

OUR HISTORY

Harbour Youth Services of Thunder Bay, a non-profit registered charity, was originally known as the Harbour Boys' Club. The organization was conceptualized in 1971 and incorporated in May of 1975.



The Harbour Boys' Club model, with a motto of "Kids Come First," was initiated by a local law enforcement officer, the late Walter Serkowney, and a handful of individuals who shared a concern for the needs of young people in our community. An analysis of petty crimes and vandalism committed by young boys along the city's harbour front revealed that most of the offences were not committed as a result of wilful destructiveness. Indeed, most of the youngsters had run afoul of the law because they had few positive outlets for admittedly over-active energies and a lack of adult role models to help guide them in a positive direction.

What was needed, it was decided, was something that would allow these young boys the opportunity to become involved in a program that offered both educational and emotional support in a positive environment. *Prevention* was the key factor.

During the initial years, programming evolved around the needs of this handful of young boys and was scheduled by a small core of volunteers after work hours and on weekends. Activities were driven by the team's commitment & tenacity and resources were scraped together through persuasive "begging" for donations and offers of free access to facilities to help accommodate activities. As the word spread among youth in the community, the program grew and quickly exceeded the resources available. Walter eventually left the force to become totally involved in what he perceived as his true calling. He would go on to serve as Executive Director for the next 30 years until his retirement in 2002. He continued to actively serve on the Board of Directors until his death in 2006.

By 1976, the organization had established firm roots and was successful in acquiring core funding provided by the provincial government. The program evolved to include girls and the organization was renamed Harbour Youth Services of Thunder Bay. The stability of core funding made it possible for the organization to rent space in the north ward of the city to headquarter the administrative operations and house

a youth drop-in centre. It also served as the base for providing extensive citywide outreach programs made possible through acquisition of two 15-passenger vans that were used to pick up children at their homes for community recreational outings, service-learning initiatives and skill-building activities. The program expanded to a seven-day a week operation and also supported a bi-weekly parent participation program. The program served up to 185 children per year in the community outreach program and an additional estimated 85 children annually in the Youth Drop-In programs, and consistently held a wait list of well over 100 children wishing to join the program, thus demonstrating the popularity and need for the services provided.

Over the 25-year period of core funding agreements with the Ministry of Community & Social Services, Harbour Youth Services provided services for well over 1,500 children, youth and their families.

During this time HYS was the recipient of many awards including the Sally Horsfall Farr Award in 1994, an award established by the Trillium Foundation to recognize important contributions to the Foundation and to social services throughout Ontario. HYS also received the National Crime Prevention Award from the Solicitor General for Ontario in 1986 and 1987, and the City of Thunder Bay Distinguished Contribution Award in 1997.



Walter Serkowney, founder, and one of the original Harbour Boys Club members.

A SHIFT IN DIRECTION...

In 2002, a change in government resulted in cuts to social services within the province including the complete cessation of core funding for our programs. At this time Harbour Youth Services and similar organizations began to see a massive shift from provincial funding of core operations to project funding, often without recognition of the need to sustain the administrative operations of the organization. This forced some dramatic changes to the HYS organizational direction and structure of Harbour Youth Services.

Following the cessation of core funding, Harbour Youth Services (HYS) transitioned toward providing school-based after school programs for underserved elementary school children between the ages of 6 and 12, to ensure that they would continue to have the opportunity to be involved in positive, productive activities during the critical after school hours between 3pm and 6pm. Although a significant downsizing of program services occurred, the quality of programming and commitment to helping kids prevailed. The new program model was dubbed The “Kids Come First” Club.

The “Kids Come First” Club was piloted at St. James Public Elementary School. The St. James inner city school location was selected because of the vulnerability of the population that accesses the school (a large number of families in poverty, single parent households, aboriginal families immigrating from reserves, etc.).

The goals initially established for our “Kids Come First” program were directed toward supporting literacy and social skill development for children in grades 1 to 3. Research has shown that many children learn to read by first grade, but for those who don’t, catching up is very difficult without additional support. Further, children who experience problems with language and literacy skills often have co-existing struggles in social-behavioral adjustment. This compounds the challenges these children face and jeopardizes their prospects for school success and positive social relationships.

Participants were selected based upon greatest needs first; we looked at behavior, academics and family support. After these children were registered, we accepted participants on a first-come, first-serve basis and we had a waiting list based on positive response and the spread of word among families.

PROGRAM EXPANSION

As the “Kids Come First” program evolved, we also began to recognize the need for a “booster” program to reinforce our original prevention goals for participants as they transitioned beyond grade 3 through the middle years.

The “Kids Get Active” program expands upon our flagship “Kids Come First” program model by increasing opportunities for participation in arts, life skills, sports, nutrition and wellness and service learning initiatives.

WHY ARE AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN IMPORTANT FOR THUNDER BAY?

Based on 2006 census data, Thunder Bay children in the middle years (6 to 12) account for approximately 11% of the population. During the vulnerable after school hours between 3 and 6pm, these children need positive places to go where with the help of caring adult mentors, they can participate in activities that help develop their social, physical and academic abilities as they navigate adolescence and head into their teen years.

According to the 2008 Quality of Life Report for Thunder Bay (*Tranter – United Way*) “Thunder Bay continues to have a higher than average rate of violent crime and property crime”. More disturbing is the fact that “youth crime in our city is more than twice the provincial average,” making it all the more important for youth to have access to positive places such as HYS.

The “Review of the Roots of Youth Violence 2008” (*The Honourable Roy McMurtry, Dr. Alvin Curling*) reports “a disturbing lack of places for youth to gather, play or create. This leaves youth with the greatest need for such facilities with no positive outlet for their energy and time, no space or facilities for creative self-expression and no place that fosters contact with coaches and other positive mentors. There is a similar lack of space for organizations seeking to work with youth”.

Harbour Youth Services has been grateful for the support of the Lakehead Public School Board in providing access to school space to facilitate our programs. The Board recognizes the value of schools serving as community hubs and an effective use of publicly funded facilities.

As a community we owe it to children to provide them with the opportunity to participate in programs that help them be healthy, safe and secure, able to learn, become socially engaged and responsible. That’s precisely what Harbour Youth Services’ prevention-focused after school programs have to offer!