

## Community Enthusiasm Propels Youth Initiative to Early Launch

by Diane Engelstad

Jim Armstrong's phone began "ringing off the hook" (to use an outdated metaphor) when City funding for a Fenelon Falls Youth initiative was first announced in mid-December 2024. Discussions about the gap of youth services in Fenelon Falls had begun early in the year, at the initiative of [BGC Kawarthas \(Boys and Girls Clubs of Kawartha Lakes\)](#). With the news that plans were now officially afoot, callers were saying, "How exciting! — and how can I help?"

As a Founder and the Chair of [Kawartha Works Community Co-op \(KWCC\)](#), Jim is delighted with the response. "The need has been evident for so long. It's quite clear how much our community is behind this project from the conversations I've been having," he says of the partnership with BGC Kawarthas..

The overwhelming community enthusiasm has propelled the project well ahead of schedule. BGC Kawarthas began hiring staff in early January, with oversight from their Lindsay team. The new drop-in program for young people aged 12 to 18 opened on February 4th, and will run Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:30 - 6:30 p.m., in space rented from Fenelon Falls United Church; for now at least.

"It's a start," says community activist Carol Milroy, who has been involved with the project from the beginning. "But in the long run, there needs to be an actual hub, a place dedicated to youth wellness." She points out that there has always been a need for a place where

young people could be together and find things to do. "In the past we've had the movie theatre, the bowling alley, Boys and Girls Club programs in the old arena, swimming lessons, roller skating, dances, and things like that."

Carol had no trouble finding excitement for the idea of a Youth Hub among teenagers working or visiting at the Museum during the summer. A few of them were easily recruited to the youth advisory committee of the Youth Initiative working group. Avalon Loube, a Grade 10 student at Fenelon Falls Secondary School, attended her first meeting in September. "Everyone listened a lot. They were so encouraging of the ideas I shared, and it made me feel this was real." Aside from ideas for activities that she would like to see, like painting, she hopes to be involved in creating a brochure and a slogan for the initiative.

Cooper Young, a Grade 12 student at Fenelon Falls Secondary, heard about the youth project from his boss, Anna Radey, owner of Slices and Scoops, who connected him with Jim Armstrong. "As an only child," Cooper says, when imagining a place for youth right at his



*l to r: Amy Terrill, BGCK; Jim Armstrong, Holli McConini and Carol Milroy, KWCC.*



*Back, l to r: Cooper Young, Carol Milroy, Sophia Entzin-Telford; Front: Ella Austin-Scollick*

doorstep, “I would have been there for sure.” He “practically lived at the arena” for hockey. But for many activities of his youth, he had to travel to Lindsay, including for Boys and Girls Club programs. “I’ve always been involved in community,” Cooper says, and he is glad to be able to contribute to developing the youth initiative in the time that remains before he heads off to University of Ottawa in the fall.

“Study support,” says Ella Austin-Scollick also a Grade 12 student and a member of the working group, “for example, just having someone read over your assignments — would have been so helpful for me.” She’s excited for future youth to find “a place for teenagers to be teenagers” without having to be a “customer.” She is especially excited about opportunities for youth to explore a variety of specific interests that might serve them well beyond their school years.

Sophia Entzin-Telford, who joined the working group in January, hopes that the youth venture will become known as “a safe place” for many young people in Fenelon Falls. Sophia, also in Grade 12, would like the initiative “to provide space for young people to express themselves.” She hopes tutoring support and opportunities to learn life skills like cooking will be a real benefit to

youth. “All of that could have been helpful to me.”

About three dozen community members have come forward so far, attending meetings, and offering to volunteer and assist with fundraising. Sophia, Ella, and Cooper hope to continue their input and involvement, even as they pour themselves into university life. Everyone recognizes that early programming is just the beginning. The long term vision is for a permanent location, “a place to go,” “our own place,” as all the youth advisors are hoping for. Carol Milroy points to the [Youth Hub in Haliburton](#) that started from the ground-up ten years ago. BGC Kawarthas opened the Youth Warehouse in Lindsay around the same time. Carol imagines a thrift store, music, cooking classes, wellness counselling, and couches that don’t have to be moved out of the way in a part-time space. “BGC Kawarthas is really pushing for us,” she says with appreciation.

While the City of Kawartha Lakes has provided significant funding, the initiative will also look to the local community for help. If you are interested in becoming involved, please message [info@kawarthacoop.ca](mailto:info@kawarthacoop.ca). Soon there will be an announcement about fundraising to support the rent, food and other program costs of the Fenelon Youth Initiative.

