

Hamilton Youth Arts Network: Voice, Space, Issues

This story describes a community-based initiative designed by members and groups affiliated with the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR), a Vibrant Communities convener organization. There are more than 150 such initiatives linked to the Roundtable. HRPR is a cross-sectoral community problem-solving table with a strategic focus on poverty and the aspiration of “making Hamilton the best place to raise a child.”

Challenges to arts participation

For children in the school system and for adults with sufficient means, Hamilton provides many opportunities for creative self-expression. Marginalized youth, however, encounter barriers to developing their creative sensibilities, including ageism and lack of financial and creative opportunities. In addition, most Hamilton arts groups meet downtown in the City’s core. Youth without means, including those who live on the street and in outlying neighbourhoods, may be unaware of such groups or unable to access them.

Philanthropic organizations recognize the importance of art as a medium for expression and community involvement, and have made youth engagement a funding focus in recent years. Many street involved youth and those with difficult home lives lack the tools and skills necessary to respond to requests for proposals, but with the right combination of leadership and guidance, they can join communities of support. Finding ways to link youth to caring adults, introduce them to artists and involve them in artistic opportunities are three areas of work recently undertaken by members of the Hamilton arts community.

Artistic aspirations

Mike Des Jardins is Program Coordinator for a collaborative initiative led by the YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington called Youth Engagement and Action in Hamilton (YEAH). In 2006, YEAH

community partners, including the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, started thinking in a more focused way about youth engagement projects, thanks to a J.W. McConnell Family Foundation call for proposals. Some 300 youth were consulted in preparation for the proposal submission. It became clear that they were looking for three things: an opportunity to have a voice, space – virtual and physical – and the chance to become involved in important social issues. Though YEAH was unsuccessful in its McConnell bid, a one-year Hamilton Community Foundation grant provided funding for Mike to engage these young people in the work of tackling poverty. Voice, space and issues continued to be important guiding principles for youth engagement.

After working on several poverty reduction projects and continuing to track needs of youth, Mike learned that the most important success ingredient for engagement was to let youth direct their own activities. In January 2008, YEAH and the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre organized a meeting to talk about youth arts programming gaps in Hamilton. They invited youth, members of the arts community and youth-serving professionals from recreation, health and educational institutions. After providing contact names and offering to promote whatever activities youth decided to pursue, the professionals moved aside and allowed the artists and youth the freedom to direct this newly-formed group, the Hamilton Youth Arts Network (HYAN).

HYAN's goal is to build a community collaborative that will work toward improving the number, quality and accessibility of opportunities for youth participation and involvement in the arts. It is currently funded by the McMaster Museum of Art, Arts Hamilton, REcreate Outreach Art Studio, Community Centre for Media Arts and The Factory: Hamilton Media Arts Centre.

HYAN now counts 150 youth on its FaceBook page. Ten to 20 others participate in project work and a further 20 and 30 do project work and attend HYAN meetings. The Hamilton arts community is an equal partner in the organization, but it is owned by youth; any arts community group or person is allowed to engage in its work. Says Mike: "It may look like HYAN is a service delivery agency, but we're actually the complete opposite. The organization and funding act as the soil for projects, but youth are the seeds."

Initiatives to date

In July 2008, a group of young people submitted a proposal to the City of Hamilton for the support of a youth-led public art mural. They wished to paint a mural on a graffiti-covered pedestrian underpass adjacent to a well-used transit station. As part of their proposal process, they undertook a 12-hour community consultation, talking to 217 underpass users and passersby about their impressions of the space and taking note of design suggestions. Mike helped with the proposal wording and final submission, and spent time educating youth about municipal decision-making processes. Says Mike: "Initially, we received positive feedback from the City's arts advisory committee and Director of Culture despite the fact that our proposal ran counter to the usual way of doing business. Ordinarily, citizens do not submit unsolicited project ideas. We received approval for the mural in mid-August and will shortly be discussing our launch date."

A second project saw HYAN revamp the 20-year-old City of Hamilton's Youth Arts Awards program. The old process asked high school art teachers to suggest award candidates, but this excluded youth who were not engaged in the educational system. The newer selection process will include a community-wide call for submissions, and winners will be chosen by a panel of five youth.

Mike also hopes that new gallery space belonging to Hamilton Artists Inc. will provide youth the opportunity to collect and curate art. HYAN members helped lead in the development of the proposal for space in the new gallery, which is scheduled to open in 2011. In the area of arts education, the McMaster University Fine Arts faculty and McMaster Museum of Art have loaned university students to mentor youth. This type of mutually enriching relationship creates strong bonds among younger members of the artistic community, and provides education and career direction for youth.

*Guiding principles for working with youth**

- *voice, space and issues: youth strive for high ideals*
Youth in Hamilton identified poverty and discrimination as their two top social issues. Many have personal experience with both and want to be involved in building solutions.
- *follow the interests of youth*
Creativity and energy are resources that youth possess in abundance – tap them!
- *youth want to be heard and understood*
Respecting people's need to understand how things work – e.g., government funding mechanisms – creates understanding and opens the doors to new ways of thinking.
- *take the necessary time*
Accept the fact that tasks may take three times longer if you let youth assume ownership of them, but it's the only way to go.
- *engagement is an ongoing process*
Continue to reach out to other marginalized groups – Aboriginal, immigrant, queer and transgendered youth.
- *support youth fully: lead from behind*
Harm can be done when adults take over and ask for recognition. Respect the fact that youth will take the work in new, uncharted directions – that is the gift they have to offer.

**These principles were articulated by Mike Des Jardins during a telephone interview.*

Areas to grow

Hamilton Community Foundation's youth engagement funding finished at the end of August 2008. YEAH has since received an additional HCF grant to provide foundational support around youth engagement in target neighbourhoods throughout Hamilton. YEAH has also submitted a three-year proposal to the Ontario Trillium Foundation. If financing can be secured, HYAN members plan to broaden their visual and community art focus to include literacy, photography and graffiti arts. One such project might come as a result of the fact that Hamilton Street Railway and City representatives – concerned about the graffiti which covers transit shelters – want to demonstrate legitimate ways for art to be recognized.

Says Mike: "We hope to inspire artistic youth in Hamilton to see the arts as a creative and career area. HYAN has given its members the chance to blend as a group and learn how to navigate societal institutions. They are beginning to understand that they can tell funders why arts initiatives are important and that talking to government is important. With every project, they have demonstrated that youth in the arts should be supported. For its part, the City's desire to make its youth arts award program more inclusive and its recent decision to fund the underpass mural project are examples of changing attitudes."

Mike is also inundated by requests from community organizations to find out how they can include youth in their operations. Impersonal jobs like handing out promotional fliers can become opportunities to teach young people about organizational issues and goals. Instead of setting up tables, youth can be invited to introduce visit guests and thank speakers. Says Mike: "Every organization has existing limitations and they may not have the capacity or desire to become youth-led. Our goal is to convince institutions and organizations that it is safe and rewarding to give youth ownership of project work and to look for new ways to harness their enthusiasm and energy. YEAH has focused on the arts, but the possibilities for including youth in environment, transportation, government, health and business issues present exciting possibilities."

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