

CMHA and Loft team up to give youth some bold Choices

By Brock Weir

Chances are, teens, you know what to look for when your friends have had a little too much to drink or taken a toke or two. But, what about self-respect, taking risks, and handling the heady world of social media?

If you're looking for some tips navigating some of the tricky areas of life, think about heading over to The Loft for a summer program of sessions hosted by the Town and the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA).

This week, this dynamic duo launched the first of four sessions in the Choices Program, a free series of talks aimed at encouraging tweens and teens up to the age of 17 make informed and relevant decisions and promote positive choices.

This week's course focused on Communication & Alcohol, while the next session on August 10 will look at Decision Making & Marijuana, followed by Prescription Drugs & Self Respect on August 17, and Risk Taking & Social Media on August 24.

“Youth in our community face difficult decisions and challenges daily,” said Mayor Geoff Dawe in a statement. “The Choices Program arms youth with the knowledge and skills to help make better decisions when it comes to complex life topics.”

The program, created by the CMHA, was inspired from a similar program out of Sarnia where they used existing municipal recreation activities to “sneak in positive decision-making activities,” says Daniel Ridsdale, Aurora's outgoing Youth Coordinator, who left the Town this week for a new position in Oakville. “The CMHA originally contacted us because they wanted to deliver the program to our Leaders In Training (LIT) program, which is actually a summer program. The only problem is a lot of the content was a little bit too salacious for our LIT program because we didn't advertise talking about sex, alcohol, marijuana, prescription drugs.”

Now, they're advertising, and getting the word out that this program is now underway.

“What we did is we created those summer sessions in The Loft (The Town's youth space at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex) so that kids can register to actually learn about those things because obviously they are going to be advertised as that. It is a little bit more digestible because parents kind of know what their kid is going for.”

As he prepared to take leave from the Town of Aurora, where he met with countless youth from across the area, The Auroran asked Mr. Ridsdale to make an educated guess on which sessions he thought would be most beneficial for young adults in the community based on issues he has seen crop up from teens using The Loft and August 17's session on Prescription Drugs topped the list.

Prescription drug use is becoming a particularly prevalent problem for youth between the ages of 12 and 17 in Ontario, he said.

“It is disseminated in the community what alcohol and weed can do to you; however, with prescription drugs, every single drug has its own difficult chemical reaction and effect and damage on your body,” said Mr. Ridsdale. “I think people taking it recreationally is just dangerous.”

What sessions will prove to be most popular? Well, he comes at that answer from a different angle.

“I think because I know a lot of our traffic is going to be coming from parents registering their kids, I think it will be Social Media,” he said. “It is something where the parents have lost the fight against cell phones. Every kid is going to have one now and unfortunately social media is completely unmonitored and uncensored. Once a child has an account, they are completely free and that is going to be a challenge for every parent.”

“I know what signs to look for if they are using alcohol, smoking weed, taking pills, but the damage that can be done by social media so much more invisible.”

Courses at The Loft run each Wednesday in August from 6 ? 7.30 p.m. Register in person at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex or online at www.aurora.ca.

But, teens, don't just leave it up to your parents to register you. They are not here to tell you how to live your life, says Mr. Ridsdale, but to empower you with the knowledge to navigate through life.

“They are not trying to talk our teenagers into not smoking weed or not drinking alcohol and not going on social media,” he said.

“They are not there to tell you how to live your life, simply to help you have the knowledge of the best way to do so.”