

# What Really Happened at YouthCAN 2015

## Participant Summary



### YouthCAN Conference 2015

It was a rainy day in Toronto when hundreds of youth arrived at the [9<sup>th</sup> Annual YouthCAN Conference](#) taking place at Humber College North Campus from August 10 to 12. In case you didn't know, the YouthCAN conference is a successful annual event that brings 250+ former and current youth in care to a college campus to communicate the benefits of formal education. The immersive program celebrates post-secondary education and facilitates networking among youth in care and those who advocate on behalf of said youth. The event is consistently important in the lives of Canadian youth who grew up in foster-homes and (or) as Crown wards.

[YouthCAN](#) is organized by those who have lived through those same experiences and provides these youth with helpful tools to advance in their education. YouthCAN has become a powerful *ally* and staple in the success of foster children moving beyond life in care. To really describe YouthCAN's position as an *ally*, I have to take you through my favorite portions of the days I spent at the event.

On the first day we arrived, we were greeted by the OACAS YouthCAN team for the youth panel. At the youth panel we met several youth directly involved in the foster care system, and they graciously shared their experiences, challenges, and tips for overcoming obstacles and ultimately completing a post-secondary education.

After a quick supper we met for the YouthCAN professional panel. That same day we were inspired by the victories of youth who were Crown wards or "troubled youth", and were also mentored by professionals with stories of their own and tips for moving on to finding a career after completing your education.

After that point I personally went on to watch the NCAA Basketball game taking place at Humber College: courtside seats, a Humber swag bag, and complimentary popcorn. Who could complain? And the day wasn't done yet. After that all the youth went on to socialize and create new friendships at the dance.

The second day is where we were invited to take a closer look at the realities of being a youth in care or former Crown ward through four organized workshops. The first workshop was on personality profiles. We used charts with various descriptive images to identify ourselves as an outgoing, curious, organized, or empathetic type of person based on which photo chart we most related to.

The second workshop was on being an ally, and it focused on the difference between equity and equality. The ally workshop on privilege was a representation of the way society works. Many of us, including youth like myself who were abandoned by our families and (or) removed from desperate home lives, lost out on certain privileges. For those of us who grew up with a little bit less (be that emotionally, mentally, physically, and (or) financially), success is dependent on how close we can get to the "front of the room" (i.e., support, formal education, opportunities, and connections).

Growing up, nobody ever tells you that so-and-so has a better chance in life because he or she has a stable home life, formal education, more money, stronger social ties or skills, is of a certain gender, is of a certain race, and (or) is able-bodied, among many other factors. Our presenter explained that our society will tell us to try harder, practice more, and work more without assessing the reality of the privileges some of us do or do not have. That's when she (our presenter) advocated for allies: those who are not only willing to encourage the less privileged but actively involve themselves in the success of those who are struggling. YouthCAN, the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, and Humber College are *allies*.

We moved on to a gripping workshop on homeless youth. Homelessness is a reality that many youth in care face. I was very struck by the documentary we were shown on homeless youth, as well as the work the workshop host has done at his shelter to ensure that teens with nowhere to go can still retain their dignity and reintegrate themselves back into leading a happy life in time.

The final workshop had everybody expressing themselves. The presenter showed us two descriptive and well-worded poems and then had us write our own. She also held an icebreaker where everybody *got what really grinds their gears off their chest*. Following the workshop was the talent show, karaoke, and movie night, another essential bonding experience for all the youth. Following this we closed the final day with a long walk through nature and the closing ceremony.

YouthCAN aims to *communicate, advocate*, and offer a *networking* opportunity for children with a foster care background. The 9<sup>th</sup> Annual YouthCAN Conference certainly accomplished this! As I made my way back home following the conference and opened up the warm fuzzies I'd received (anonymous notes we each wrote to new friends from the conference), I knew I had created some strong bonds that had the potential to last a lifetime, all from one event.

It was very important for youth to have the opportunity to communicate with other youth who had similar backgrounds. Furthermore, it was equally important for all of us youth to meet others who had grown up like us but still managed to form a comfortable life for themselves where they had educations, careers, real friendships, and a home. Lastly, it was encouraging and essential for us youth to meet our *allies*, people who not only encouraged us to do well but actively involved themselves in advocating on our behalf for the tools that we need to go that next mile.

