

The Loft "walks path" with at-risk youth



By Brock Weir

A kid came into The Loft the other day and threw a handshake down at Daniel Ridsdale, the 27-year-old youth programmer for the Town of Aurora and, for just a couple of seconds, Daniel was at a loss.

"I guess there is a character named Daniel on the cartoons right now, he called me that and threw me this handshake that I didn't know yet, and I just felt like the biggest idiot," says Mr. Ridsdale. "He said, 'Are you okay?' I said, 'Yeah, dude, I'm just tired' when I really have no idea what you're doing, you're cooler than me and that's hard for me right now!?"

In the interests of full disclosure, the young man in question is a lot cooler than this 30-year-old writer as well who isn't even going to guess who the Daniel character might be, yet this is just a snapshot of what kids can expect at The Loft, Aurora's designated youth space at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex.

But, in addition to the video games, air hockey, and other fun stuff going on, there are deeper things going on below the surface, challenges Mr. Ridsdale says he is only too eager to tackle.

Mr. Ridsdale marks one year on the job this month, after a time working in the not-for-profit sector in Burlington, working for the disabled community. Over time, youth in Burlington became a "hot button issue" and his focus.

Joining Aurora and tasked securing a "Youth Friendly" designation for the Town of Aurora (done!), he found the issues facing youth here in Town were not very different from teens in Burlington or Hamilton.

"There is a story underneath Aurora, as it is known all across Ontario and the reputation it has as an affluent community of people who either come here to settle or come here to live in wealth and travel to Toronto," he says. "The impression that the youth who live here are pretty well adjusted is fair, however I found challenges that were happening here [were similar] to those in the Hamilton Area.

"I don't want to seem grim, but it is hard to see that youth who are even in the best socio-economic statuses, in most cases, are still struggling with those issues of mental health and self-harming. I don't want to say that it is popular here, but we see a lot of it. The amount of 16-year-old girls I have met who self-harm was overwhelming."

Since then, Mr. Ridsdale has been putting an increased focus on the "community development" portion of his role. It is a new role in

the Town roster and one that he has been able to shape. Recently, Mr. Ridsdale appeared before Council stressing the importance for a Town like Aurora and, in particular, its youth programs, to frame themselves as a not-for-profit to build bridges and alliances with other community not-for-profits that have the same goals of supporting youth in the area.

'Right now a big focus for us is building our not-for-profit identity,' he says. 'We have developed relationships with the Children's Aid Society and 360 Kids and actually getting those youth who are at our centre disclosing that they are harming themselves, or that they have these intentions, actually aligned with the appropriate social services.'

'As a municipal government, I know sometimes going down the path of working in human services and social services is a little bit risky because that is not the specialty of municipal recreation. However, if you look at it from a broader standpoint, if we just liaise and facilitate opportunities that connect people with those specific services that is where we can fit in.'

For example, at a recent movie night at The Loft, bags of popcorn were handed out to the kids before the film rolled and stapled to each bag of popcorn was information about MOBYSS (Mobile York South Simcoe), an initiative of the Canadian Mental Health Association which provides medical, sexual and mental health care to youth and brings their services directly to them.

Those wanting to know more at the movie night were immediately put in contact with volunteers from the organization that would be able to carry things the rest of the way.

'There is a way to incorporate human services, even in the municipal recreations setting,' says Mr. Ridsdale. 'People want to be where the fun is. Regardless of whether they need help or not, they still need an outlet where they are going to play and where they are going to hang out. You are going to go where your friends are. If you are going to be in a place that is safe, supervised and funded by your municipal government, you would hope that if you disclose to someone 'my dad is using drugs,' that the person is going to have the ability to get you some help on that. You would hope so at least.'

If someone under 16 informs someone in Ridsdale's position that they want to harm themselves, it is a path you have to follow with them, he says. It is important to be up front with if kids start talking about problems at home that he might have to ultimately do something about it but in almost all cases, they will open up, wanting that support.

'There are some youth I keep email correspondence with who have had challenges with self-harming that they admitted, who have emailed back saying, 'Hey, thanks man! I kinda needed that help!' Even though it is challenging to tell your parents about it, it is a little bit easier to tell people like myself who might seem like your peers. They want to know that the things they are telling you are safe. Unfortunately, sometimes being safe is having to share that information. It is nice to see that even after something tumultuous like that, they still value your relationships.'