

COMMUNITY: Organizations go co-ed, welcome diverse chapters to attract members

Youth groups change with times

BY SANDRA BOLAN
sbolan@yrmg.com

These aren't your grandparents' youth groups, York Region.

Shrinking enrolment and growing competition for young people's time have forced some organizations to reinvent themselves during the 21st century.

They offer courses in everything from welding to leadership. Some have gone co-ed to attract members. Others have gone outside their usual zone, ethnically and geographically.

4-H isn't just for farmers anymore.

The youth group that turns 100 in 2013 and was once known for helping farm kids show off their calves, now offers programs in photography, history, outdoor adventure, welding and even chocolate making.

4-H, has not, however, abandoned its roots as an agriculture-based organization. It still offers programs in ploughing, farm safety and cattle showing. The twist here is that many of those participating in the agricultural-based programs are city slickers.

"It's pretty neat to have a girl surrounded by concrete to have that natural touch of a kid surrounded by a farm," said Glenda Hamilton, president of the York 4-H Association of a dairy club member she had from Toronto's High Park area.

The change in focus for 4-H was a conscious one the organization embarked upon in the 1990s to attract more members.

"4-H is one of the best kept secrets in the province," said Marie Winter, manager of member services and development for 4-H Ontario.

4-H, like many other youth organizations, initially only attracted boys, although it was not a male-only group. In the 1920s it started offering homemaking-type of programs to entice the girls.

It worked.

'Value systems have been sadly lacking in our school systems for many years and are just now returning. Youth groups play a critical role here in developing our future leaders.'

Since the 1980s, according to Ms Winter, membership is a 2:1 ratio of females to males.

While some clubs still attract more females than males, such as sewing, there is one 4-H club that attracts them both equally - welding.

"In the end, the girls really want to know how to do that," Ms Winter said.

Another organization that has transformed itself to remain relevant is Scouts.

Originally known as the Boy Scouts, the orga-

nization became fully co-ed in 1998.

Along with teaching outdoor survival skills, it now also offers those highly-coveted badges in snowboarding, computer technology, pet care and photography.

"While the outdoors is still our primary focus, we've kept up with the times and realized kids use these tools," said Susie Mackie, communications specialist for Scouts Canada.

Scouts has not only embraced activities that interest a 2011 youth, it has fully embraced the area's cultural diversity.

In York Region, there are 12 Chinese and one Muslim group.

"Canadian society has changed so much over the many years. There are so many new Canadians and what a better way to welcome them into Canada ... and the scouting program," Ms Mackie said.

Scouts hit its peak membership in the 1960s. What followed was a steady decline for three decades.

It was only about 10 years ago the 1st Ballantrae Scouts, which started in 1955, had one Beaver troop. But it wasn't because the kids weren't interested. It was because there weren't any adults interested in being leaders, according to Doug McDougall, registrar for 1st Ballantrae Scouts.

SCOUTS NOT JUST BOYS

But thanks to hard work by a couple of the volunteer leaders they did have, the group has been rejuvenated.

"As long as we get the young kids, we feed them all the way," Mr. McDougall said.

In an era where youth groups might be thought of as uncool, how are these organizations able to attract and retain kids?

"We all need to belong. This is particularly important for young people who are trying to find their way," said Steve Kent, chief commissioner of Scouts Canada.

The organization as a whole, according to Ms Mackie, has experienced a resurgence over the past three years with a 103-per-cent increase in its membership over last year alone.

"We suspect parents are embracing scouting because parents are going back to those values," she said.

The fundamental beliefs of Scouts are: duty to God, others and self.

You know them best for their cookies, but long before scouting became co-ed, if girls wanted to take part in outdoor adventures, they joined the Girl Guides.

When Scouts started accepting girls, enrolment for Guides dropped.

"Guiding has, for the first time, not only in Ontario, but across Canada, experienced a membership growth," said Marnie Cumming, provincial commissioner of Ontario Girl Guides.

Joanne Iannuzzi, community guider for Stouffville Girl Guiding, attributes the uptake



STAFF PHOTO/JIM MASON

Ballantrae scouts, cubs and beavers show off their numbers at a meeting this spring.

to the organization listening to what the girls want, but without compromising the organization's core values of friendship, fun, care and respect.

That also means no boys.

"Annual surveys to the membership indicate a strong desire to remain female-only," Ms Iannuzzi said.

But not all is good in Guiding. In 2010, about half of the organization's 33 Ontario camps were sold due to under utilization. None of those camps were located in York Region, according to Ms Cumming.

"A lot of the response we get from parents is that kids are doing two and three things. We'd prefer we be their 'thing' but that doesn't always happen," said Kathleen Murphy, unit administrator for the York Region area.

One youth group that has carved out a unique niche is the cadets, which has air, army and sea divisions.

Originally created to get teenaged boys interested in preparing to join the Royal Canadian Air Force in the early 1940s, it now offers just about anything a youth could ask for from an organization: sports, leadership training, camping, music and citizenship events.

Air Cadets is funded by the Department of National Defense, in partnership with the Air Cadet League of Canada, but its members are not a part of the military, nor are they expected to be.

And for the most part, they don't enlist.

The organization is also no longer exclusively male.

"We recognized it really shouldn't be a boys club," said Captain Scott Harvey of the recently formed 707 Marion Orr Air Cadet

squadron in Whitchurch-Stouffville of the shift that took place in the 1970s. "I think we've gone a long way in terms of understanding gender equality."

However, it remains a male-dominated organization with only about one-third of those enrolled being female, according to Cpt. Harvey.

"I'd like to see it 50-50," he said.

While kids were joining Scouts, Guides and 4-H in the 1960s through to the 1990s, the cadet organization remained relatively unknown, until 9/11.

"With our participation in Afghanistan we saw what the military meant to our country," Cpt. Harvey said.

LISTEN TO GIRLS

While enrolment has since dipped across the country, it remains steady in York Region.

Whether it be cadets, Scouts, Guides or 4-H, the one thing youth organizations have in common is they want to help nurture a youth into becoming the best adult he or she can be.

"It takes a village to raise a child," Cpt. Harvey quoted. "Value systems have been sadly lacking in our school systems for many years and are just now returning. Youth groups play a critical role here in developing our future leaders."

"A youth group is the start of a network that can support them for the rest of their lives, regardless of the program being presented," Cpt. Harvey said.

For more information, go to www.4-hontario.ca, <http://www.scouts.ca/dnr/>, www.guidesontario.org or www.cadets.ca

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