

Ottawa Girls Make the Most of their Time Helping Others Grow

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Through these camps, girls aged 10 to 14 had a chance to spend part of their summer doing constructive activities they otherwise would not have been able to take part in for financial reasons. Thanks to grants from non-profit, private sector and

government agencies, camp attendance was free.

AESOP held their inaugural camps for girls in inner-city neighborhoods, offering a combination of math and language tutoring, sports and leisure activities, including fascinating outings.

Better than watching TV

Lita Ryall, a student in Recreational and Leisure Services at Ottawa's Algonquin College, was able to apply her knowledge for the benefit of AESOP campers. "I was in charge of the afternoon recreation and sports, crafts, teaching games, leadership activities, etc.", she explains. Her role involved leading team-building activities; trust games and teaching communication skills to help the girls get along with each other. "I am learning about their family life, their social status; the way different people grow up and take things for

granted, how excited these children are to have this opportunity. The danger is for them to end up sitting at home and do nothing all day whereas here they learn amazing skills, they get to go swimming and do arts and crafts. They would not be able to do that if it weren't provided to them, especially in this location, which is a pretty rough part of town. I think they are really benefiting from this."

Amanda Valente, ia a graduate of University of Ottawa teachers' college. She was involved with planning and setting up AESOP from its very inception in October 2004. Through her work with youth at a local community centre, she was able to ask parents what they thought about the idea. "They said it would be wonderful for their daughters because they would get the academics; this was not just a recreation-based camp. Plus because

it's free, they actually afford to send their daughters to camp. The parents comment every day they're really glad their daughters aren't at home, sitting in front of the television, doing nothing."

Perseverance pays off

AESOP started small: the first week, only 5 or 6 girls attended. Several others had been unable to solve transportation difficulties. Camp staff went ahead anyway and their efforts were soon rewarded. "Once they started realizing the camp was fun and they were actually learning things, we noticed that in the second week, a lot of their friends were calling for applications", says Amanda. "That alone has been wonderful because it shows that the girls actually enjoy it and are getting something out of it."

Personal enrichment made real

Character building talks were also a part of the programme at AESOP. The first week, they focussed mainly on friendship and inclusion, which helped dissolve little cliques that were already starting to form.

Campers were encouraged to come up with their own ideas on how to practice certain virtues such as generosity, modesty, optimism and cheerfulness, kindness, etc. One day, they went outside and illustrated their ideas on the sidewalk and parking lot through chalk painting. Another day, they made bird feeders to be delivered to a nursing home, putting into practice what had been discussed about being generous and thinking of others.

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