

Beyond Learning to Canoe

by Dale Duncan

Getting outdoors can get some youth out of trouble, but funding such programs is a hard sell.

Twenty-year-old Franki Lodge and her co-workers listen intently as their supervisor goes over the day's agenda. Tomorrow, they head out on their first camping trip of the season and there's a lot of work to be done.

The excited group sits in a circle on the ground outside the clubhouse, where the 26-foot canoes are stored. To their backs is a quiet beach and a lake that stretches to the horizon. It's a scene familiar to anyone who's spent their summers working as a camp counsellor in Ontario. But Lodge and her team aren't on the shores of Georgian Bay or Lake Huron. They're at Sunnyside Beach in Toronto. Walk toward the water and you can see the CN Tower and a cluster of high-rises in the east marking the city's busy downtown core.

Lodge and her crewmates help run Toronto's Inner City Outtripping Centre (ICOC), an outdoor education program aimed at inner-city youth. Started in 1995 to reduce conflict between rival gangs in Christie Pits Park, the organization has since grown to include the Paddle and Picnic program (day camps where kids, teens and even seniors canoe up the Humber River); the Toronto Recreational Outreach Outtripping Program (TROOP) Trip (three-day camping trips where police officers and youth portage, paddle, cook and set up camp together on McCrae Lake near Georgian Bay); and two-week leadership programs, which include a week of training and a week of camping.

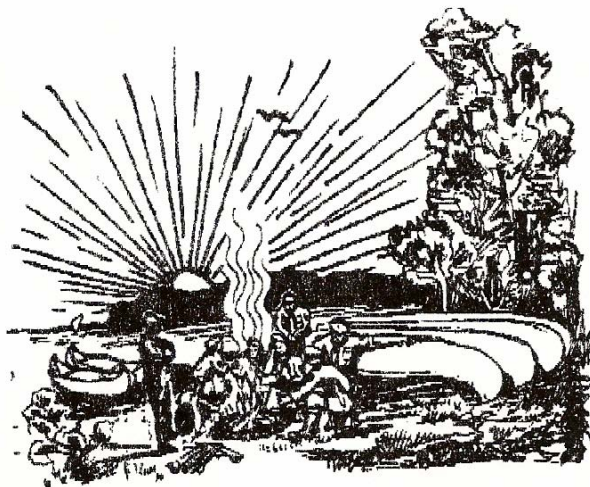
While many people debate whether building more basketball courts or community centres is the best way to help solve the problems of gangs, drugs and violence, the ICOC takes advantage of the many spaces that already exist in Toronto, getting kids and teens to see

and experience the city in ways most of us rarely consider.

"A lot of kids that come down [to Sunnyside Beach] are amazed that there's a lake you can't see the other side of. Or they've never seen swans before — and they've lived in Toronto their whole life," Lodge says. "We help them see that they don't need that media buzz. We take them away from all of that."

Despite the large spider that'll scare her out of the clubhouse an hour from now, Lodge considers herself lucky. While others her age prepare for a summer selling burgers or washing dishes, she gets to teach the J-stroke, picnic in High Park and swim in Sunnyside pool. The experiences she helps provide may motivate a few of the kids she works with this summer to turn their lives around as she did after participating in the program four years ago.

"The TROOP Trip involves taking bad kids from bad areas and showing them that there's more to life than gangs, guns and drugs," explains Lodge, who grew up in Rexdale and joined the trip when she was 16 years old. "When I was approached with the idea of going on trips with cops, I wanted nothing to do with it. A friend talked me into going."



At the time, Lodge had dropped out of school and wasn't speaking to her mother, but her experience with the program changed all that. Each year, TROOP Trip participants who show interest and take initiative are asked to join a once-a-year, end-of-the-summer trip to Temagami. Back then, Lodge was one of the campers invited to go.

"Just going through the program and being called back was a complete wake-up call. I saw how people viewed me when I took responsibility," Lodge says. Campers are expected to help out with every aspect of the trip, from portaging to setting up the tents to cooking the meals. "The summer after, I got to come back to volunteer with the Paddle and Picnic program. I did a complete 180. I went back to school and I dropped certain people from my life."

One of Lodge's co-workers, 19-year-old Aislinn Malszecki, who's starting his second summer working for the ICOC, has seen a change in some of the adults who participate in the program as well. "The big focus is on kids getting to know the cops, but in my opinion, it's also about the cops getting to know the kids," Malszecki says.

Lodge agrees. "[The police] see a kid that comes over wearing a b-boy hat and pants down to his knees, and looking like a thug and they think he's up to no good. They learn that just because a kid dresses like that doesn't mean that's what's in his heart," she says.

As a testament to the ICOC's popularity, its programs were booked solid last summer. Parks, Forestry and Recreation employee Allan Crawford, who oversees programming for the centre, would like to see outdoor education programs expand. "Thirty-two per cent of our youth are not finishing high school, so if your only point of contact is high school, you've lost nearly one-third of the kids," Crawford argues. "Outdoor education has been formalized to the point that a one-week inoculation during an entire school career is seen as meaningful."

Crawford would ideally like to see the city play a larger role, but despite the benefits of recreation programs, he says garnering financial support is a challenge. Politicians are more likely to put money into a park than a program such as the ICOC, he explains. Once a park is built, some additional funds will be required for upkeep, but people can use it freely without the aid of paid employees. Programs, on the other hand, require the same infusion of funds each year. Cutting a program is often more noticeable than making cuts to the maintenance of a park. Politically, it's a difficult commitment to pull out of.

"Funding happens in three-year blocks, so there are not a lot of long-term plans that can be made," says Crawford. "But it's programs, not places, that are important."

Crawford has been pushing the idea of building a lodge at the mouth of the Humber River where groups similar to those involved with the ICOC could meet and spend the night before hiking or canoeing along the river. A team of architects has already drawn up plans for a sustainable building for the site after a request for proposals went out in 2000. Despite the city's current infatuation with improving the waterfront, no one at City Hall is working to move the idea forward.

"We're less connected," Crawford argues. "We're changing the way community is formed and the way community functions. We're very quickly getting into trouble." Thankfully, for Lodge, trouble has been averted. She plans to go to university to study English literature and maybe even become a professor.

"I'm really fortunate that I went through the program," she says. "Now I want to give back what people have given to me."

Dale Duncan is an ESL teacher in Toronto. Her article about Toronto's Inner City Outtripping Centre was first published in Eye Weekly, www.eyeweekly.com/eye/issue/issue_06.08.06/city/news.php. It is reprinted here with permission.