

Thriving

children • youth • families

 Growing Edge Training online journal



Finding a Way

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When Alex first walked into the Chantal Berube Youth Centre in Beaumont, Alberta, our team was immediately drawn to him. Who was this very tall, full-bearded young man? He had a warm smile and seemed to be a leader among our youth with whom we already had relationships. Once we confirmed that he was, in fact, not an adult and he was only fifteen (the full beard threw us off), we started to build rapport with him.

Over the next few months, Alex started coming to the centre more often. His presence frequently brought trouble at the centre and elsewhere in the community.

We often heard him being labelled as a “druggie” or “criminal” by residents and teachers. He would stop in the centre drunk or high. The team would have to ask him to leave for the night but not before offering him something to eat or a glass of water. Sometimes he would get angry and become physical with his peers, and a fight would break out. We had many interactions like this with Alex. He would stop in, noticeably stressed, and pace the centre while on the phone. We would give him some space but still gently ask him questions: Are you hungry? Can I fix you something to eat? Nine times out of ten he would ignore us, and sometimes he would even be rude. Still, we let him pace away and reminded him that if he needed anything we were there for him.

When reports surfaced in the community that he was causing mischief, the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) would stop in to the centre and ask us if we had seen him. His beard was always a giveaway! The nature of our work is not always understood by our community partners. On one occasion, an RCMP officer suggested that the centre was housing criminals and we were supporting crime by allowing Alex to come into our building and access our services. After a few deep breaths, I tried to provide an explanation to the officer. Although he had made poor decisions, Alex was only fifteen years old and without support and guidance in his life. We were able to see that Alex had strengths and wonderful qualities about him such as humor and kindness.

In our work and commitment to the cause of helping young people grow through challenging times, we were not about to label him a “criminal” and write him off. Even if he displayed behaviors that were scary or that didn’t go with social norms, he would always be welcome at our centre. We believed in him and knew that he was more

than the problems he caused. Often people say “it takes a village.” We wanted to be a safe and helpful stop in his village.

When a youth is asked to leave the centre, they are required to have a conversation with me, the supervisor, before being allowed access to our facility again. In the follow-up conversations that I started having with Alex from incident reports

at the centre, he slowly started to trust me and open up about his life. He was a young man who was struggling. He was a young man that

faced adversity every day of his life. He told us he was in conflict with his family. He stated he felt like they did not understand or care that he was struggling, and believed they were dismissive of his feelings about being stressed and anxious. His mom and dad were struggling with the stress in the family. He had a sister that did well academically, and Alex felt like all of the attention was always on her. His attendance at school was sporadic. He was often in trouble from teachers for not showing up to class or for showing up high and unable to function in the classroom.

The community labelled him as “defiant” and “a bad kid.” He disclosed to one of our team members that he had been engaging in self-injurious behavior by cutting to cope with all of the stress. We were able to connect him to our outreach counsellor. Over the next year, we would get together and talk—not always at the centre. I would meet him at our local restaurant or the coffee shop. We would spend time chatting and getting to know each other. No matter what was going on in his life, I would remind him that the team at centre would always be there for him. We wanted him to be healthy. We believed in him. Sometimes he would share that he was using drugs and that he was dealing to make money. I would remind him of the resources in the community that he could access for support. I wanted him to feel safe sharing what was going on without casting judgement or pretending that I had solutions for him to turn his life around. I think that is why he always came to me. He knew that I would be there to just listen. Our conversations were a safe place for him to express himself freely.

One day, he disclosed that he had come home late in the night and had a serious physical altercation with his father. He had packed up all of his stuff as best as he could and left the house. He had slept in the dugout at the local baseball diamond for

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a couple of nights. Then, a friend lent him a tent. Finally, a centre team member was able to set him up in a house through a contact at her church. We took him to Walmart to pick up some necessities. I took his bag of clothes home and washed them so he would have clean clothes. We took him to our local grocery store and stocked him up with food that was easy to prepare. Some contacts at the high school shared they were thinking about kicking him out of school because of his poor attendance. When Alex and I talked about school he expressed that he did want to graduate. He was having a tough time getting to school and concentrating while he was there. I set up a meeting with the principal, and we were all able to come to an agreement: Alex could finish out his education at our local outreach school.

At our round table discussions in team meetings, we would chat about ways we could support Alex to finish school. We worked with his outreach teacher to create a reminder schedule laying out when assignments and tests were due. We would message Alex and offer a ride if he needed one. One morning, his outreach teacher informed me that Alex had not shown up for a final but he still had time. I called Alex and rushed down to his house to pick him up and take him to his exam. He was able to finish and pass his diploma exam. When Alex received word that he would be graduating, we were all so happy and proud of him. He sent us a picture of himself in his cap and gown. We have the picture displayed on the "Grad Board" here at the centre. I often wonder what would happen to these kids if the city and our sponsors did not support us in our mission to be a safe, helping resource for them.

The Chantal Berube Youth Centre celebrated its doors being open for 15 years in September 2019. The centre is named after a young woman, Chantal Berube, who tragically and suddenly died at the age of twenty eight. Chantal could make you laugh from the deepest parts of your belly. She loved music and often sang even though she almost always messed up the lyrics to the songs which resulted in more belly laughs. She was one of those people that you could count on no matter what—a true friend, daughter, sister, and advocate for those less fortunate. Chantal was the first supervisor of the centre and tirelessly advocated for youth in the Beaumont community. She was a very skilled, relational youth worker and always made sure young people knew they were valued. She helped the youth become the best version of themselves, and we do our best to carry on her work here at the centre. Sometimes in the community we hear that the centre is "where the bad kids go" or "druggies hang out there." We provide a safe

place for youth to access mental health supports and referrals. We build trusting, meaningful relationships with peers and adults, and we participate in preventative and educational programming.

The traditional greeting among the Masai people in Kenya and Tanzania in Africa, "Casserian Engeri," means "and how are the children?" It is indicative of the value placed on the young people in a community and the wellness of the community. Our centre strives to be a place in our community where children and youth from all walks of life have the opportunity to be well.

Many youth that utilize the centre are experiencing difficult family dynamics and family breakdowns, homelessness, and mental health and addictions issues. The team at the centre believe in strength-based supports for young people. When youth feel they have nowhere else to go or no one to talk to, we want them to know that they can come to us. We operate from a place where we believe that building a trusting relationship with each youth is the most significant component to safety, growth, and healing. We look at behavior as one way young people are communicating what they need or simply *that* they need. The centre strives to provide a safe place for youth to explore who they are and achieve their own individual potential. When a young person walks into our space, we want them to feel welcomed. We do our best to learn their names and follow up with conversations. Youth express to us that we are like family and that we provide adults who listen without judging and help guide them down the right path. Not all youth have strong family bonds. The centre is a place where youth can connect and build relationships with adults that will provide support no matter what. The centre isn't just a building in the middle of our community, it provides immeasurable aspects of home and family to many.

Alex writes, "In the small town of Beaumont, I have discovered a marvelous place for youth and young adults of all kind to gather at a safe place with a very heartfelt group of staff. My experience at the Chantal Berube Youth Centre was an unforgettable journey. The centre has provided not only me, but dozens of other troubled young youth, with food, water, friends, a shelter, and a safe atmosphere with no judgements. A safe light in a dark place."

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