

Rural Youth in Action



Lessons in Community Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

As part of the Government of Canada's efforts to continue the dialogue with youth, the 2003 National Rural Youth Conference *Young Canadians, Leaders of Today and Tomorrow* was held in Orillia/Ramara, Ontario from May 2–4, 2003.

This event brought together over 60 young Canadians (between the ages of 18 to 29) from rural, remote and northern communities across the country. The conference gave participants a valuable opportunity to discuss their roles as innovators and develop strategies, skills and tools to strengthen their leadership within their communities. The main topics of discussion at the conference were “Innovation,” “Partnerships” and “Entrepreneurship.”

To participate in the 2003 National Rural Youth Conference, delegates were asked to prepare and submit a brief project proposal outlining a community issue that they felt was important and one they would propose to become involved within their own community. Youth were asked to be innovative in their proposals and present their own ideas to address their chosen issue. The projects could be new or existing initiatives as long as they had a community focus and were carried forward in an innovative way.

Participants were also asked to find a mentor from their community who would offer guidance on their projects and help to apply the skills and tools they acquired during the conference.

Finally, youth were asked to report back on their projects and share their experiences.

Rural Youth in Action: Lessons in Community Leadership highlights the successes of these young leaders, as well as the difficulties they faced and overcame. It's hoped that other youth from across Canada may apply these lessons as they carry out their own community projects. It also includes useful tips on mentorship, funding and promotion, and features detailed descriptions of two projects and interviews with the proponents.

This publication is based on anecdotal information from youth project participants, as well as other rural youth who are active in their communities. It is a reflection of their experiences and views alone, and includes insight into their interactions with mentors and other individuals in their community who were involved in the projects.

BACKGROUND

Before they began their community projects, the participants were asked to consider what issues their project would address, and the potential benefits for their community. This resulted in projects that focused on youth becoming more involved in their communities, by working toward the construction of a needed facility or building a greater sense of goodwill and community esteem, among many others.

Overall, the participants gained valuable insight into the process of seeing a community project through its initial stages, with many achieving overall success as the project reached either a conclusion or continued as an ongoing community service. They overwhelmingly reported that the process helped both youth and other community members, while many also pointed out to the lifelong skills they learned in all aspects of the project's development. One of the most successful aspects of this process was the relationship that many developed with their mentors, who often provided not only a voice of support, but offered valuable advice as well.

Challenges were certainly part of the process as well. Not all projects ran as smoothly as others, while some projects had to be modified from the original vision. Various challenges ranged from such things as securing timely funding, finding enthusiastic partners, balancing work and school, or simply knowing what forms had to be filled out and when. These are not to be seen as shortcomings. Instead, they are valuable lessons that can be considered when other Canadians develop their own community projects in the future.

I. A COMMUNITY FOCUS

So how did the community react to the projects launched by these youth? Were they helpful? Were they receptive? What kind of support did the participants receive? Here is what they found:

“Traditional leaders and older members of the community have been very supportive and receptive since both groups agree that investing in our youth is also investing in building stronger communities.”

— Brian Gignac
(Project: Electronic Employers’ Directory, Quebec)

“Business relationships were established between them (community members) regardless of age gaps.”

— Félix Bussière
(Project: Réseau des jeunes entrepreneurs en agroalimentaire (RJE)
[Young Agri-Food Entrepreneurs’ Network], Ontario)

II. MENTORING

As part of their original proposals, the participants were asked to identify a mentor to help them meet their project objectives. The idea is that the act of mentoring is a collaborative, mutually beneficial partnership between a mentor (who has greater skills, knowledge or experience) and a mentee (who is looking to enhance his or her knowledge, skills and experience).

When examining the results of the completed projects, the mentorship experience was overwhelmingly positive. Many of the participants indicated that not only were their projects launched with the help of a mentor, but that the mentor could often be counted upon to give advice on how to pilot the project when waters got rough.

“My mentor made it possible for me to develop my project and advised me on several occasions. She’s involved in community economic development, and was able to guide me in making the right decisions and teach me about the realities facing certain rural communities.”

