

Youth2Youth program finds pen pals during COVID-19

By Kristena Schutt-Moore

Youth2Youth Hastings Prince Edward is a youth led group supported by the United Way Quinte. They have a mission to spark innovative thinking in the youth of the area, and work in partnership with community leaders to help increase solutions to local problems as identified by the youth.

In 2021 the area's youth wish to see change including, economic development, the environment, youth poverty, sexual health and substance abuse, mental health, social media, gender equality/diversity and filling community gaps.

One of the Youth2Youth Programs newest projects is the Youth2Youth PenPals Program which pairs youth who are close in age as writing partners. Bancroft This Week talked with Youth2Youth coordinator Kaitlyn Lalonde about how the program will work.

Q: How can people sign up and when do they need to be signed up by?

A: They can sign up on the website by filling out the survey and signing the consent form provided. The link is <https://sites.google.com/view/from-pen-to-friend/pen-pals?fbclid=IwAR2eeSf9prVHqlvPHsetn2qx1VJypyg0YWQpjPTE6P12zbayPeCjYX8ukaA>.

Q: How are pen pals matched? Asking due to some concerned parents commenting on the Facebook post wondering if their 14-year-olds would be talking with 24-year-olds.

A: This is a very understandable concern and an aspect we considered right from the beginning stages. When youth register, they fill out a simple survey with their information and some general questions about their interests, which is only shared with Youth2Youth. The youth ambassadors will then use the surveys to match participants by age and similar interests.

Q: What is the goal of the project?

A: The youth ambassadors who created this project wanted to give youth a sense of connection without it being through a screen. Youth have to spend so much time on their devices right now and Zoom fatigue has been a major theme we've noticed in our youth. The youth ambassadors wanted to give individuals a chance to make a new friend in a way that gets them off their screens for some time.

They also wanted to provide them the option to write a second letter, which would be for the use of Youth2Youth to publish, that would describe their 'perfect day after COVID'. This could be a letter written to their post-COVID selves to remind them that there are better days ahead and make predictions on what the world might be like. Participants have the choice to write this letter but the ambassadors felt like it could be a really positive and uplifting activity.

Q: How was it developed/what inspired it?

A: The PenPals project is the original idea of three Youth2Youth ambassadors, Kaitlyn (21), Brianna (21) and Alyssa (19). They have been working for a few months to develop a model that is inclusive and safe during the pandemic.

Youth2Youth HPE is a youth led group with a mission to spark innovative thinking and work in partnership with community leaders to help increase solutions to local problems identified by youth. Youth2Youth HPE works with local youth, non-profit organizations, and the broader community to create new resources and improve experiences for youth in Hastings and Prince Edward Counties so all youth have a chance to succeed. In order to create change for youth, we need them to lead the initiatives that address the issues they care about. We focus on key youth issues that empower youth and encourage them to take a leading role in

grassroots change.

To do just that, youth ambassadors have been working on youth action projects to make impactful and positive changes in their community. With COVID, we've had to adapt these projects to be safe and virtual. This group felt that a pen pal program would be a meaningful way to connect youth that are the same age in a safe way to combat the feelings of isolation that the pandemic has created.

Q: When will it start and how long will it go for?

A: The process has started, registration opened April 15 and ended April 26. The next week Youth2Youth will be putting together packages that will be sent to the participants, which will contain paper and a stamped envelope to help them write and send their letters easily. We'll give each individual time to write their letter and send them back to the United Way Hastings and Prince Edward office (55 Harriett Street, Belleville). Youth2Youth will then be in charge of getting the letters to their matched pen pal in order to keep all home addresses and information confidential. This program will run until the end of May.

Q: Where are the youth from that will participate in the program?

A: The youth participating are from the HPE region as that's the area Youth2Youth works with.

Q: Will the program include things other than letters? Example: exchanging pictures, art, etc.

A: To keep it safe, we will just be accepting letters at this time. However, if the program continues and youth want to keep writing to their pen pals, we will definitely consider pictures and art as something else to add to their letter.

Q: What are the rules of the program?

A: The most important aspect we had to consider when creating this project and in anything we do is the safety of our youth, especially when there was the potential of addresses being exchanged. When they registered, every participant had to sign a consent form and/or get their parents to sign it giving them permission to participate. As mentioned, the youth also won't be sending their letters directly to their pen pals to keep all of their information confidential. They'll send them to our office and we'll make sure the matched pen pal receives each other's letters. Other than that, we really want youth to have fun with it and make a new friend!

Q: The written word in the mail is giving way to the computer and typing an email or online message. Are youth responding well to this program? Has anyone reported back to you on their experience or said anything about how it has helped their child?

A: We haven't received feedback for it yet because the youth haven't written their letters but the overall response so far has been great! We've received a lot of parents reaching out to ask about signing their child up and we've had a good amount of youth register. I'm sure this positive response will continue as we move forward with the project but I'd love to tell you more about it as we go.