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Students Find Ways to Help Kids in Ottawa

A newsletter from ASEOP (Association for Culture and Educational Development) talks about summer projects organized by some members of Opus Dei in Canada.

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What do I do with my Summer?

Imagine you're 12 years old. You've scraped through final exams and the summer holidays have begun, but

because your parents are struggling to make ends meet, they can't afford any pricey diversions to keep you occupied. So it's up to you to figure out what to do with all that free time. But you can't – mostly because you're just 12 years old.

That's a dilemma a lot of kids on the cusp of adolescence face, and one that some university students in Ottawa decided to tackle. They'd attended formational activities at Parkhill, a centre of Opus Dei next to the University of Ottawa, and had learned from *St. Josemaria Escriva's teachings* that one important way that Christians could improve the lives of others was by helping them to use their time to prepare for the not so distant future.

One of the students, Jean-Pierre Chabot from Moose Factory up near James Bay, had already participated in Toronto's Academic Sports

Enrichment camp, or ASE – a very successful program sponsored by Ernescliff College that uses an enticing blend of sports and academics to get the kids in the Regent Park area off the streets and into more constructive pursuits. Chabot and his friends decided that with a little imagination and tinkering, the ASE program could be adapted to Ottawa's needs (or those of many other cities for that matter). And so was born ASEOP, or the Academic Enrichment and Sports Ottawa Program.

Getting a programme started

ASEOP recruited twenty-four boys between the ages of eleven and thirteen from all over Ottawa, which made arranging transportation a nightmare for the organizers. But after a shaky start, things began to gel. ASEOP's goal was to provide children with a mix of academic,

sporting and cultural activities that would foster their personal development and help them integrate into Ottawa life. And the signs that the program would work weren't long in coming. Right from the start, the boys went out of their way to encourage each other. For example, Gino Tropnas took the time to cheer on a disheartened teammate who had taken a loss in soccer a bit too seriously. And then when Gino ran a lap around the gym dressed in a fire-fighter's full rig – helmet, oilskins, boots, the works – everyone cheered him on. He did a pretty snappy job of it, too.

Career Dreams

Gino's run, however, was more than just a bit of light-hearted fun. It had a serious purpose – to introduce him and the rest of the group to career possibilities that might not have occurred to them. Pierre Savary from

Ottawa's Fire Prevention Division simply dazzled the boys with a Power Point presentation that not only explained what a tough job fire-fighters do, but also helped to illustrate the importance of teamwork, which just happened to have been the subject of that day's talk. It's opportunities like these that allow young boys to dream. When they're exposed to jobs at a young age they develop those dreams. It's part of growing up and setting goals. It marks the first stage of taking on responsibility, of choosing one path over another and moving on. Gino might never become a fire-fighter – but he's thinking about it.

Jean-Pierre Chabot: “There is a certain expression that always seems to follow the grasping of an idea or a solution to a problem. As an AESOP monitor I think the greatest achievement comes from being able to recognize such "looks" and then

trying to create day-to-day activities that foster those expressions to rise above expressions of discouragement and frustration. I think that what lies behind these looks are what makes any type of teaching experience rewarding. Erix Escobar, Tobias Mwandala, and Gerhard Freundorfer can attest to this directly. Being able to teach the boys attending the program by example and by subject matter is both a real service and a learning experience.”

By land, air or sea

On July 31, six of the boys in the camp tested their tolerance of heights in a four-person Cessna. Simon Garrett, the head instructor of the Rockcliffe Flying Club, had prepared tables and umbrellas for the group to use during lunch. There was also a large field beside the airstrip that was used to play a game of soccer. As some of the boys can

recall, not everyone got to the club at the same time. Jean Pierre drove some of the boys in a van from downtown. However, the majority of the boys had to get to the club by public transportation. As for those who went in the airplane, they thoroughly enjoyed themselves. The six boys who flew were chosen for their outstanding effort during the first two weeks of the program.

Jean-Pierre: “Six of the boys who take the program really seriously for the first few weeks are chosen to fly in an airplane. The Rockcliffe Flying Club has supported this activity for two years now and every year it becomes a highlight of the program for those who end up flying. Most of the boys have never been in a small plane before and the experience is really inspiring for them. Since many of the boys come from rough neighbourhoods in Ottawa, even though they may come from

excellent families, dreams like that of flying can often be crushed by the social influences and the problems they face each day. I get more knots in my stomach from watching the excitement of the boys just before they head up in the plane then I probably would get from being in the plane myself.“

The Academics

Daily activities in ASEOP started with two one-hour classes in math and English. The classes, given simultaneously to two groups of 12 boys, featured plenty of games and practical exercises to facilitate learning. The goal was to improve their skills in these areas as well as to instil good study habits in the participants.

Character Building Talks and One on One Advising

Classes in the morning were followed by a talk on such topics as friendship, study, teamwork and respect for others. These talks gave the boys in the program a chance to develop their personality as responsible individuals. They are taught the basics in living such human virtues as punctuality, order, respect for others and fortitude to finish work begun. They also learned the great value of friendship.

Each boy who entered the program had the opportunity to speak on a one-on-one basis with one of the monitors. This provided the monitors with a chance to emphasize the ideas highlighted during the talks thus helping the boys set personal goals for themselves.

Erix Escobar: “In Parkhill, the centre of Opus Dei that I had attended, I found myself getting encouraged to go beyond myself and not to be

satisfied with mediocre efforts in school, or in any other endeavours. Mediocrity is not very inspiring. Now I find myself trying to encourage the same drive in people younger than I am. It made me feel that my contribution could help them a lot. In fact, being the math teacher, I remember that most of the boys took the work quite seriously even though it is particularly difficult to study in the summertime. Moreover, some kids showed a particular interest in the subject and were eager to learn more than what was planned. The kids surely made ASEOP a lot of fun. I am glad to have been able to participate in it”.