— Marie-Eve LaRocque
(Project: Prospective Jeunesse, Ontario)

“Proceed with a substantial part of the work alone and then show it to the mentor from time to time for feedback and assistance in directing the project. You should see the mentor as a resource person. Do not do all the work with him or her because you need to develop a sense of initiative.”

— Félix Bussière
(Project: Réseau des jeunes entrepreneurs en agroalimentaire (RJE)
[Young Agri-Food Entrepreneurs’ Network], Ontario)

III. FUNDING

One of the most difficult tasks in any project is finding the money to support it. This issue was certainly no different for the project proponents. Each one of them was asked to outline their experiences and attitudes in tracking down funding. Their responses suggest that good preparation, innovation and imagination brought about the results they were looking for.

“Talk to schools and community centers. Often times their facilities are under used. Many sponsors prefer to donate various resources other than money, so asking for in-kind support of this type can be the best way to gain valuable resources for your project.”

— Corey T. Parsons
(Project: Fortune Multi-Purpose Court Completion, Newfoundland & Labrador)

"If you have a large group of people who are interested in spending a lot of time raising money, then car washes, bake sales and flea markets are great ideas...you will find that people have all kinds of stuff they want to get rid of. I was able to obtain four beds, a living room set, and kitchen chairs at no cost, by making a presentation to a group who knew someone who had these extra items."

— Angela Johnston
(Project: Brochet Exchange, Nova Scotia)

"Offer something in return. For example, free office space for a mention in the newspaper, or upkeep of the building, snow removal...basically, create an 'offer they can't refuse'..."

— Allen Richards
(Project: Our Region/Our Future, Quebec)

IV. CHALLENGES

Funding isn't the only challenge involved in launching a community project. From the outset, participants were asked to anticipate potential problems and how they would deal with them. However, unforeseen challenges can always creep up. Here are some of the challenges they encountered, along with how they attempted to solve them:

"The two biggest challenges have been finding volunteers and sponsors. As far as finding and keeping volunteers I think the best approach is to always be positive with them and to try to make it a rewarding and fun experience."

— Jason Mandes
(Project: People First Annual Benefit Hockey Game, Manitoba)

"Getting responses from businesses and employers. Due to their busy schedules, I spent lots of time contacting employers and literally running around to get their permission, (but I) found ways to get in touch with them. Phone calls, faxes and e-mails got the job done and everything turned out okay in the end."

— Brian Gignac
(Project: Electronic Employers' Directory, Quebec)

Other problems encountered:

Problem: Some people don't want to be involved!

Solution: Don't take it personally.

Problem: There's too much membership turnover!

Solution: Ensure that effective minutes of meetings are taken, making the most up-to-date material available for new members.

More Funding Tips:

- **"If you don't ask, you'll never know"**
- **Contact community groups**
- **Find in-kind support (non-profit organizations, churches, schools, local organizations)**
- **Organize fundraising and social events**
- **Get to know government funding programs**
- **Research community foundations or individual donors who may be passionate about your cause**
- **Connect with other successful project development people/organizations and find out what worked for them**
- **Create a good sponsor request letter or portfolio**

"I acquired the skill of stress, the skill of withdrawal after being worked against by certain individuals, and the skill of wanting to not have anything to do with certain individuals once damage has been done. I realize these are not skills, so I guess I've learned the skill of perseverance, to not give up on my ideas, even though it is not going the direction I had initially planned."

— Andrew Plett
(Project: Oak Lake Web Site Development Project, Manitoba)

Problem: There's too much resistance to new ideas in my small town!

Solution: Communicate more, get feedback and buy-in from community members.

Problem: I can't get everybody together because of distance problems!

Solution: Use new technology such as Internet messaging to bridge the gap.

V. WHAT WORKED, WHAT DIDN'T

Once the challenges and solutions were identified, the participants suggested a number of ideas that they would keep and what they would probably not attempt again.

What worked...

"Plan, plan, plan! Coming up with as detailed a plan as possible makes things so much easier in the long run. It helps to keep you on task, and if you run into a block when working on one thing, you can always come back to it and find something else to shift gears and work on for a while, until you can resume what you were previously working on."

