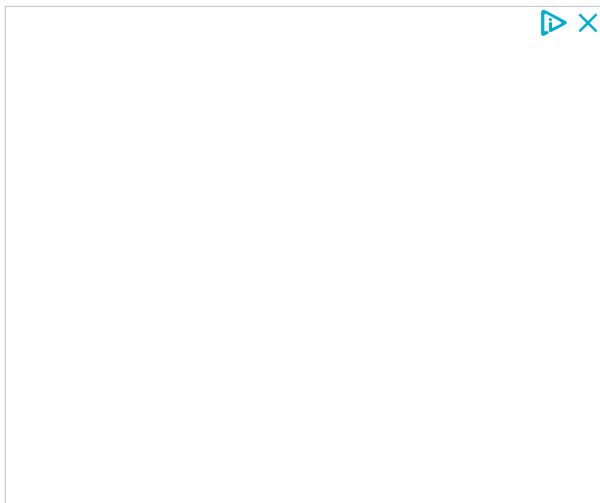


Inter-generational connections make good things happen

Sharon MacKenzie is a teacher and inter-generational advocate who believes that older generations and youth can benefit from each other

CONTRIBUTED / Dec. 30, 2012 3:00 p.m. / LIFE

Sharon MacKenzie



Special to The Morning Star

“I have nobody. I need someone.” — Amanda Todd

FACT: There are more people on the planet than ever before.

FACT: People share e-messages within seconds.

FICTION: That we are meaningfully connected.

I'm 64 years old with three grown sons. I recently gave one an earful because for three weeks we had texted and sent random photos. I had not heard the sound of his voice nor sensed the timbre of his tone to know if he was content, harried or healthy. Yes, we were connected, but no, we were not.

Having nobody and needing someone are serious issues that confront two generations — young people and older adults. Governments lack sufficient flexibility, funds, and personnel to cure the ill of social disconnection. The answer may be to prevent the debilitating circumstances of social isolation by “becoming community.” There is untapped inter-generational power that can build resiliency to heal what ails us. “I have nobody. I need someone” is not just the call for help of Amanda Todd, it is a call from Canadian society. We as individuals need to stop viewing our neighbourhoods as locations, and start interacting face-to-face within them.

At some time in our lives, each of us will find ourselves alone and isolated as a result of death, divorce, re-location, as a new parent, a reluctant retiree, or as a neglected child. Circumstances of disconnection make us vulnerable. If someone is not there to fill the void within, we may fall victim to depression, addictions, suicide, gangs, or we may turn to Cyberspace. But Facebook can be faceless and texts are text without context. Nothing replaces the warmth of human kindness.

Governments and institutions fund programs that grapple with the complexities of teen bullying, depression, addictions and suicide. Meanwhile at the other end of the age continuum, they fund projects to promote awareness of elder abuse, self-neglect, depression, addictions and senior suicide. In aged and youth, isolation is now a leading health concern. It costs us lives. It costs us money. It causes us despair.

Two generations, opposite ends of the ageing spectrum, both facing astoundingly similar issues, both looking to be empowered and connected. Could working inter-generationally be a winning double-dip?

Canada's history is proof that generations working shoulder-to-shoulder create resilient community, but now we disconnect generations. We develop paths to efficiently target age groups: seniors in seniors' facilities, high school students in high schools, middle-age in workplaces, First Nations in residential schools, pre-schoolers in pre-schools. In disabling inter-generational strength, the middle generation is left to care for both the young and the old. But why not let the young and old together form a coalition of care with each other? Co-participating as age-friendly partners, they can positively address some of the very criteria in which depression, lack of purpose, and isolation are rooted.

Ministries of Education are proposing project-based learning, a community-context approach. We know historically that elder knowledge was revered as part of teaching, tempering, and applauding youthful creativity. Schools and community can once again offer opportunities for building respectful

bridges between youth and older adults, an inter-generational stand against ageist attitudes, isolation and bullying.

Prevention is the key. It's easy, cost-effective, and it will work.

Regardless of how much money government hands out, how many dedicated volunteers work, how trained staff is, or how strong the family unit, there will never be "enough" to correct all that plagues us within the social milieu. Party politics come and go, families split and move apart, and education and health care run the race between burn out and responding to the myriad problems in an ever-changing field.

Everything costs more and takes longer, with no promise that funded programs are sustainable. What we do have is children and youth with time on their hands, and a bulging demographic of older adults. We have the people power.

It is unfortunate that it took the death of another young person to re-focus our attention on how important respectful face-to-face relationships are to our societal wellbeing. How many more calls for help do we need to hear? As individuals within democracy, we must all take personal responsibility for the solution and act now.

Research shows that purposeful and simple inter-generational activities make positive differences. They bring long-lasting strength to participants who reflect, "I have someone. I do not feel alone."

So, what are we waiting for? One place to start is with excellent resources newly developed by government and not-for-profit in Canada. Check them out at www.intergenerational.ca and then do something.

Sharon MacKenzie is a former Vernon resident now living in Victoria. She is a parent, grandmother, teacher and inter-generational community advocate.