

'Youth Are Awesome' is a unique volunteer experience

Young people thrive writing their own blogs

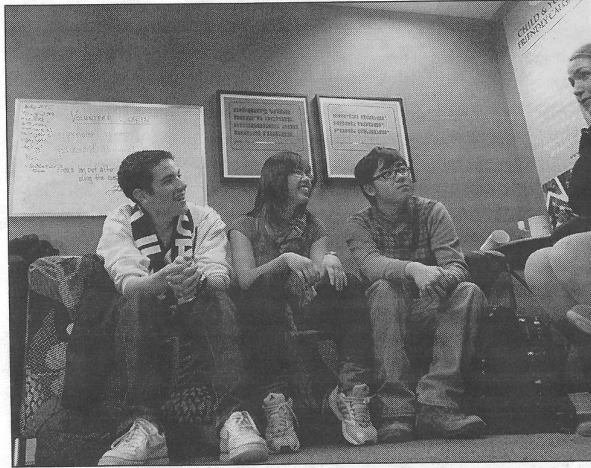


Photo: Samara Hawkins/Calgary Journal

Bloggers gather at Youth Are Awesome headquarters at Youth Central, a Calgary organization with volunteering and youth programs. The bloggers meet once a month with program staff to discuss the blog's advertising, layout and design elements, and to also discuss future blog topics.

SAMARA HAWKINS

shawkins@cjnewsdesk.ca

A Calgary-based blog is making it easier for young people to connect with city events and share new experiences with their peers, while gaining volunteer experience.

Youth Are Awesome fosters a creative and open environment for 12 to 18-year-olds blogging from home. It also gives writers an opportunity to attend concerts and theatrical performances.

"It's opened me up to a lot more things that are out there," said Anna Murynka, 17, who has been writing for Youth Are Awesome since September 2010. "I would have never considered being a restaurant reviewer, but then I got to do some reviews and I really like it."

Wanting to volunteer more, Murynka faced obstacles in getting around the city without the aid of her family.

"I have to get my parents to drive me and they're always so busy," she said. "With this, I can directly contribute from my own home."

Lisa Bui, 18, who blogs under the screen name "lisa aka 'Mangomaru'", said she likes using the site to connect with the community.

"I was able to appreciate what was happening in the city, tell other people and get others involved to say, 'Hey, there is a concert coming out that's really good,'" Bui said. "I get to interview directors and see what's behind the scenes."

The posts on Youth Are Awesome range from arts and culture to viral videos. The open environment encourages youth to write about whatever they choose, including hot topics in Calgary and around the globe.

Blog Allows Creative Freedom

Andrew Phung, program director for Youth Are Awesome, said he recognized a need for a youth-based blog in Calgary.

"I wanted a place where young people could have creative freedom," Phung said. "I wanted to have a positive place for young people to come, write, share ideas and interact."

Youth Are Awesome is one of many programs run through Youth Central — an organization connecting youth with volunteer activities and programs in the community.

"We can take as many bloggers as we want," said Jennifer Hilliker, the program co-ordinator. "Even if English is their second language, they can come to us if they have a passion for writing, and they can absolutely come aboard."

The program was launched in June 2009 and has seen a steady increase in members, from five to 20 bloggers in the last year and a half.

Google searches have helped the popularity of the blog that draws people to the site because of its relevant and timely topics.

between users.

Youth Are Awesome has also incorporated video blogs or vlogs into the content of the site. On

The website also allows bloggers to develop and share opinions about the world they live in. "We're making a big push

for city politics to be critiqued, to be discussed," Phung said.

"I think those things apply differently to this generation, so I would like to see more (blogs like Youth Are Awesome). We've done research for

—Jennifer Hilliker, program coordinator

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Jan. 20, Hillborn posted his first vlog on the topic of the upcoming Google Science Fair, and promised viewers that his videos would become less awkward in the future.

this kind of thing around Canada, and we haven't seen another site like this in this form."

For more information, go to youthareawesome.com

Blog Site Has Thousands Of Hits

Phung said he checked the site one day to discover that it had amassed 1,200 hits, because a blogger had interviewed Ashley Kirilew, the Ontario woman who faked cancer in 2010.

"It was all on one article," Phung said. "It's all because people were Googling that girl's name and we were the first thing that came up."

The site's traffic has continued to grow over the past year, with more readers commenting on the writers' posts. Unfortunately, the traffic increase has also created more opportunities for negative and hurtful comments to surface.

Ben Hilborn, 18, who writes under the name "TheGentleman-Scholar," said they try to moderate content when necessary.

"It's the hot topics that bring views to the site, but it's the controversial stuff that we have to be careful about writing," Hilborn said. "It's a pretty open community; we get comments on our posts and it's nice because you get the gentle feedback."

Hilborn added that comments are moderated to stop "flame wars," or derogatory arguments