Still others were rebelling against their own culture’s expectations of what kinds of work they should do and what kind of life they should live.”

Throughout the training sessions, project leader Ryan Boyko, 24, was sensitive to the needs of youth who have not bought into the importance of culture in their lives. At 15, Ryan could not have cared less about his Ukrainian heritage, and had yet to see the value of building community and breaking down cross-cultural barriers. Today, he runs his own disc jockey business, participates in drama and theatre, and is more involved in his Ukrainian community. Says Ryan: “I felt that Youth Action Now had to speak up for the kids like me – the ones who would go to a forum to skip class and who wouldn’t take the messages seriously. Not everyone has the proud family and

cultural traditions that I’ve grown up around, and I worked to make sure that we kept thinking about the kids who might feel like outsiders. Many young people want to be involved, but they don’t know where to start. The thing that will make YAN successful is that it will really be listening to youth – not telling and teaching them. We’ll use a lot of humour to convey the message that we’re about youth helping youth. We’ll be asking for the participants’ opinions and we’ll transfer their thoughts to people in power who make the decisions.”

Over the three training weekends, participants learned more about their own culture, Saskatchewan and the wider world. While many were concerned with practical realities like employment, they also were developing their understanding of cultural diversity and discrimination and how these factors influence the



YAN Project leaders group shot – Victoria Morris is at 3 o'clock, Ryan Boyko is next to her in the Mobile Monkey sweatshirt.

social and economic fabric of Saskatchewan. They understood that if they remained open to one another culturally, they could create a more welcoming, supportive society. Many expressed the concern that Canada is becoming a muddy mixture of cultural assimilation where no one's uniqueness is preserved or celebrated. Says Flo: "There was a wonderful young energy in the recognition of how things are working now and the realization that how we shape things today will affect how they grow in the future. Each participant has a vested interest in the outcome of this work."

The success of Saskatchewan's YAN project may provide a template which other provinces and territories can adopt. Says Bob Friedrich of Canadian Heritage: "The Youth Action Now project is the culmination of work done by the Department of Canadian Heritage dating back to 2000 with the national youth "Stop Racism Tour" and the International Youth Conference the Department initiated at Expo 2000. As a project officer working with youth, I felt it imperative that the department continue the work of helping youth discover the value of Canada's multicultural heritage as well as enable them to take action locally to ensure that Canada is a place that respects diversity."

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul coordinates the community stories series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

Victoria Morris may be contacted at Victoria@youthactionnow.ca or by phone at (306) 652-0961.

Bob Friedrich, Project Officer, Multiculturalism, Canadian Heritage may be contacted at bob_friedrich@pch.gc.ca or by phone at (306) 780-7295.

Danylo Puderak, Executive Director of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress – Saskatchewan Provincial Council, may be contacted at

danylo.puderak@ucc.sk.ca or by phone at (306) 652-5850.

Wade Luzny, General Manager of the Multicultural Council of Saskatchewan, may be contacted at wluzny@accesscomm.ca or by phone at (306) 721-2767.

Endnotes

1. For more information on Street Culture Kidz Regina, visit: <http://www.thecircuit.org/main.cfm?function=showcontent&contentid=1878&page=5>
The Working, Living and Playing Together website is at: http://www.ersr.org/html_site/index2.html

2. The Pow Wow Trail refers to the weekly series of pow wows that are held across the continent to celebrate indigenous culture. These are sacred events where musicians and dancers come to share their gifts and compete for prize money. The hosting community fundraises throughout the year to cover operation and competition costs. Julia White has written a book called *The Pow Wow Trail* – for more information on this resource, visit: <http://www.powersource.com/gallery/powwow/default.html>

References

Antonio, A., M. Chang, K. Hakuta, D. Kenny, S. Levin, and J. Milem. (2004). "Effects of Racial Diversity on Complex Thinking in College Students." *Psychological Science*, 15(8): 507-510.

Simpson, A. (2000). *Street Culture Kidz*. Ottawa: National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, October.

© 2004 by The Caledon Institute of Social Policy

1600 Scott Street, Suite 620
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1Y 4N7
Phone: (613) 729-3340 Fax: (613) 729-3896
e-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org
website: www.caledoninst.org

Caledon publications are available on our website.