

Aboriginal Youth Council

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National

WHO THEY ARE?

The Aboriginal Youth Council (AYC) is a council inside the National Association of Friendship Centers (NAFC). The NAFC aims to improve the quality of life for Aboriginal peoples in urban environments by supporting self-determined activities which encourage equal access to, and participation in, Canadian Society; and which respect and strengthen the increasing emphasis on Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness. The AYC aims to create positive change for Friendship Center Youth through inclusion, empowerment and culture by increasing communication, training and development opportunities, leadership, and awareness.

There are Friendship Centers all across Canada, and a lot of them have youth wings. The AYC has a national council which brings together youth representatives from all provinces in Canada. The AYC conducts quarterly Board Meetings, including conference calls, to discuss numerous issues relating to Aboriginal Youth within the Friendship Centre Movement.

WHY DO THEY ENGAGE YOUTH?

“It’s important to engage youth to make them feel a sense of ownership and a feeling of control. There’s nothing more motivating than feeling as if what you do in your work really has a genuine effect on the people around you, and that your decisions will shape the community, and even the world around you.”

Ashley Norton, Aboriginal Youth Council

THE YOUTH COUNCIL

They’ve put together a youth council that brings together one representative youth from each province to talk about important issues. When these representatives return to their respective provinces and communities, they meet with their provincial youth board, and then they return to their communities to let their peers know what the latest developments are. Each board member has a personal responsibility to disseminate information and act as a liaison between the community and the council. This way, each member feels respected, worthwhile, and a sense that their work is important. This way, they are fully engaged and active in their community. This is an important responsibility. The AYC also acts as a youth advisory committee to the Friendships Centers and are thus engaged in a strong partnership with them.

“Great leaders start young”.

Ashley Norton, Aboriginal Youth Council

The AYC is the real deal. They pass motions, make important decisions, they have a code of ethics, and they hold a national youth forum at a different place every year. Youth gather from all across Canada, to hold elections, do workshops on hot topics like the Indian treaty, get cultural teaching from their elders, leadership and empowerment workshops, tobacco cessation, and meetings with provincial and national staff. Here, youth are exposed to a myriad of topics where at least one is likely to affect them directly, whether they know it or not. They get a great amount of exposure and

witness their peers getting involved in all sorts of things that can hit home with a lot of disengaged youth.

“You have to start training youth early and let them experience what it feels like to be a decision maker early on in life, and this way they will be better prepared to lead their generation tomorrow.”

Ashley Norton, Aboriginal Youth Council

Each friendship center across the country tailors itself to the needs its community. Some may have drop-in centers for youth, while others may focus on support for young single mothers or any other issue the center’s community would like it to focus on. This highlights the importance of flexibility when it comes to an organization engaging youth. Rigidness is not the right way to go. What works in some areas may not be the best in others. Be in tune with the interests of youth and be ready to “bend” accordingly. This is not to say that you should bend over backwards. Not at all. But to successfully engage youth in *genuine* partnerships, you’re going to have to give up a little control and make a few concessions.

WHAT ADVICE DO THEY GIVE?

“Don’t force youth to talk when they aren’t comfortable doing so. Sometimes, before giving input, youth just want to absorb. Start small, and invite them into an informal environment. For the first meeting(s) let people sit about and intermingle (young and old) and offer food and drink. It would also be advisable to not dress up too professional, as in, suit and tie. Someone who looks too professional can intimidate youth and they may feel like they don’t bring anything of importance to the meeting. One of our great ice-breakers is our sharing circles. We sit in a circle and go around the room and take turns answering a question, such as: why we’re here, why we believe in the project and who we are.”

Ashley Norton, Aboriginal Youth Council

Sharing circles are a simple yet effective way to break the ice and create plenty of conversational opportunities for members at later times.

WHAT THE YOUTH FRIENDLY GUIDE SAYS

The informal atmosphere allows for emphasis on making connections between generations and fostering strong communication (two of the five principles for intergenerational partnerships). The guide explains that making intergenerational connections is excellent for young people to gain wisdom from older members and for young people to bring fresh and creative views to the scene. Communication is also crucial so that everyone has a better understanding of where everyone is coming from and will thus be able to work more effectively together.