— Josh Leslie

(Project: First Canadian National Undergraduate Bioethics Conference, Nova Scotia)

"I think an important first step in any project is to set out clear and realistic goals and objectives. This will help to keep your project focused if things get sidetracked. It is also important to clearly set out how your project will benefit the community as a whole and then to promote it as much as possible."

— Jason Mandes

(Project: People First Annual Benefit Hockey Game, Manitoba)

...and what didn't work

"The one thing that sticks out in my mind, is that I would have gotten started earlier on drumming up media coverage for the event, as there was only coverage from the local radio station and student newspaper on the event, even though other (larger) media conglomerates were contacted."

— Josh Leslie

(Project: First Canadian National Undergraduate Bioethics Conference, Nova Scotia)

VI. TIPS

The participants also had a number of tips for those who may wish to tackle a community project of their own. Here are some of their suggestions:

"Don't try to do something by yourself—it is too much and you need the community support to make it happen."

— Desmond Collins

(Project: Promoting Skilled Trades to the Community, Ontario)

"Believe in the value of your project. Show the positive results of your project to help get others on board and display perseverance throughout the project."

— Corey T. Parsons

(Project: Fortune Multi-Purpose Court Completion, Newfoundland & Labrador)

Other tips:

- **Create a full, detailed proposal**
- **Find a partner/mentor with a lot of capacity and willingness to help**
- **Spend time at the outset to ensure everyone is on the same page**
- **Remember that each person in the community can contribute in some way**
- **Keep in mind these two words—cooperation and communication**
- **Be confident! Don't be intimidated by executives or funding agents.**
- **Organize your time well**

“One should also be flexible, because things rarely go as planned and be confident in yourself and your project. In addition, it's important not to get too discouraged when things go wrong. Try to learn from your mistakes.”

— Jason Mandes
(Project: People First Annual Benefit Hockey Game, Manitoba)

“Have faith in yourself and do not forget the main purpose of your project. It's important who you listen to and who you do not listen to.”

— Glenn Tsessaze
(Project: The Dene Go Theh Achievement Awards, Manitoba)

VII. LESSONS LEARNED

About the projects...

“The most important thing I learned is team work. A project is rarely successful if it involves only one person. That person can do an excellent job, but a community project means that more than one person must be involved.”

— Brian Gignac
(Project: Electronic Employers' Directory, Quebec)

“I gained a greater understanding of the difficulty a young person may experience in getting a project off the ground. Also the importance of sticking to personal values—when an organization follows a direction you do not agree with, you have a right to withdraw from that organization.”

— Stephanie Maynard
(Project: Agriculture in the Classroom, Quebec)

“The most important thing I learned is that everyone has assets they can offer any project regardless of whether it is immediately recognizable, and that patience and flexibility allow these assets to become visible over the course of a project.”

— Treena Decker
(Project: Kaien Island Youth Council, British Columbia)

...about themselves

“My work this year on this and other projects has shown me that I want to have a career in regional development and has led me to begin a Master's degree in regional development.”

— Félix Bussière
(Project: Réseau des jeunes entrepreneurs en agroalimentaire (RJEA)
[Young Agri-Food Entrepreneurs' Network], Quebec)

“I am now better known within the municipality, and social and community agencies. I have improved my public speaking skills, and enrolled people in a project that is very important to me. I have achieved greater confidence in myself and in my ability to complete my projects. I have also improved my knowledge of project planning and funding applications. The more I'm involved [in my community], the greater my inner strength and self-confidence.”

— Marie-Eve LaRocque
(Project: Prospective Jeunesse, Ontario)

A few skills participants learned:

- **Partnering and networking**
- **Writing grant applications**
- **Understanding and patience**
- **Public speaking**
- **Team leadership**

“You have to do things for yourself. You cannot rely on other people all the time. Taking on a community project is very fun and exciting. It is very educational and it will help you to build the skills you will need for the future. It can be very challenging and frustrating but that goes with the territory. The key is not to give up.”

— Glenn Tsessaze
(Project: The Dene Go Theh Achievement Awards, Manitoba)

VIII. SO, WOULD YOU DO IT ALL AGAIN?

Although many of the projects are still ongoing, some participants were asked about whether they thought the entire process was worth it and whether they would attempt to do a community project in the future. They were also asked if they would recommend that other youth from across Canada should get involved or not.

