

LEARNING TO LOVE UNCONDITIONALLY

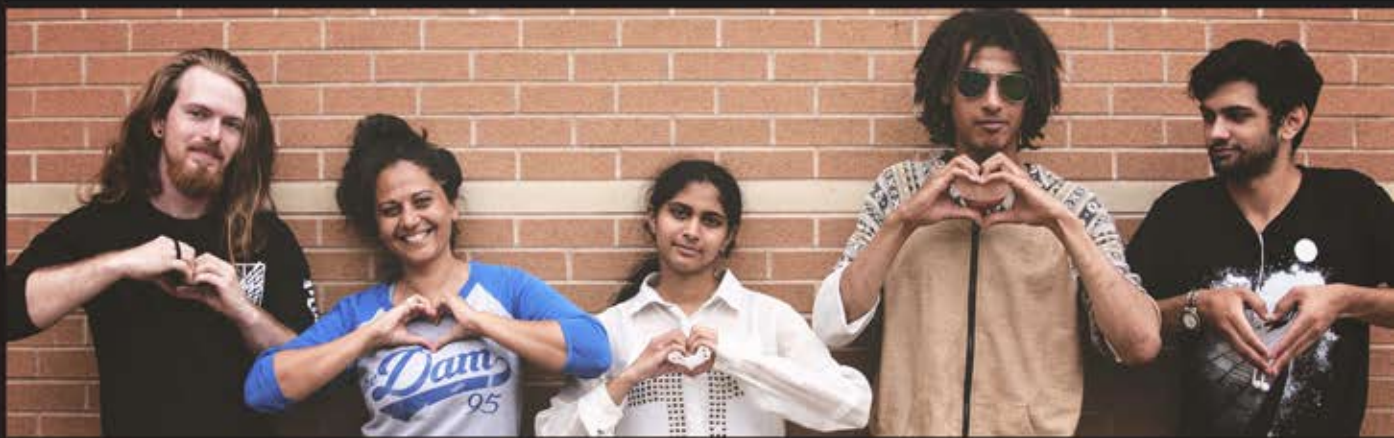
Written By: Claudia.G
Cooksville Youth

As a society, we give birth to children and promise them that we will love them unconditionally; not be violent towards them, accept them for who they are and be there for them. Some of the promises made when our children were born are broken now that they are grown. We stop loving them unconditionally, as we once used to, as a result of the paths they take and the identities they discover; attraction to the same gender or different race, becoming a member of a 'gang' or misbehaving in school. We encourage our children to "be themselves" but show them that "our" beliefs, values, and opinions that cause us to take a stand on certain social issues means more to us than our children as individuals finding their own.

The Dam community (our 'Family') means everything to me! It has helped me get through my toughest years in high school. The Dam has been a big part in shaping who I am today; currently a Child and Youth Care

practitioner in-the-making. Throughout my elementary, middle and high school junior years I never thought that I would make it this far. My dream goal of being in college and working with young children felt out of reach. Those I once looked up to constantly told me that I will not make it far in life and I believed going to college would never happen.

The Dam has given me a reason to be optimistic. During 10th grade, I was a regular drop-in student and volunteering at The Dam consistently. Through this time at The Dam I formed healthy relationships with staff members; I got to know them well, learning I could trust and count on them to be there for me. The Dam showed me what an atmosphere full of acceptance, positivity, and support is. Within the 'Family' every individual is unique and is unconditionally loved and accepted for who they are; as a society, we should do the same.



GROWING OPPORTUNITIES

Written By: Nilanthi Meemanage (Student Placement)

"Tears roll in. There's indescribable pain in my heart, like... like I'm saying goodbye to something very dear to me". This is the best way I can describe my last day at The Dam | Cooksville.

I am currently in my last year studying to be a Child and Youth Care practitioner. My first practicum was with the Dam and it will forever be in my heart. I remember the first day I walked into The Dam. All of the staff were warm and welcoming which made this anxious student feel at ease and safe. I always felt valued and supported by the staff; creating a great space for learning. During my time at the Dam I learned many skills; conflict resolution, cooking, and many card games that I now teach my friends.

My learning opportunity was extended when I was hired as

one of The Dam summer staff. The summer created many fond memories. The Dam has developed me as an individual and as a Child and Youth Care practitioner.

I cannot forget all the other lovely student placements, volunteers and youth I had the chance to know during my time at the Dam. Mac and cheese, garlic bread, fresh pastries, loud music, and laughter will forever be symbols of love when thinking of my time at the Dam. Being a part of the Dam, even for a short time, was definitely one of the best things that I have experienced in my professional journey thus far. When someone has the opportunity to grow through serving at The Dam, whatever the role, they will be changed forever and become part of an amazing family; a family filled with LOVE, DIGNITY and RESPECT.



Cooksville crew at Wonderland



Some swing set fun at the park

CONNECTIONS RESULTING IN GROWTH

Written By: David Kaur (YPC Member)

I started coming to The Dam when I was in grade 9, and now I'm 19. When I was in grade nine I was going through some tough times. I was in foster care and I am currently aging out of the system and moving out on my own. I have battled with depression. One day some of my good friends said that I should come with them to this place called The Dam.

Walking into The Dam for the first time felt really good; everyone was very welcoming. I immediately knew that I would like it here. Over the years I've been here, I've learned a lot. The Dam has helped me get out of a number of tough times. Going to the variety of activities and programs has helped me get through my depression. I have grown a lot as a person.

