

THOSE KIDS ARE OUR KIDS

Reflections from a Year of Awakening and Awareness

Who We Are and Why We Organized?

More than a year ago now, the Brockville community was shocked and saddened by an unfortunate [incident](#) that happened in a public park on the edge of the St. Lawrence River. “Those Kids Are Our Kids” (TKOK) is a group of concerned citizens who came together because we believe that this was more than an isolated incident. Simply put, we believe that our community needs to truly listen and understand our youth because they live in a new and different era that bears little similarity to the world that adults lived in when they were youth. How can we bring hope, optimism and opportunities to all of our youth so that another incident never happens? That is the big question that defines who we are and why we organized. Our group of five wants to see meaningful action in support of Youth Development in Leeds and Grenville.

Our Three Platforms of Action

Leeds and Grenville is a wonderful place to live and play. We have natural beauty and potential access to numerous amenities that compare to or exceed other communities. However, not unlike other communities, we are also seeking to understand what youth engagement looks like in the year 2019 and beyond. As such, TKOK is proceeding with a specific plan of action, guided upon three key platforms as follows:

1. Bringing youth *leisure* to the forefront

Our community has an understanding and support network for traditional interpretations of youth recreation. Organized sports and youth access to sports and sports facilities exist and are accessed by many youth. However, do we as a community understand what youth want and need in the way of leisure?

Leisure is different than recreation. Leisure is how people choose to engage their free time. It may include sports through recreation. But it may also include many other activities, physical or not, that refresh the soul and connect us with others. This particular platform of action is guided by the work of [Jackie Oncescu](#) of the University of New Brunswick who understands the vital role that leisure has to play in youth and community development.

2. Empowering the voice of our youth

For our community to address the leisure and recreation needs of our youth, we have to listen, understand and respond to what they have to say - as unique individuals. How can we create opportunities to empower the voice of our youth? TKOK is committed to helping ensure that our collective progress to meet the needs of youth is founded upon their information and perspectives; particularly those who are normally hesitant to participate.

3. Acting as a “supportive friend” to Leeds Grenville service agencies

With a complicated and overlapping network of well-intentioned youth service agencies, Leeds Grenville often struggles to bring alignment and measurable outcomes to strategic improvement processes. For example, as a “community collaboration dedicated to the long-term success of every child and youth” [Every Kid in Our Communities of Leeds Grenville](#) is in the process of bringing greater clarity and defined purpose to its work. As a “willing friend”, TKOK is committed to asking difficult and relevant questions of

THOSE KIDS ARE OUR KIDS

our community agencies to ensure that we remain focused on the task at hand while demonstrating informed progress.

Our Progress to Date

Over the past year, TKOK has been talking, researching and collaborating to awaken and raise the awareness of local leaders and community organizations of the need for a strengthened focus in support of youth in our community. We started with a survey and meeting of community leaders where information was shared and knowledge gained. The [Those Kids - Are Our Kids Report Shared.pdf](#) report was prepared and released with six recommendations as follows:

1. Leeds and Grenville with the municipalities must develop a Recreation and Leisure Five Year Plan for its citizens and tourists.
2. Large tent style focus group should meet quarterly to discuss plans, issues and services for the 11-16-year old's in our community.
3. Twice yearly a forum must be organized to ensure that plans are being adhered to and services are delivered appropriately in a non-judgmental manner. All programs must be evaluated for relevance (attendance) meaningfulness (is what is intended to take place actually meeting the intended needs). Are unintended activities and potential consequences being addressed in a timely fashion.
4. Community agencies must be encouraged to continue development of comprehensive partnerships. Breaking down any silos of isolation and continue to genuinely find opportunities to share our resources, ideas and talents.
5. Continue to recognize the family as the building block to a healthy vibrant community. Build capsules in our communities and families.
6. A comprehensive plan must be organized, developed and implemented to build on the successful Stingers initiative. Community leaders with youth representatives must build this program. The leaders must be knowledgeable of the developmental needs of this age group. The program must be accessible and barrier free for all. The program must be accessible and a plan to transport children must be organized. The program must be sustainable and resistant to changes in public funding (Municipal, Provincial and Federal).