Overwhelmingly, they reported that they would recommend that other youth—or any Canadian for that matter—should take on a community project if they have the opportunity. They pointed out that being involved in one's community not only leads to a greater sense of personal involvement within a community, but it also gives a sense of helping to shape the future of the community itself.

"I'd recommend other youth take on a community project since it's an excellent opportunity to give back to your community. If you want to improve life around you, you must take matters into your own hands."

— Brian Gignac
(Project: Electronic Employers' Directory, Quebec)

"I would definitely recommend other youth take on a community project because it helps you and the community to grow. You become stronger, learn more and develop personal qualities. You also become known in your community."

— Marie-Eve LaRocque
(Project: Prospective Jeunesse, Ontario)

"I would strongly recommend that other youth take on a community project. Seeing any project completed and witnessing the positive impact it can have in a community is going to make anyone extremely proud of their contribution. This feeling will motivate them to continue to find ways of making positive contributions to their community and will help them to recognize how valuable they can be to their community and why it is important for youth to stay in their rural communities."

— Corey T. Parsons
(Project: Fortune Multi-Purpose Court Completion, Newfoundland & Labrador)

"I would strongly recommend that anyone take on a community project. Aside from the immediate benefits that it can have for your community, it can also be a great experience for yourself. Taking on a community project can help you to develop all sorts of skills and qualities that will be of great importance to future career success."

— Jason Mandes
(Project: People First Annual Benefit Hockey Game, Manitoba)

Promotion

Here are some tips on what worked for the participants when promoting their community projects. Not all may work in all communities, but as the youth have pointed out, some ideas can be used anywhere.

They suggest:

- **Speaking at annual general meetings**
- **Writing an article in a community or provincial newspaper**

- **Spreading the word to people you meet on the street**
- **Writing a news release**
- **Publishing a newsletter**
- **Creating a memo-pad or other promotional items you can hand out at meetings**
- **Speaking at schools**
- **Developing a Web site for documents from any conferences, meetings or events**

IX. FEATURED PROJECTS

FEATURED PROJECT #1

Shawna Wallace (Alberta)

Project Name:

Alberta Rural Youth Council

Description:

The creation of a province-wide organization to involve rural youth in their community.

Goals:

- Raise awareness of Albertans who would not normally have been interested in the concerns of rural youth in their communities.
- Prove that youth have the desire, capability and drive to create and implement projects, thus helping them to gain additional respect from various community and provincial organizations.
- Create a situation where youth feel they have a voice and can express their ideas, questions and concerns to the people who can make the most difference.
- Create a provincial organization from the ground-up, which helps to maintain high levels of youth involvement at every stage of the game, without sacrificing youth engagement for youth tokenism.

Result:

This project gave rural youth a voice within their communities, providing a representative body, a forum to exchange ideas, a place to network, and an organization that helped with community-based projects by funding workshops or leadership training in various communities.

Q1 What drew people to your project? Why were people interested in it?

A1 The “community” (Alberta) as a whole has been very receptive to the idea of a representative body for rural youth at the provincial level, and often asks for ways that the Alberta Rural Youth Council (ARYC) can help them with their various youth engagement problems. Most traditional leaders/older community members were also very receptive to the idea of improving their relationships with youth. The community leaders we dealt with were excited there was a medium through which they could gain a youth perspective or find a youth board member, and could use the organization, regardless of their readiness to accept youth.

Business and government were drawn to the project because they recognized that it could help youth to develop valuable skills which could ease their transition into the job market and make them more employable and valuable as workers.

Q2 What would you change? What would you do the same?

A2 What I would change:

- I would have recruited more committed members for the initial membership base.
- I wouldn't have involved government in the money portion since they were constantly trying to convince us to change our dates, what we spent money on, what we were going to discuss. I would have waited until after the project/group had been better established.

What I would do the same:

- I would apply for status as a society, which enabled us to get funds/grants from other places in the government, foundations, and gave us a spending account.
- The three mentors I had provided an immense amount of support for my project and never doubted our ability to march on.

Q3 What have you done to promote your project?