As a result of all the growing and learning I've been able to do through The Dam, I have just been hired at The Dam through the new Youth Partnership Program and the Ontario Trillium Grant that is funding the Youth Partnership Committee. The Dam has been and will likely always be my family. Family isn't about blood, it's about the bonds that connect you and about cherishing those bonds.

The bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other's life. - Richard Bach

INTERSECTIONS: WE NEED EACH OTHER

Written By: Carol Reist (Executive Director)

There has been a shift in how we talk about young people. The exasperations about what is wrong with young people and the prevalence of youth violence has diminished. There is a hushed whisper of fear for the fate of the world where leaders openly threaten nuclear war, displaced people are forced to leave countries, climate change lurks, and fragile economies threaten the hopes and dreams of our young people. Today, any mention of young people is in awe of advancements in technology and entrepreneurial achievements.

Today's teenagers are called Generation Z. They have grown up in the shadow of 9/11 and experienced a recession in their formative years. They are truly a digital generation with knowledge and connectivity at their fingertips. Research from the Annie E. Casey Foundation conducted in 2016 compared teens from 2008 and 2014 and found a 40% drop in teen pregnancy, a 38% drop in drug and alcohol abuse, and a 28% drop in the percentage of teens who did not graduate on time from high school.

Every day, I see teenagers that are putting down their phones to engage in conversations of respect. I see teen-

agers who mutually care for one another in the bad days and want to celebrate with each other on the good days. Maybe those tendencies aren't very different from the past, but we sure need our youth to lead us and the world in working together to solve large issues. We need our youth to know how to resolve conflicts.

Equally, our youth need adults to support them. Mental health and suicides rates continue to rise under the stresses of an unstable environment. Youth need caring adults they can trust. Together we can grow through the crises of life. For our communities to thrive today and in the future, youth and adults need each other.



Check out our new program "While I Still Have Breath" at www.wishb.org or on Instagram - @whileistillhavebreath



Youth enjoying the sun at our Cooksville location



Ken with some of our youth in Meadowvale

PURSUE YOUR DREAM

Written By: Kriz (Volunteer)

I first heard of The Dam when I was randomly browsing the Internet at my old office job downtown. They had introduced an initiative at work that would allow employees to take 1 day off each year to do volunteering work. When I read about the organization on their website, something clicked. Instead of taking the day off, I decided to leave my job altogether and pursue my dream of becoming a teacher.

Originally, I had applied to become a volunteer as a way to supplement my application to return to university, but as the summer passed by and this year's submission deadline got closer, I realized that this place was more than just a step-

ping stone in my career. Having met so many wonderful youth, I realized that I wasn't the only one with hopes and dreams. Being around them every day motivates me to be the best version of myself as I can be, and I can't help but return the favor. I can't wait to see what the future holds!

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

- Join us for "A Family Christmas" on Nov.21st,2017 Visit www.thedam.org for more details.
- COLDEST NIGHT OF THE YEAR is Feb.24th,2018 Visit www.cnoy.org/mississauga for details.
- The Dam welcomes Nancy Labib and Jo Ang Go to the staff team as Cooksville Youth Mentors.

GROWING YOUTH LEADERSHIP FOR A BETTER FUTURE

Contributions By: Youth Partnership Committee

At the beginning of May 2017, The Dam started our Youth Partnership Project. Last Fall, youth from our Meadowvale and Cooksville sites came together to dream. They explored what it would look like to have "youth voices" play a more significant and meaningful role at all levels of youth programming at The Dam. Their work helped in the development of a successful funding application with the Ontario Trillium Foundation for this three year Youth Partnership Project. In addition to youth assisting in the planning, implementing and evaluating of youth programs at The Dam, the project enables the employment of two youth interns at each site. All of this helps The Dam better accomplish its mission of partnering with youth to develop inclusive community.

VOICES HEARD

We asked the youth who were part of this process last fall and current members of the Youth Partnership Committee (YPC) their thoughts about being part of the YPC. Kawtar, 16, shared that "the YPC gives us a voice." Partnering with youth has been empowering. Chris, youth intern age 19, says, "it's nice knowing youth like myself have a voice and input into what goes on at The Dam week after week." Youth voices are often ignored and unvalued in life and home situations as David, another youth intern age 19, has

experienced. David is encouraged "when youth are at meetings [at YPC] they know that people are going to listen." Having a voice is not all work either, "being a part of the YPC is fun" according to Jevonae, 17.

"Being part of YPC is kinda empowering. I feel like I have more input in the community. Everyone has a voice. No one is shut down."
- Georgia, 17

NEW SKILLS DEVELOPED

This project has helped youth at The Dam grow and develop. Sara, 15 says, "it's fun to be a part of something so involving and a great experience to help gain new skills and friends." Youth are learning the process involved in making decisions and their impact. For Eduardo, 16, being part of the YPC "means that the staff see us as equal and they want to know our opinion and trust us with decision making."

BETTER FUTURE AHEAD

For the youth, it's all about making a good thing better and long lasting. Partnership at The Dam is being realized. Luke, 18, says "it's like putting in the thoughts of the people I talk to and my own thoughts to try to make The Dam a better place."

"It means a lot to me to have done this. It is a very large accomplishment to have been able to help the youth in the future by getting this funding." - Keegan, 19



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