

OPEN DOORS

FEATURING THE SUMMIT YOUTH CENTRE HUB,
2020 BCPVPA PARTNERSHIP AWARDS RECIPIENT

The **Summit Youth Centre Hub**, also known as the Invermere Valley Youth Centre Society, is a not-for-profit that functions as a drop-in centre for youth in the Columbia Valley (SD #6 – Rocky Mountain). Ranging from 12 to 18 years old, the youth who frequent the Centre come mainly from Invermere, but also from more remote areas such as Canal Flats and Radium. The Centre has been opening its doors to local youth for 26 years, providing a safe space for connections and resources — and for having fun.

The Summit Youth Centre Hub was a 2020 recipient of BCPVPA's annual Partnership Awards. We are delighted to feature them and the important work they have done, and are continuing to do, for young people in the Columbia Valley.

We had the pleasure of speaking with **Alison Bortolon**, Centre Manager as of August 2020, who also has an extensive history of working with youth.



by
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How did the Centre emerge and what is its mission for youth in the Valley?

In 1992, there were a lot of concerned community members in the Columbia Valley who wanted to do something for the youth in their community. They knew that it was a small town and, because of that, there were limited opportunities here.

In May 1994, the doors to our Youth Centre opened. It began as a fully volunteer-based drop-in program that operated out of a basement. Today, we still operate as a drop-in program, but our capacity and reach are much greater.

One of the core values of the Centre is that we are inclusive and welcoming to every youth. At its core, our Centre is a safe place for youth to come and completely be themselves. We have fun activities like pool, ping pong, and video games, but we also have access to different resources and positive role models.

It might just be the video games that initially get the kids in the door, but our hope is that by continuing to come, the youth will be able to build deeper connections with our staff and their peers.

Our Centre is really focused on giving youth access to resources, opportunities, and providing positive support. Our staff is always ready and available to talk with youth about what's really going on in their lives. Essentially, our mission is to offer connection and to inspire youth.

If we weren't experiencing a pandemic, what would a typical day at the Centre look like?

There is no such thing as a typical day here at the Centre! Some days, the activities are a hit, some days they are not. Some days are heavier, some are super light and fun. If something serious has happened, then it's a matter of sitting down, chatting together, and sorting through how to best to go about the situation.

Before the pandemic started, the Centre had more than 50 kids each night, and we'd do all kinds of activities together. Sometimes we would have a dedicated gaming night which included not only computer games, but also different board games. We often have dedicated cooking nights — which have always been a really big hit with the youth. We don't cook *for* the kids — we cook *with* them. From brainstorming ideas for ingredients and recipes, to planning what games we'll play that night, the youth are included throughout the whole process.

We have also done movie nights, gaming tournaments, painting, music nights, and even held a mini-Olympics! During the pandemic, our amazing youth workers had to adapt and be creative. One time, they even delivered painting kits to each of the kid's houses so that we could paint together over Zoom.

What are some of the most notable challenges facing youth right now?

Boredom and isolation, definitely. Even adults are facing extreme boredom and loneliness with COVID-19. For young people especially, boredom and a lack of social interactions can easily turn into deeper mental health concerns.

Additionally, youth mental health concerns are often magnified in the colder months, as they don't have the luxury of riding their scooters, going to the skate park, or going outdoors with friends.

When one is in the age range of 12 to 18, there's already so much change. With the pandemic and social distancing measures, there's another layer added to that change.

They say that the time between the end of school and when kids go home — between 3:30 pm and dinnertime — is the time when you want positive activities to be happening for youth. Unfortunately, it's the most vulnerable window of time for youth to engage in negative behaviours or activities.

Our Centre, as a drop-in after-school program, acts on that opportunity and gives kids a healthy space and time for positive support, creativity and connection.



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Lisa Tente (right) presents Kelsey Prichard, former Centre Manager at the Summit Youth Centre (left), the 2020 BCPVPA Partnership Award

How is the Centre partnering with schools in the Valley community?

