

Against All Odds, Canadian Charity Finds a Way to Support Toronto's Vulnerable Youth in Absence of Usual "Summer Camp"

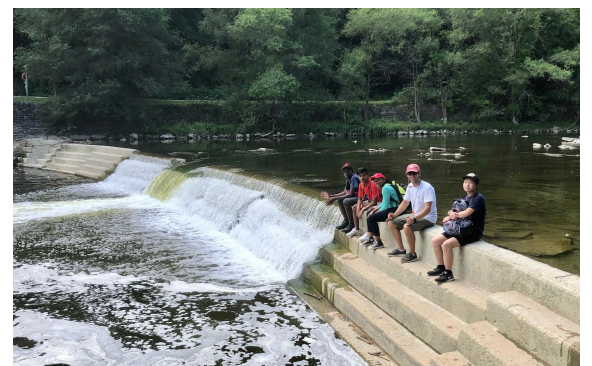
Trails Youth Initiatives' redesigned camp program provides essential connection in Toronto's urban wild

TORONTO, August 24, 2020 – Trails Youth Initiatives ("Trails"), an award-winning charity, has successfully completed its sixth week of an eight-week Trails City Day Camp, finding a way to replace the traditional summer sleep-away camp for 85 of Toronto's vulnerable youth. Trails has changed the lives of more than 500 participants in its 28-year history and, in the face of a global pandemic, the charity designed a completely new program that celebrates Toronto's urban wild while maintaining critical connections with participants and families.

"When COVID hit, I worried about how we could maintain the vital line of communication with our youth. I knew we had to and would find a way to be there for our families who rely on us," says Melissa Millward, President, Trails. "If you can't bring youth to camp, bring camp to the youth. Regardless of privilege, we are proving that nature, connection and community are accessible to everyone, wherever we are, even in the heart of the city."

Trails challenges, equips and empowers vulnerable youth from high-risk areas to become contributing members of the community. Participants accepted into the Four Seasons, Four Years, For Life program normally attend Trails Lakeside, the organization's 143 acre property near Stouffville with their group of 20 peers for two weeks every summer, and one weekend a month during the school year, for at least four years.

This year, COVID protocols meant Trails was unable to provide transportation or overnight accommodation. Virtual programming, online classes, Instagram challenges and phone call check-ins acted as a positive buffer as staff re-imagined what camp could look like in an urban setting. Trails City Day Camps have empowered youth to explore Toronto's urban wild and experience essential developmental challenges as they canoe on the Humber River and spot wildlife on hikes in Morningside Park.



Trails was built on the belief that all youth — especially those facing barriers based on race, income, education and neighbourhood — benefit from a long-term, consistent approach to engagement, one that uses outdoor experiential learning to teach leadership, resiliency, and conflict resolution, as well as physical and mental wellness. Racialized youth and those from single-parent families are three times more likely to drop out of high school and 55% of students from low-income groups do not apply for post-secondary education[1], yet Trails participants, of whom 89% identify as BIPOC and over 90% live in a single-parent home, have a 100% high school graduation rate and 72% pursue post-secondary education with the help of Trails' bursary and mentorship program.

A first-year participant said, "I was bored at home, I had nothing to do. I wasn't allowed outside. Because of Trails, I had something to look forward to everyday." Low-income families are disproportionately affected by COVID with amplified food insecurity, declines in mental and physical health and precarious living situations highlighting the role that routine, consistency and accountability play in youth development.

"Without knowing what to expect, both my kids attended," shared Trails parent, Carlis Dunbar. "Abigail couldn't stop talking about paddling on Lake Ontario and how it has inspired her to take on bigger challenges in life, even though things may seem hard." The Dunbars are one of the 40+ families attending the Family Day Camps at "Trails Lakeside" where the entire family is invited to find respite in the woods. "I'm so thankful to Trails for inspiring youth leaders and setting them on the path of seeing what is possible," said Dunbar.

Despite the changing environment, "Trails will continue to evolve and our commitment to empower youth is stronger than ever," said Melissa Millward, President, Trails Youth Initiatives. To see how Trails participants are finding purpose in each day, please follow @TrailsYouth on Instagram. More information, including how to donate, can be found at www.trails.ca.

[1] Toronto Foundation 2019 Vital Signs Report: https://torontofoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/VitalSigns2019_09_Learning.pdf

About Trails Youth Initiatives: Trails has a mission to challenge, equip and empower vulnerable youth from at-risk areas of Toronto to become contributing members of the community. The "Four Seasons, Four Years, For Life" program represents experiential education at its best, emphasizing the growth and strengthening of skills such as leadership, non-violent communication, conflict resolution, critical thinking, goal setting, stress management and reflection for the 156 participants currently enrolled in the 2020 program. Trails relies on the generosity of non-government donations from individuals, companies and foundations such as the MLSE Foundation and the Deacon Legacy Grant at the Toronto Foundation to provide life-changing experiences for its participants. Trails was recently ranked one of "Canada's Best Charities" by Maclean's and Charity Intelligence.

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