

Lessons Learned:

Bridging the Gap Between Seniors and Youth

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE - Ancient Tools for Modern Times: Youth Gain Life-Changing Perspectives in an Intergenerational Project Inspired by Suicide and Truth & Reconciliation

MARKHAM, ON, June 13, 2019 - After experiencing two youth suicides within 6-months, Sociologist and Dance Educator, Elisha MacMillan made a commitment to support youth in mental health and self-expression. The short film, "Lessons Learned: Bridging the Gap Between Seniors and Youth", showcases students of Markham District High School and seniors from Markham Seniors Activity Centre who were partnered in a social experiment that aimed to reduce isolation in seniors & youth and bridge the gap between generations. Both groups were led through a series of events and experiences, some of which responded to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action. The project took place from March – June 2018, and the film was released on June 1, 2019. Surprising discoveries include, intergenerational connection as a tool to counteract cell phone addiction, anxiety and depression in youth.

Growing up in a multigenerational, multicultural household and living in West Africa as an adult, gave MacMillan a clear understanding of the importance of intergenerational connection. She observed both Canadian youth and seniors were facing challenges, confirmed by Statistics Canada;

- According to Statistics Canada, the Canadian age group that suffers most from anxiety, depression and substance abuse are between the ages of 15-24 years old. In the same Canadian Community Health Survey, 1 in 7 youth ages 15 – 24 reported having suicidal thoughts.

- Psychologist and Professor at York University, Ami Rokach, says loneliness in seniors is a public health crisis comparable to obesity. As many as 1.4 million seniors report feeling lonely, according to Statistics Canada.

MacMillan wondered what would happen if the two groups were brought together, and applied for federal funding aimed at fostering connection between local seniors and youth. The project concept was to bring together students of Markham District High School and seniors from the Markham Seniors Activity Centre, through a series of events and experiences.

The initial challenge was evident, as there was scepticism on both sides. The two groups were led through a process of sharing personal stories, food and photos, learning together and working towards a goal. The magic began to unfold and the student/senior connections took on a life of their own. The film tracks this journey, along with personal reflections of seniors and students.

This project gave MacMillan the opportunity to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action (63 iii). Under the category of 'learning together' seniors and youth learned about contemporary challenges faced by local Indigenous people, through an experiential visit to Georgina Island First Nation, guided by Jake Charles, *Na-nock-ashee*, a traditional Anishinaabe knowledge sharer, teacher and cultural guide in his community of the Chippewas of Georgina Island.

Before the group trip, students spent time learning from Charles, who shared about his life journey, which involved ongoing struggle with addiction and discovering the source of his pain and anger. Students learned about drumming and indigenous tools as a way for healing, and the importance of Elders, who supported Jake to turn his life around.

The inspirational film lays out a simple framework for other communities who are looking to bridge the gap between seniors and youth, while offering a solution that just might work for youth who struggle with cell phone addiction, anxiety and depression. With average wait times of 1 year for youth in crisis to receive support, we need to find creative solutions at the grassroots level.

"As someone with depression and anxiety everyday life has been getting more difficult. However the minute I left the seniors I felt like a little kid again. I was able to see the world in colour once more..." MDHS Student Participant, Allison Brealey, *Lessons Learned: Bridging the Gap Between Seniors and Youth*, 2019

Watch the 20-minute film at: rhythmisforeveryone.com/lessons-learned

Check out the 1 minute trailer: bit.ly/lessons-learned-trailer