In pre-COVID times, we opened our Centre to students in nearby schools to come during their lunch break. It would just be a communal space for students to hang out, study or even participate in a yoga and meditation exercise led by one of our youth workers. We want to let youth feel that they can come and go as they please.

We've also connected with schools by building relationships with teachers, Principals and Vice-Principals in the area. We had one teacher who wanted to involve her students in the community more, so on Tuesdays, we arranged for her students to come to our Centre to help with recycling and cleaning, and to participate in planning an activity for other youth for that night. This gave the students some ownership and responsibility in their community.

What initiatives does the Centre hope to explore in the future?

As in many communities, mental health is a huge issue for youth in the Valley. I believe it's so important, especially now, to speak about mental health. Personally, when I was in Grade 7, nobody spoke about mental health. That was a no-no. And now, to have these programs in schools is so cool to see – it's so important. It normalizes having the conversation.

On our 25th anniversary, we decided that a big focus of our Centre was going to be on youth mental health. In 2019, we worked in collaboration with other local agencies to offer the Mental Health Program, a series of workshops focused on building resiliency for local youth by increasing practical skills and knowledge through a proactive, preventative framework. This program allowed us to go into schools throughout SD #6 and facilitate discussions, covering topics



from self-care to suicide intervention. At the end of the program, we wanted youth to be able to define mental health and what it means for them, relate their mental health and wellness to their everyday lives, and recognize warning signs in themselves and their friends. They would learn how to help a friend struggling with a mental health problem, self-care practices and where to access services in their school and in their community. 114 grade 4-7 students from across the Columbia Valley have received the series so far. Many Principals from different schools in the area have reached out and encouraged us to keep running this program.

It's more common than we think for youth to have mental illnesses. Many people often misunderstand youth who are struggling with their mental health, because they can't really see those illnesses and there's a fear of talking about it. My goal is to normalize talking about mental health with youth – not only what mental illness can look like, but also what mental *wellness* can look like. For example, together we could discuss and learn about self-care and how to set boundaries with different people.

I had the privilege of going to a Youth Summit once in the Columbia Valley. The youth that attended were asked to pick a topic they were interested in discussing with their peers. Around 90% of the youth that were there wanted to go to the table that was discussing mental health. This shows that youth are willing and wanting to have these conversations.

We're continuing to shift our focus, financials, and physical energy into supporting youth mental health more. In collaboration with the schools in our region, we developed an app for youth that contains information and resources, so that youth can access a resource at any time. If they need more urgent help, there are direct links to the Kids' Helpline. It has been very helpful at making resources accessible amidst the pandemic. We've also made it a priority for all of our staff to go through Mental Health First Aid training.

"IF YOU REALLY WANT TO INSPIRE, INVOLVE AND EMPOWER YOUTH, THEY NEED TO HAVE OWNERSHIP, FEEL INCLUDED IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS, AND HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOU."

More broadly, what advice do you have for school leaders who want to engage the youth in their school more?

The most important thing is just being there to connect with youth. Being there and listening – that is the first step in building a genuine connection with youth. If I went to start a youth program somewhere, and I didn't know any of the kids, I'm going to have a hard time getting traction. They're probably thinking: *'Who is this person? Why are they here?'* Building those connections and collaborating with youth is huge. You don't need to reinvent the wheel – there are lots of resources out there already.

It all starts with conversation, and then it's a matter of getting started.

It's so important to sit and listen to young people and have them tell you what they want or what they think is best. If you have a bunch of adults talking about what they think kids need and want, well, you might hit some points. But if you really want to inspire, involve and empower youth, they need to have ownership, feel included in the decision-making process, and have a relationship with you. If they know what they want to do, or to see more of, they are naturally going to be more engaged and want to be involved in making things better.



All photos are courtesy of Summit Youth Centre Hub