A3 I promoted the project mostly through word of mouth, then, once the project got off the ground, I started touring to other provinces and within the province giving talks and presentations about what we are accomplishing and hope to do in the future. Once we got the word out, people kept coming to us. We are currently developing a marketing plan to further our scope, including high schools, post-secondary institutions and city chambers of commerce.

Q4 What have been your biggest challenges? How did you overcome them?

- Space, time and committed people.
- ARYC membership: The youth age category is a transitional one without much stability. Trying to have a core group of members was difficult as youth's lives changed on a regular basis—members dropped out, others dropped in.
- Getting everyone together given that Alberta is a vast province with huge distances from top to bottom and there are already technology barriers in rural communities.

Q5 What tips would you give to other youth planning a community project?

- Know what your community wants or needs first. Do not assume that everyone wants what you want; otherwise, you won't get support or help for your project.
- Do not be discouraged if at first you don't receive the encouragement you would have liked. If you keep pursuing until you get the answer you want, you can gain a lot more respect than just giving up.
- Use your already established contacts to further your project. Anyone can have a skill to lend you, even your grandparents, sister or babysitter! Use all the resources you know of from everyone you know.
- Dream big. Even if the project is small, a bigger picture helps focus yourself on a bigger goal.
- Find a mentor.

I'd recommend other youth take on a community project as it is one of the most rewarding experiences youth can have. Even if it doesn't turn out the way you anticipated, the life experience is far more valuable than a lesson in the classroom. If you do not want to do it for the community, do it for yourself.

Q6 What did you do that worked well that you would recommend to others?

A6 Using relationships to further the project. It's also important to keep up with your contacts so that everyone feels involved and a part of your project. A thank you card is often enough to make them feel their contribution was worthwhile.

Q7 What did you do that did not work well that you would recommend others avoid?

A7 Trying to take the whole project on yourself, without any help. You cause excess stress on yourself and risk alienating other youth or people in the community from your project.

Q8 What ideas do you have for obtaining funding?

A8 Apply for as many grants as possible, look for funding in odd places such as foundations, other community organizations, your town or individual donors who are passionate about your cause. Fundraising can be done creatively and using the whole community, so do not count any ideas out.

Q9 What ideas do you have for obtaining in-kind support (e.g., use of office space/equipment, project promotion)?

A9 Government departments often have youth mandates to fill, so they are often happy to let you use some space for your project, but also think about the town office, businesses and home offices of people you know. Also, when you ask for use of space, pitch it like a donation of space or office supplies and they may be able to write it off as a charitable donation or community donation.

Q10 Would you recommend that other youth take on a community project? Explain why.

A10 Absolutely, in a heartbeat. From this experience, I gained skills I would not have gained anywhere else, such as organizational development, dealing with horizontal issues, agenda setting, logic modeling, and how to overcome communication barriers and obstacles. I also gained respect for everyone and their situation, perseverance and tolerance. In addition, this project helped me acquire skills in planning and decision-making, leading and working with groups.

FEATURED PROJECT #2

Jim Rutten (Nova Scotia)

Project Name:

The Lake Ainslie Development Association's Community Shared Agriculture and Farmers' Market Pilot Project (LADA)

Description:

LADA, in partnership with the Municipality of the County of Inverness, Human Resources Development Canada, the Co-operatives Secretariat, and the Central Inverness Community Health Board (CHB), is undertaking partnership building, research and awareness building, for the development of a community shared agriculture and local farmers' market.

Goal:

To create a youth worker/local producer co-operative that will connect consumers and producers of food in an effort to create a bioregional food system. This project aims to build on the historic importance of subsistence agriculture in Cape Breton.

Results:

This project provided a place for youth to come together and gain valuable experience in community development and co-operative principles. It also helped in reconnecting youth to area elders and the traditional importance of subsistence agriculture to the local area. This assisted in helping youth better understand the food cycle, health and nutrition, and food preparation and processing. In addition, the project enabled additional capacity for health boards within the community. The project enabled local food producers to have access to the community's customer base and local farm market.

Q1 What drew people to your project? Why were people interested in it?

