

StepStones for Youth: Community and Caring

By Heather O'Keefe, Executive Director, StepStones for Youth

Who We Are

StepStones for Youth is a registered charitable organization, developed in 2004 in response to the critical need for preventative intervention programs for vulnerable young people in the inner suburbs and inner city of the Greater Toronto Area. Our subsidized programs are designed to foster personal and social development, leadership, life skills and resilience in youth. Our mission is to address a significant gap in Ontario's social welfare system by providing a safe and ongoing support network for the province's most vulnerable youth – those who have experienced trauma, abuse and inconsistent guardian care, and particularly, youth leaving the foster care system. StepStones for Youth currently offers innovative skill development programming and support for children and young adults who are considered at-risk through our Life Skills Focused Summer Camp and SPIRIT Mentoring and Community Bridges Program.

How We Support Youth

It is widely known that, in comparison with the general population, youth who experience trauma and abuse are less successful in education attainment, at greater risk of poverty and ill health, and are more susceptible to criminal involvement. Despite increasing awareness and attempts to rectify this discrepancy, children with histories of trauma continue to be at risk. StepStones for Youth's Life Skills Focused Summer Camp Program is one of the only residential summer camp programs in the province that provides skill development opportunities for girls who have suffered trauma and abuse. Our summer camp, which has been operating for eight years, offers girls age 6 to 14 years a nine-day camping experience on the shores

StepStones aims to help children and young people build and strengthen skills for life so that they can be optimistic in their educational, academic and employment pursuits.

of Georgian Bay. Every summer, we provide programming for over 100 girls from the most needy areas of Toronto. Girls who attend StepStones' summer camp have opportunities to build skills in literacy, swimming, canoeing, arts, dance, robotics, photography, social justice, environmental education and conflict resolution. Our skill-development based programming invites campers to enhance their interests and abilities, and build self-esteem while experiencing the wonders of camp.

In partnership with Pelletier Youth in Transition, StepStones is similarly determined to bolster skill development and self-confidence in youth leaving the foster care system (one of Ontario's most underserved communities) through our SPIRIT Mentoring Program. Current research suggests that trauma, abuse and frequent moves through schools, families and communities result in youth in care being left behind, ill equipped for the demands of adulthood. For instance, whereas 81 per cent of all Ontario youth graduate from high school, only 44 per cent of youth in Ontario's foster care system reach this milestone. Furthermore, 68 per cent of homeless youth

have been in foster homes or groups homes.¹ These statistics reflect an urgent need for preventative intervention.

Celebrating Diversity

One of our strengths as an organization, which has undoubtedly contributed to the success of our youth, is our commitment to celebrating diversity and difference. In all facets of our organization – staff, participants, volunteers, program curriculum, and community partnerships – StepStones is inclusive and diverse in nature. Many of the youth that we service are newcomers to Canada; they bring a broad range of cultural traditions and customs, which are shared and embraced in our camp setting and SPIRIT program. In both of our programs, StepStones is intentional about providing space and opportunities for learning about diversity and difference.

StepStones' SPIRIT Mentoring Program is focused on celebrating diversity, as it services a community of youth that is inherently marginalized. The program is designed to assist youth involved in Ontario's foster care system, many of whom are from different countries, with varied cultures, languages and religions. The cultural diversity of our SPIRIT youth population is fully reflected in our mentor group as well as our network of volunteers. In pairing youth with mentors, we endeavour to accommodate language barriers and support cultural and religious backgrounds. The skill-based curriculum for our SPIRIT program is designed to encourage youth to learn about social justice and embrace diversity, and we frequently invite guest speakers and organize community excursions so that youth can embrace these values in an experiential setting.

Similarly, StepStones' Life Skills Focused Summer Camp curriculum is purposefully focused on promoting diversity and social justice, as these principles foster understanding, acceptance and mutual respect, which, similar to life skills development, will ultimately enhance the lives and experience of the girls and young women who attend. Girls are invited to share their experiences and celebrate difference in our book club, where they select, read and discuss novels featuring female protagonists from various cultural backgrounds. Although our camp is non-denominational, we encourage campers to learn about different religious backgrounds and spirituality. For instance, given that our campgrounds are situated on Ojibwa land, we deem it important to explain the historical relevance and recognize native traditions by sharing the creation story of Turtle Island and inviting elders from the local Anishinabe community to deliver workshops on native spirituality. Through these and other such teaching and learning experiences in our art, music and life skills programming, StepStones encourages campers to embrace social justice and cultural diversity.

In each of our programs, StepStones aims to help children and young people build and strengthen skills for life so that they can be optimistic in their educational, academic and employment pursuits. As an organization committed to helping youth succeed, we recognize that the principals of respect, tolerance and understanding are the foundations upon which life skills and learning can be developed. We endeavour to instill within each of our participants an understanding and appreciation for diversity as they seek out their path for growth, potential and success in life.

For more information about StepStones for Youth, visit www.stepstonesforyouth.com or call 416-893-5196.

1. My REAL Life Book: Report from the Youth Leaving Care Hearings. Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth May 2012



Do you know an impressive young student ready to inspire action?

If you spot potential, we'd like you to refer an exceptional high school student to a St. Jerome's University undergraduate program. You'll be maintaining the SJU reputation and inviting others to share in it:

Visit sju.ca/connect/refer-student to introduce a student today!

UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

SJU
St. Jerome's University
Established in 1865
Co-founder of the University of Waterloo

Please support the advertisers that make this publication possible.

OMWA 46 YEARS

Ontario Municipal Water Association

OMWA offers up to 4 bursaries of \$500.00 each to students who are residents of Ontario and registered at an Ontario Community College in a program such as environmental technology or resource management that could lead to a career in the water supply industry. Details are on the OMWA website at omwa.org, under About OMWA.

Contact Us
Ontario Municipal Water Association (OMWA)
Ken Graham, President
Douglas Parker, Executive Director

For more information regarding our Annual Bursary Program
OMWA c/o Douglas Parker, 43 Chelsea Crescent, Belleville, ON, K8N 4Z5
(613) 966-1100 • Toll-free 1-888-231-1115 • Fax (613) 966-3024
www.omwa.org • E-mail: dparker@omwa.org