Overall, from this process we have learned that:

- youth disengagement is a reality in our community, with complex causes and conditions,
- many groups in Leeds & Grenville - good people doing good things for kids and families, are working hard to confront this youth disengagement,
- greater collaboration, communication, accountability and honesty between service and community groups is required,
- groups need to share their mandates with each other,
- the revenue and resource strategies employed for disengaged youth needs to be examined,
- a comprehensive method to continually assess return on Investment (ROI) is required, and
- a sense of ownership by community groups is causing some resistance to change and accountability.

It is apparent that many people and agencies are highly engaged and committed in the work they are doing. However, we have also learned that we all need to work together because there is some frustration due to

THOSE KIDS ARE OUR KIDS

the complexity of youth services across our community. Passion was evident at the meetings held and, while silos are evident, positive opportunities do exist for more open dialogue and collaboration.

Since its formation, TKOK has researched and asked questions to better understand Youth needs in Leeds and Grenville. Over the span of one year, we raised funds to sponsor a Youth program at Stingers over the summer of 2019 through collaboration with RNJ Services, Brockville Police Association, YMCA, United Way, Girls Inc, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Every Kid In Our Community, Mental Health and faith-based groups. Furthermore, on September 26 and 27, 2019 TKOK sponsored the “Creating Community Wellness Through Leisure and Recreation” Conference; the first of 3 community conversations that will take place in Leeds and Grenville this year. Key working partners for this initiative were United Way, YMCA, Every Kid In Our Community, MPP Steve Clark, Mayor Jason Baker, Mayor Doug Struthers, Mayor Doug Malanka with attendance from several Leeds & Grenville leaders and organizations. From this event that was facilitated by Jackie Oncescu, valuable feedback was received from adults and youth which, [summarized into themes](#), is helping to define and advance our next steps.

In all, this first year has been a coming together with honest discussion and youth participation to start a new vision by introducing leisure as a concept to move forward. Some organized agencies and groups that acknowledge our group and are using the information and energy available to create new initiatives such as Every Kid In Our Community, Leeds, Grenville and Lanark District Health Unit, The United Way and YMCA. We continue to educate ourselves to the mandates and processes of organizations to support youth leisure for the larger community wellness of Leeds and Grenville.

Our Moment of Challenge

While we are encouraged that this past year has been a period of awakening and awareness, we also know that there remains an untapped opportunity to build upon a collective vision for a stronger community through youth leisure. As we move forward, we are committed to staying informed of our progress. This is about putting values into actions, choosing character over convenience, establishing direction and committing with action from a youth perspective.

Our moment of challenge causes us to recognize that:

- conditions are generally unchanged from a year ago,
- there is a general lack of communication and cooperation between stakeholders,
- the current model for serving youth in our community is not sustainable,
- traditional methods of service youth and communities need to be challenged and replaced with a more current definition and application of leisure and & recreation, and
- our community leaders need to become change leaders by understanding what leisure & recreation is and by developing the possible best strategies for our youth and community at large.

Our moment of challenge also causes us to ask:

- Who are the champions of this cause?
- Where are the resources available to meet the needs of this age group?
- How can these resources be distributed?
- Are we listening, communicating and collaborating well?

THOSE KIDS ARE OUR KIDS

- What are the definable returns we should be using to measure our progress?

A Call to Action: Next Steps for Year 2

With the first year of awakening and awareness now complete, preparations for year 2 are underway. From the guiding foundation of our three platforms (bringing youth leisure to the forefront, empowering youth voice and acting as a supportive friend to service agencies), a solid action plan with short and longer term deliverables will be completed by the end of February, 2020.

In the meantime, TKOK is continuing to focus on building relationships and securing lasting partnerships in support of our vision for a healthy and vibrant community that accounts for the needs and perspectives of youth. More specifically, plans are underway for a series of community visits to strengthen our connection with municipalities and receive additional information from youth and adults that will assist the development of the action plan. We look forward to your participation!

Those Kids Are Our Kids (TKOK) is:

Dave Beatty, Bob Castle, Dwayne Dudgeon, Brent Ellis and David Thomas