A1 We aimed to develop this project by building from the assets that we had available to us in order to use local food as a tool to strengthen community connections and build community health. To ensure that the project developed in a meaningful way we approached the work from a participatory planning position—one that gave the community the power to decide the direction of the project within the variety of operational models that we were working from. People were drawn to the project because they understood how it could work from a common sense point of view. People have become interested in the project because they hold the decision-making power and can therefore play a proactive role in developing and maintaining their community.

Q2 What would you do the same? What would you change?

A2 I think our greatest strength in terms of developing the project has been the relinquishing of project ownership to interested community members. I strongly believe in grassroots community development principles and participatory planning.

Given the experience of developing this project I have gained a new understanding of the speed of bureaucratic institutes as related to releasing resources and funds. Our initial project planning was based on the assumption that funders would stay true to the timelines they first indicated. However, this has not been the case and we've experienced several delays. These delays not only seriously affect project sequencing but also have a negative effect on project cash flow. We now double our expected timeline for all commitments and contributions made by government sources.

Q3 What tips would you give to other youth planning a community project?

A3 Have confidence in your own perspective. Your perspective is important and worth sharing. No one else has experienced the world in the same unique way that you have—until you find a way to express your perspective you will not affect any sort of change you wish to see in your life.

Q4 What did you do that worked well that you would recommend to others?

A4 I think each community project needs to be rooted and developed out of the community that the project exists in. I'm in favour of working from models that have proven their success in terms of sustainability and adaptability. But each project must be rooted in each community, and the project needs to have an adaptable model which can make the project meaningful to the local community.

Q5 What did you do that did not work well that you would recommend others avoid?

A5 In order to begin the project at a time that would lend itself to positive sequencing I donated a third of my salary in-kind. While this has helped the project to develop in a natural way, it has left me without personal security. Be sure that there is enough capacity to support key individuals within the project, because if you cannot take care of yourself it will make it difficult to facilitate the project you're working on.

Q6 What ideas do you have for obtaining funding?

A6 In my experience it's helpful to map potential project stakeholders. When this is complete, it's helpful to develop a benefit analysis for each stakeholder—considering that the primary stakeholder is always the community. If your project can create enough benefit for your community then the opportunity exists to create horizontal communications and connect with other stakeholders enabling potential funding stakeholders to more clearly understand how their investment can assist your stakeholders and theirs.

Q7 Would you recommend that other youth take on a community project?

A7 Definitely. If there's something that you feel needs to change then take action on it because things certainly won't change on their own. Besides, for communities to prosper and development to become meaningful, it has to be done in a way that doesn't sacrifice future generations for the present one. Decision makers in their 40s, 50s and 60s need to know how we feel about the state of our community and the one that we'll inherit based on the decisions they make today. The other great benefit of community development work is the wealth of knowledge that you become exposed to—and there's no greater teacher than experience.

CONCLUSION

The youth who were involved with this lessons learned document have brought their projects from the initial “idea” stage to its conclusion or ongoing operation. What is quite clear is that this process is neither easy nor challenge-free. However, practically all of them indicated they thought the experience was a valuable one. Not only did it increase their sense of community spirit, their projects also fulfilled a specific need in the community.

So how about starting your own community project? We would encourage those interested in developing projects in their communities to refer to the Community Project Planning and Evaluation Guide, published by the Government of Canada. You can find this guide online at www.rural.gc.ca, or you can obtain a copy through:

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Best of luck!

As was pointed out from the youth participants, getting the questions and details sorted out in the beginning makes all the difference in the end. This is a checklist that you may wish to consider when planning a community project:

- **Describe your community, including the issues and problems it faces, or those faced by rural communities in general that brought about your project.**
- **Describe the involvement and support of the community members and/or applicable local/regional or national organizations for your project.**
- **Explain why your organization is qualified to deliver this project.**
- **What are your objectives for this project?**
- **Who will benefit from this project and how will they benefit?**
- **What is your proposed work plan?**
- **Who will manage and deliver the project?**
- **Who are your partners and what are their roles and responsibilities?**
- **What are the expected results of your project?**
- **What do you intend to do with the results of this project once it is complete?**
- **How will you share the results of your project?**
- **How will you measure your project's success?**