

Culture Report 2019

**YOUTH
UNLIMITED**
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"CALLING A GENERATION BEYOND ANTI-BULLYING"

The Great Pivot



**BY TIM HUFF,
COMPASSION
SERIES LEAD**

"Do whatever you can! Anything! Everything!" If I was being bullied and anti-bullying campaigners were near, this is what I would beg of them.

Indeed, those invested in anti-bullying work and messaging – survivors, advocates and allies – have profound conviction and great passion. They speak out against something that wounds so many. I say, support them whenever and wherever you can!

There is a way, though, in which "anti-bullying" can be perceived as working to end bullying but going no further, which sounds a lot like aspiring to a culture of people who "tolerate" one another. This strikes me in human and humane terms as a ridiculously low calling and an anemic vision for the next generation – that they would simply tolerate one another.

In the context of my faith, the notion of simply tolerating one another is a non-starter.

Imagine if after the Last Supper (John 13:30), Jesus had implored his disciples: A new commandment I give unto you, that you tolerate one another as I have tolerated you. But, of course, that is not what he said. His edict was to love.

Perhaps a simple but profound pivot is in order: To create communities where we are not just tolerated but where we belong and thrive – together – we must move beyond tolerance toward the greater goal of love, by way of compassion.

The word "compassion" comes from the Latin *com* meaning "together or with," and *passion* meaning "to suffer or endure." Ultimately, to be compassionate is to come alongside, to share in the burden, to "endure with." Compassion is among the truest expressions of agape love.

We are often prone to tossing the word around with a sugar-coating. But we are best not to be confused; tearing up over a sad storyline in a tragic movie or heart-wrenching commercial is not compassion, not really. We often short change the gravity and beauty of compassion's calling. Compassion calls us not simply to feel but to do

something with those feelings. Not only to look at life through the lens of compassion, but to step out from behind the lens and live a compassionate life.

It is so easy to say, but living a life of consistent compassion is difficult to do. At my best, I am able to enact compassion in steady, measured portions. At my status quo, tolerating is hard enough. At my worst, a hurting world best not count on me. Still, at our best or worst, whether consistent or erratic, compassionate living is worth our heart's pursuit.

It's worth it because the truth is I can – and do – only believe in a God who does so much more than tolerate me. A God who suffered for me and endures with me. One who knows my

brokenness and calls me to more, despite it and because of it. A God who loves me, who loves you, who loves us all, so much that He is endlessly eager to shepherd us to such life-changing pivots. ■

CONTRIBUTORS

TIM HUFF

PAUL ROBERTSON

SAM MO

PAUL BARTLEY

LEE SOMMERFELDT

DESIGN

RENGA

PHOTOS

UNSPLASH.COM



Girls Online: Persuaded to Aggression



BY PAUL ROBERTSON,
YOUTH CULTURE SPECIALIST

The Pew Research Center reported in the fall of 2018 that 99% of teens are online almost constantly or several times a day. Such is the power of persuasive technology to capture the attention and lives of our young people. Social media companies such as Instagram and Snapchat use persuasive design to prey on the desire of preteen and teen girls – who are wired for relationships – to be socially successful. They are easily conditioned to create a curated image of themselves to get as many likes, retweets, reposts, great selfies and long threads on Snapchat as they can. This new cyber-self works 24/7 hoping to be accepted by people they don't even know.

One of the problems social media obsession creates for our girls is the way they practice aggression. They are not normally physical but are more likely to be relationally aggressive as they try to hurt their rivals' relationships, reputations, and social status. Girls use social media to make sure other girls know they are intentionally being left out of certain activities. Their antagonism takes the form of calling each other out, and posting lies about girls they don't like.

This type of behaviour makes perfect sense when you understand that life in cyberspace has no boundaries and is unlike real life. So what

do we do? Youth workers need to have a plan to help kids have a healthy relationship with their screens. Having open discussions where girls can address this issue is a great place to start. Parents need to hold their children responsible for what they are posting and doing online. It too begins with healthy communication so you

can discern what's really going on in their private lives.

If you'd like a handout with 42 practical responses a parent can use to help themselves and their kids have a healthy relationship with technology, email Paul at probertson@yugta.ca today. ■



Fostering Belonging



WITH SAM MO

Sam Mo works for Youth Unlimited in partnership with East Toronto Chinese Baptist Church. He leads 'the Hubsters', a diverse group of community youth at the Victoria Park Hub.

CR: Sam, have you witnessed bullying at all at the Hub?

Sam: There isn't much bullying in the traditional sense of one person picking on others. It is more subtle, where some youth consciously or subconsciously exclude others for various reasons. I find not only with youth but almost universally, people with similar backgrounds and who are like-minded tend to stick together because it is more comfortable.

CR: How, then, do you shape the diverse community of the Hubsters to be a place where everyone can flourish?

Sam: I have found the key is to first examine myself – putting in the work to see who I naturally exclude and why. Then, to intentionally make the effort to engage, breaking down whatever assumptions I had about others. It is usually out of that place of growth for me as a leader that others will follow and a culture of acceptance is created.

CR: How do you know if you're making space for everyone?

Sam: If we take a step back to look around, I believe we can see who the marginalized are. I think when we see these people, it is important to check-in, engage, and give them a voice because even the act of listening helps people feel more included. As our leaders model this inclusive practice, we start to see the Hubsters youth slowly adopt a culture where everyone belongs, and has a voice. Then we know we're on the right track! ■



Building Compassion in a Racialized Community



WITH PAUL BARTLEY

Paul Bartley serves at Youth Unlimited as a Community Outreach Worker in Jane-Finch, where he grew up.

