

Youth speak through pictures - Chronicle Journal: Local News

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Brent Linton, CJ staff

A group of youth who have been homeless have conveyed their experiences through photographs while taking part in I Have a Voice — A Youth Photo Voice Project.

A reception was held at City Hall on Wednesday with many of the photo project participants being joined by partners and supporters of the project.

“Youth homelessness looks a bit different than adult homelessness and it starts differently,” Cynthia Olsen, Thunder Bay Drug Strategy co-ordinator told The Chronicle-Journal.

“It starts with family conflict, dynamics and having to possibly couch surf for a little while — stay at a friend’s house and still not have a place to call your home,” explained Olsen.

The project gets youth to share their experiences and show what their lives have been like through a participatory process with photographs rather than words. Olsen hopes the pictures will be display in variety of location and that the youth homelessness will be talked about.

“For the last several years, youth under 24 represent about 20 per cent of the population at Shelter House and at one point in time we did have a stand-alone youth shelter,” said Olsen. “At this time we don’t, but we do have some hopes that there will be some changes to that.”

Nine youth from a variety of backgrounds and situations took part in the project.

Amber Towedo had two photographs on display. She was honoured to participate in the project.

“I was thrilled to be a part of this and said yes as soon as I was asked,” said Towedo who is 17. “This has given me a lot of hope. . . . It has made a huge impact on me knowing that my voice is heard and I am able to use my voice to be heard by other youth who are going through the same thing that I went through.”

Towedo has now gone through a treatment program and is getting her own apartment soon.

Her advice to other is: “Learn how to love yourself and you can go a long way with that to success. . . . You have to become clean and genuinely happy with yourself — acknowledge that you have potential.”

The project had a special guest speaker, Joe Roberts who is the author of From Skidrow to CEO and was formerly homeless as young person.

Last May, Roberts began pushing a shopping cart, symbolic of chronic homelessness, across Canada in an effort to raise funds and awareness to end youth homelessness.

“We wanted to do something to create a legacy and pay it forward, Canada is a country that has given me more than I deserve,” said Roberts, who calls his journey the Push for Change. “I wanted to take that story and really mobilize communities and talk about what we can do, one community at a time, to support vulnerable young people.”

Roberts believes looking at the core issues like family conflict, mental health and addictions are things that can be addressed before a young person leaves home and finds themselves on the street.

“We know where they are. They are in a classroom. We know that they are struggling, ask their teachers or parents. . . . If we dramatically reduce the numbers of young people entering into the system, we can, in effect, change the

adult homeless as well.”

Roberts praised the photo project and the involvement of community partners as key in the power of community engagement. His own Push for Change campaign has had similar support, particularly from the Ontario Provincial Police.

On Sunday at 10 a.m. at the Current River Community Centre, Roberts and the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 966 have invited the community to go for a walk around Boulevard Lake and hear from Roberts about homelessness.