

Switch Yard drop-in centre resumes outdoors



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By Mike Riley

On Aug. 11, the Switch Yard drop-in centre started up again with restrictions in place to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. One of these restrictions is that the drop-ins are now outdoors. They will be continuing these outdoor drop-ins for youth on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. as the pandemic continues and restrictions are still mandated by the province.

The Switch Yard is administered by Bancroft Youth Unlimited, a satellite of Kawartha Youth for Christ, which works together with the community to help local youth. The drop-in centre is a place for youth to come hangout, to relax, to eat and to chat about life. The volunteer team is committed to serving and building relationships local youth.

A few weeks ago, the Switch Yard had a fundraiser to raise \$10,000 to cover their budget shortfall in light of the COVID-19 crisis. They ended up raising more than double that, taking in \$20,163.20, and also were gifted internet and phone services from Northern Rural Net for the next three years, valued at \$5,000.

Kelsey Watts is the managing director of Bancroft Youth Unlimited, which administers the Switch Yard drop-in. She says that they are excited, as they've not seen the youth since early March, so they're eager to get back to the routine of the drop-ins, and see them face to face.

"We are anxious to see how this time of isolation has impacted them and provide a listening ear and hope for the future," she says.

Watts says that they have been closely following Ontario government and Hastings Prince Edward Public Health recommendations to put a safety plan into place. They review it weekly and have thoroughly trained their staff and volunteers on how to stay safe and ensure the safety of all the youth that come by as well.

"A few other examples of safety measures include posted signage throughout the area reminding everyone of the safety protocols, hand sanitation stations in several locations and a thorough checklist to limit the risk of transmission by surfaces. The safety of our youth, volunteers and staff is our highest priority. We did not take the responsibility of reopening under COVID-19 restrictions lightly. Several hours were spent reading through all the safety guidelines from the Ontario government, HPE Public Health and our own Kawartha Youth Unlimited head office. It took four weeks to adapt and implement these guidelines to ensure that we have a safety plan that works in our specific context," she says.

Watts says at this point they are focused on creating a safe outdoor environment where youth can simply hang out and see their friends. However, they have been able to safely implement a couple of activities where both maintaining distancing and sanitation are prioritized. "So far, these include air hockey and video games. We also hope to reopen the indoor pool table for the youth in the coming weeks," she says. On the night of Aug. 18, Wells said that on the previous Tuesday and Thursday, there had been nine youth that dropped by the first night and five that came by the second night.

"Starting with lower numbers is advantageous though, as we get used to operating under COVID-19 restrictions, and it will be helpful as we work towards preparations for safely opening more of our programs in the fall," she says.

Her husband Ben Watts, who is drop-in worker at the Switch Yard, is happy that they're open again and that local youth have a place to come hang out, have fun and be safe.

"I wish more youth were coming, but I'm just glad we're open and available for whomever wants to come and hang out," he says.

Ben Watts reveals another outdoor activity that came about the previous week by chance.

"We had a guy who usually comes and he brought his Nintendo Switch with him. So, we were doing that because Kelsey okayed it with the health unit. Because we can disinfect the controllers and pass them around. We were able to do that together, which was kind of fun," he says.

Three of the Switch Yard's volunteers, Ryan Sararas, Eric Culp and Dylan Campbell, also shared their insights into what it's been like volunteering there and what the new outdoor drop-ins have been like since Aug. 11. "I'm on my third year here," says Sararas, "About March break we just left and didn't come back. When the schools shut down, we shut down.

Hopefully things get back to normal soon. Most of our crew comes to play pool and we can't do that right now [due to distancing restrictions]. We have our groups; some play air hockey, some use the computers, some play pool, some just come to chat and that's literally all they do. Thursdays are busier because they serve dinner, so that always attracts more people. "Eric Culp says he has been volunteering for about a year a half, but has been coming to the drop-in centre since he was 12 years old.

"I was helping out Ben [Watts]. I was practically a volunteer when I was like 14 years old, because I would just randomly stock the fridge. Ben was like, do you want to volunteer here? And I was like sure. Basically, that's how I got into this. It's really fun. When we're actually open and can touch things pre-COVID-19 it was great because Ben had all these wacky board games and card games, so it was interesting because he always had something. It always brought a crowd around to see what he'd have. So, that's what keeps me coming and I'm also working on my social skills. I used to be an anti-social kid, so I'm trying to involve myself and get more comfortable with crowds," he says.

For two years, Dylan Campbell has been volunteering with the Switch Yard and thinks it's always fun coming out each week.

"It's a nice change of pace from life in general. There are different groups of kids. You get the same kids each week but always some different ones from week to week, which is nice. In addition to air hockey and video games, we also had requests for kids to use the computers, but we can't yet as it's too difficult to monitor with all the sanitation and distancing that needs to go on. Same with the pool table. But as long as we have something that's used a lot out here, it gives some sense of normalcy," he says.

The reactions to the drop in centre resuming have been very positive, according to Kelsey Watts, and she says that youth are excited to get back to see their friends. This sentiment is echoed by Isaac and Shakira, two of the youth that dropped by on Aug. 18.

It's my first time here and it's pretty cool. So far, it's been pretty good," says Issac.

Shakira agrees that it's pretty good to hang out at the Switch Yard. "I've been coming for a while and I stopped going because of the

virus. But now I'm coming again. I was getting bored," she says.

Kelsey Watts feels that members of the public see the Switch Yard as an essential part of the community and that reopening is important to serve local youth. While they do have capacity limits set for their deck and tent areas, they have an abundance of outdoor space. This would potentially allow them to host up to 100 people as per Ontario government guidelines for outdoor gatherings.

"We anticipate our numbers will likely be more in the range of 20 to 30 youth per night. As we expected, it has been low numbers to start, but we fully expect the numbers to increase as youth get back to school," she says. "All youth are welcome. Come join us Tuesdays and Thursdays from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m."