

York's youth polarized between haves, have-nots

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

York Region is becoming home to two increasingly polarized classes of young people, a summit on youth issues was told.

On one hand, youth are enjoying greater educational, technological, recreational, cultural and social opportunities than ever before.

But there is a growing population of alienated youth who are faced with problems ranging from homelessness and street drugs to violence and loss of community.

The challenges and success stories facing today's youth were addressed at the region's first-ever summit on youth held yesterday at Cardinal Golf Club in King Township.

More than 200 participants, including youths and experts from fields ranging from health and social services to policing and recreation, took part in the event.

According to York's social services commissioner Joann Simmons, almost 50 per cent of the region's homeless enumerated during a three-month study in 1999 were under the age of 25.

"We have some very big issues with youth on that front, as well as many other fronts," she said.

"We really want to hear from you and learn from you, so please teach us."

Complaining government has traditionally done a poor job listening to the voices of young people, Newmarket Mayor Tom Taylor also expressed dismay with the region's growing youth homeless problem.

In addition to young people liv-



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

April Yue of Markham District High School speaks on various issues at the Youth Forum at Cardinal Golf Club in King Township.

ing on the streets or in doorways, Taylor warned there is a growing number of young people who live such precarious lives on the outskirts of society they run risk of becoming homeless at any given moment.

He hopes the summit will serve as a catalyst to deal with the issues facing youth.

"I know it's a cliché to say our children are our future, but we need to acknowledge it's a fundamental truth," he said.

"We need you in the future to guide us."

At the same time, Bethany Moore, a 16-year-old Stouffville student and co-chairperson of the summit, said the youth of today are making great strides.

They are more involved in shaping their futures than previous generations.

Unlike teenagers of the 1960s, Moore pointed out today's youth have learned they can often get further working with adults than hold-

ing noisy protests.

She also said this generation of young people has come closer to abolishing racism than ever before.

Urging her peers to stand as a generation of action, Moore encouraged teens and young adults to find a cause they believe in and dedicate themselves to making their communities better.

During a brain-storming session, participants of the summit identified a number of trends, challenges and opportunities facing

today's youth including:

- An increase in the use of street drugs;
- Increased consumption of alcohol;
- A growing rift between youths who feel connected to their communities and those who are alienated from mainstream society;
- An increasing number of young people who are considered profoundly vulnerable, meaning they are dealing with multiple issues such as addiction, mental health problems and lack of education;
- A lack of recreational and artistic opportunities;
- Barriers to educational and employment opportunities;
- A decline in family time;
- Decreasing emphasis on teaching youths morals and values;
- An increase in the number of wealthier children who have many privileges, but few responsibilities;
- Increased sexual activity and pregnancy;
- Increasingly diverse educational pursuits, but only for those youths who learn how to access the system;
- A decline in physical activity;
- Increasing youth violence and a growing sense young people aren't safe in their schools or communities.

According to regional planning statistics, there are 102,000 youths in York between the ages of 15 and 24. They make up 14 per cent of the region's population of 775,000.

Markham has the largest percentage of youths in the region, with 33 per cent. East Gwillimbury, King Township and Whitchurch-Stouffville have the fewest, each with 3 per cent.

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