CR: In your many years in the Jane-Finch community, what shape have you seen bullying take?

Paul: The constant has been the persona to which youth, especially young men, feel compelled to adhere. It's about being tough – 'hard'. The last thing you want to be

called is 'soft' – that gets you ostracized quickly.

However, I have seen bullying move almost entirely online to social media. And what is said is exceedingly harsh – you'd never hear these things in person.

The digital still spills over to physical reality, though. I do see a lot of fights and arguments that happen as a result of 'internet beef'. Kids feel they have to do something face-to-face in response to what's said online.



"WE NEED MORE ROLE MODELS THESE YOUTH CAN LOOK UP TO, WHO ARE ENCOURAGING THEM TO A BRIGHT FUTURE."

CR: Do you believe there are unique contributing factors behind how bullying unfolds in a racialized community like Jane-Finch?

Paul: Yes, I do. Many of the youth are seen and portrayed with negative labels, and this comes out in the way they bully others. The youth are often told they are not good enough, and they don't have a future. Nobody is pushing them or advocating for them. The impact this has on a young person's psyche is incredibly damaging, as you might imagine.

CR: What anti-bullying interventions have you seen in the community? How have the young people you serve responded to those?

Paul: Mostly, schools – along with the police – ran assemblies and handed out literature. Lots of it encouraged youth to share about bullying. Trust of authority figures is still very low because of the abuse that's happened over the years, and so much goes unreported. Nobody talks about getting bullied.

CR: How do you invite young people in your community beyond anti-bullying to compassion?

Paul: I show my young men that we are all family. I let every young person know that they have a purpose – to live out God's calling for their life. Finally, I invite the young men I serve to know Jesus. When you have the love of Jesus in you, you will repay evil with good.

CR: Where do you see bright spots in the Jane-Finch community of young people living compassionately?

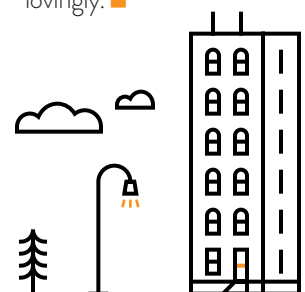
Paul: In lots of places! At our basketball programs, I see youth using encouraging words even when their teammates make mistakes. It's no longer, "This guy's garbage" but is instead, "Good try on that shot, man." Also, there's more acceptance of differences and also more celebration of successes – including for academics. You used to be bullied for getting good grades.

CR: What community supports would be most essential to help support young people in Jane-Finch to live compassionately?

Paul: I think the need for stronger family supports is most significant. Also, we need more role models these youth can look up to, who are encouraging them to a bright future.

Peer support is huge, too. We've got to learn to share emotions and be vulnerable with one another. Recently, to celebrate the birthday of one of our basketball volunteers, our youth shared what they appreciated about him. Our volunteer began to cry as he listened! Seeing this really impacted the kids.

Little by little, I believe we will continue to see more and more young people in Jane-Finch living compassionately and lovingly. ■



Changing Perspectives to be World-Changing



BY LEE SOMMERFELDT

Lee Sommerfeldt is Youth Unlimited's Lead Instructor of our LAUNCH Leadership Course.

When we focus on anti-bullying we focus on the problem, not on a solution. When we challenge young people to see the world differently, to see people differently, that's when change happens! This is our heart's desire at LAUNCH, to inspire our young leaders to have compassion, empathy, and love—and to equip them to impact their world through serving others. Setting their sights on making a difference changes the focus from anti-bullying, to compassion and care for others. Our students are challenged to think beyond themselves and develop a project that is community-focused.

How do we practically live out our vision? In our for-credit

grade 11 LAUNCH Leadership course, students complete a Leadership 360° assessment where they learn about their God-given potential and how they can use these strengths to make a difference. We teach compassion in many ways, and a highlight is our annual street walk. As we take students out onto the streets of Toronto to interact with those experiencing homelessness, they learn that all people have a story and we can't be quick to judge others. Our teamwork class helps the students better understand that all people are different,

and equips students to work together with everyone. Finally, the year ends with teaching on conflict resolution and forgiveness. Students learn that conflict affects everyone (not just themselves) and we teach practical ways to resolve conflict when it arises as well as the importance of forgiveness.

As our young leaders engage in the course they experience change! They see people differently and learn to love and include everyone. They realize the potential they have to help or hurt others. They see the importance of resolving conflict when it arises and the power forgiveness can have. They come away realizing that they, even one person, can have a real, positive impact on a community!

You don't have to be in LAUNCH to create this change in perspective (although we would still love to have your grade 10, 11 or 12 students join the class!). Any parent, grandparent or youth worker can do this. It's all about helping young people see the value of their contribution, and helping them develop a heart of compassion. Look for service opportunities, ways to encourage youth to step out of their comfort zone and interact with individuals they may not interact with regularly. Model empathy, compassion, and love. Start conversations around these topics. Remember God is already at work in these young people! Let God use you to help them see the world differently. ■



YOUTH UNLIMITED

57 MOBILE DRIVE
TORONTO, ON
M4A 1H5
T. 416.383.1477
E. YUADMIN@YUGTA.CA

Youth Culture Specialists

For information on getting one of our youth culture specialists to come and speak at your event, please visit yugta.ca.

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