



Gwaii Trust Society

Queen Charlotte Youth Centre: a safe, creative space for teens

By David Archer

“Drugs R 4 Slugs.” “Chanty Town.” “They Were Children.” If you’ve been out past the Bear Park in Daajing Giids *Queen Charlotte* lately, you’ll have noticed vibrant new street art and slogans on the concrete. And maybe you enjoyed last summer’s Pride Concert or got to snack on some venison jerky made by local teens. The neighbourhood has been looking and feeling a little brighter recently thanks to the re-opening of the Queen Charlotte Youth Centre and the enthusiasm of its intrepid new leader, Jay Myers.



Youth Program Manager Jay Myers (bottom right) shows off a chanterelle mushroom harvest alongside youth and helpers at the Queen Charlotte Youth Centre

In summer 2021, Gwaii Trust Society provided a \$10,000 Youth Centred Communities grant to support the QCYC’s operations, and specifically the hiring of the new youth program manager. Since Jay came on board with the Village of Queen Charlotte, and with assistance from outgoing coordinator Julia Weder, he’s been hard at work putting on programs at the youth centre.

“I’m passionate about this work because I really see the future in our youth,” says Jay, who has a background in community organizing and working with youth in the areas of mental health and addictions. He recognizes the ways today’s kids struggle from personal experience. “I also had a hard time as a youth. I was bullied a lot. And I really remember having mentors, people that I looked up to.” Jay wants to hold space for today’s youth by not only creating fun programs, but by earning trust so that local kids have someone they can reach out to when they’re in trouble, like he did.

With its new manager in place, and Covid-19 restrictions waning, the QCYC soon began opening for weekly drop-ins where youth aged 8-19 could hang out after school. Jay has

also hosted several workshops, many of which were funded through a separate Gwaii Trust Society youth grant. Some events included physical activities like skateboarding or hiking. Others focused on food or art. During one event, Jay and helpers brought youth out to forage for chanterelle mushrooms and then preserve them by canning. Another time, the kids made venison jerky. Youth have learned to make medicine bags, drums, and linocut prints this year too.

You can see some of the art the kids have made on the skate park, which doubles as a concrete canvas for spray paint. Youth have been able to express themselves this way, and they’ve learned a few things too. Jay introduced them to the history of graffiti and street art, the vibrancy it can bring to a community, and the ethics surrounding the artform, such as the importance of painting in sanctioned spaces like the skate park.



Street art at the skate park

Jay believes street art builds confidence and validates the experiences of local youth. Having fun with graffiti has opened space for conversations about some tough topics. “Some of the kids we’ve been working with - they’re fully aware of the destructive legacy of colonization and residential schools, and there’s a lot of pain,” Jay says. “Being able to express themselves is a really good way [for young people] to channel those emotions.”

Attendance has fluctuated throughout Covid-19, but Jay says the numbers have always met or exceeded his expectations. One highlight was the Halloween dance, which drew about

70 kids to a sugar-fuelled bash with outdoor dancing and a deejay. Events like this have encouraged youth from Skidegate to join in the fun at the QCYC too. Jay is encouraged to see kids from HlGaagilda Skidegate and Daajing Giids Queen Charlotte hanging out together. "I think it's so important to bring people together, and if we want to move into an ideal, harmonious world then we need less segregation."

Ongoing funding is needed to keep this program going, and the grant from Gwaii Trust Society plays a key role. "In my view, what makes this grant so vital and unique is that it's one of the few that supports operations or core funding," says Allison Sinkins, Chief Financial Officer at the Village of Queen Charlotte. Grants for programming tend to be much more common, she says, but none of the programs can happen without a core grant stream. "It provides our youth programmers with a reliable source of funding, and that is why it's critical for the stability of the program."

Mayor Kris Olsen agrees that core funding from Gwaii Trust is vital to keeping the QCYC open. "It's nice to have programs, but if you don't pay someone a fair wage, a living wage, you have [turnover]," he says. "With core funding, we can continue to have consistent employees and have the building open."

Kris has been involved with local youth programming and education for decades and has served as a youth coordinator in both Daajing Giids Queen Charlotte and HlGaagilda Skidegate. He says the youth centre was originally put in place for harm reduction purposes, "to ensure that kids had a safe space to go to." That impact continues today.



Teens celebrate Pride at an outdoor concert hosted by the QCYC

Kris also points out that the consistent investment in youth programming pays big dividends down the line, and fosters togetherness, inclusivity, mutual respect, and care for the environment. "The youth centre is really important to our island community, [...] in learning to love and appreciate Haida Gwaii, and also to understand that we're stewards. Our job is to leave this place in better shape than when we received it." He also believes that providing strong programming and mentorship for youth helps to attract and retain families in the community. "I'm excited because there's so much potential [with the Youth Centre], and the support that Gwaii Trust has been giving us - it's amazing," Kris says.

Jay's team has grown a little since the summer with the hiring of Emily Valente as a youth worker to help run the drop-in centre and create programs. "She has a lot of really amazing ideas," says Jay, "so I'm really excited about what she's bringing to the team."



Kids make colourful art inside the QCYC alongside volunteer Natalie Cresswell (left) and youth worker Emily Valente (centre right)

Along the way, Jay and the team at the Village of Queen Charlotte continue to weave together a safe space for youth from across all South Island communities, bringing people together one event and one conversation at a time.

The Gwaii Trust Society funded the 2021 Queen Charlotte Youth Centre's operations grant through the Youth Centred Communities Grant. To Learn more about the grant and find out how to apply, visit gwaiitrust.com/grants/youth-centred-communities-grant.

Interested in learning more about the Queen Charlotte Youth Centre's programs? Contact Jay Myers, 250 559 4769.

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