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In this newsletter we recognize Jason Preece, president of our Youth Advisory Committee, Peer Specialist at Aunt Leah’s Place, and Advocate for foster children. His story and his leadership are truly inspiring. Jason demonstrates what happens when we encourage young people to be healthy and strong.

I’m reminded of a ritual I had with my grandmother (Leah) when I was very little. She would hold me and rub my back and recite the phrase “Rub her Back and Make Her Strong”. Over and over she would repeat the phrase. It was similar to a nursery rhyme, a lullaby, a grandmother’s song to her grandchild. For me it was the warm comfort and physical expression of being loved and cared for.

This tiny piece of visual, poetic wisdom, is a metaphorical backdrop to ask, ‘What will make former foster youth strong?’ and what will help support the work of caring for foster kids as they transition to adulthood?

In a parental role, Aunt Leah’s board and staff have asked this question over the years and as a result we have added important pieces to this place of care. We “Make Them Strong” through life skills training, housing subsidies, employment training, educational support, food security, and counseling. Most importantly though, we provide a community that supports these individuals through difficulties and celebrates with them during success.

To you the reader, I suggest the question expands to:

“How do we provide family support to the young adults leaving foster care? How is this support currently provided within mainstream families? How can it be replicated at Aunt Leah’s Place?”

Thank you for your continued volunteer and financial support. You provide us with the space to creatively ask questions and the means to make the young people at Aunt Leah’s Place strong.

Wishing you the best for 2016. May we collectively move toward a Brighter Future for Foster Kids.

In the spirit of Leah,

Gale Stewart
Aunt Leah’s Place
Executive Director
Thresholds Open House:
January 21st, 2016 - Thresholds held an Open House to unveil their new kitchen design and upgrades and the opening of 1200 sq ft of new programming space. The renovations to the kitchen will allow more mothers to partake in Thresholds 12 week Cooking Club program, which increases the capacity of low-income mothers to access food and teaches them the skills to provide nutritious meals for themselves, their children, and their community. Additionally, the new programming space allowed for more living space in the house for another mom and child. The kitchen upgrades were made possible thanks to funding generously provided by The Home Depot Canada Foundation. The expanded program space was funded by the Government of Canada, City of New Westminster, John Hardie Mitchell Family Foundation, Central City Foundation, Lonsdale Quay Market, Moffat Family Foundation and Yunnan Foundation.

Hampers:
Our annual Christmas Hampers saw a significant increase this year, thanks to 28 individual and corporate sponsors. This year 60 youth and mothers received this generous Christmas gift. We want to thank members of BMO for coming out and helping us assemble these hampers.

Housing First:
The Link: Housing First successfully completed its first year of operation, permanently housing 15 individuals who were experiencing severe homelessness. The program helps fill the gap in permanent housing and support services that the organization was previously unable to provide for young homeless care-leavers. Aunt Leah’s Place is currently one of two organizations across Canada that provides Housing First supports for youth in/from care and the only program in a major Canadian city.

SEFFY: Donor Recognition
Special thanks to all of the funders who supported our Supporting Education for Foster Youth (SEFFY) program’s 2nd year of operation. Last year, 73 youth from care received planning, advocacy and financial aid in pursuing their educational goals: 92% of SEFFY youth under 19 are in school or have graduated with a high school diploma; 56% of SEFFY youth who are over 19 have graduated from high school or are on track to graduate from high school within the next year. In BC last year, only 27% of 19 year olds left foster care with a Dogwood Certificate.
Jason was a reserved 18 year old with a wealth of unseen potential when he first came to Aunt Leah’s Support Link program. While still under the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development, Aunt Leah’s provided Jason with the unique opportunity to live independently in a supported basement suite, which he said was a “welcome change.”

This suite allowed Jason to take on the challenges of living independently, within a safe, supportive environment. During this time, Jason gained a huge sense of accomplishment and confidence through the little everyday tasks of life, such as budgeting, shopping and preparing food. This experience prepared him for his next birthday, when he would “age out” of government care.

After turning 19, Jason joined The Link, Aunt Leah’s program for former youth in care. “I had made a lot of friends and it (The Link) was a sort of hub for us, so that’s mainly why I kept coming back” said Jason. Like a family, the supportive community Jason had found at Aunt Leah’s in both his peers and the workers, helped create stability and trust during his time of transition. With this stability, Jason’s confidence and sense of self continued to grow.

While in the Link, Jason overheard of a group camping trip planned by the Youth Advisory Committee (YAC), a community of Aunt Leah’s youth who advocate for their peers. “...I really wanted to go, so I joined the group and started attending meetings” said Jason. After the camping trip, Jason remained committed to the YAC and his dedication was noticed by some of its senior members who encouraged him to take on a leadership role. “I felt I needed to rise to the occasion” stated Jason and during the next meeting he was appointed as the group’s leader.
As the new leader of the YAC, Jason’s first goal was to formalize the group’s operations and get more of his peers involved. After creating and delegating roles for leadership, Jason and members of the YAC created the group’s official mandate and started the organization’s first bank account. “When we put our heads together the group can achieve quite a bit” Jason added with a smile, as he reflected on the group’s progress.

Under Jason’s leadership, the YAC has represented and advocated for foster youth by taking part in a variety of local events, including the Vancouver Pride Parade, 12th Street Music Festival (New Westminster), Aunt Leah’s Open House, and the Fostering Change Long Table Lunch.

With his knowledge of Aunt Leah’s Place, wide range of experience, and an ability to meet challenges, Jason exhibited the ideal qualities for Aunt Leah’s new Peer Specialist position. Jason helps participants access the many services that Aunt Leah’s provides. As a former program participant, he understands the challenges that youth face and he brings that lived experience to Aunt Leah’s.

Through his many roles, Jason has had the opportunity to stand for his peers and publicly advocate for youth in care. His story gives insight into the foster care experience and underscores the importance of having a community of supporters that stand with you, no matter your age. Like the majority of us, Jason has a fear of public speaking and still admits that he’s “pretty shy,” but there is a courage inside of him that far surpasses these traits. “I’d rather fight through my barriers and share my story, because many people don’t have an opportunity to share theirs.” This courage drives Jason to make the lives of his peers better and it’s this humble, selfless attitude that makes him a quality leader and strong advocate for youth across the province.

As the President of the Youth Advisory Committee (YAC), a Peer Specialists for Aunt Leah’s Place, and a public advocate for youth in care, Jason is a respected member of the Aunt Leah’s community. His experience at Aunt Leah’s highlights the importance of the organization’s family model of care, which offers youth a safe and supportive place to chase opportunities and achieve a brighter future.

“Whenever we put our heads together the group can achieve quite a bit”

“I’d rather fight through my barriers and share my story, because many people don’t have an opportunity to share theirs”

Give Today and Support Youth like Jason

I would like to help create more opportunities for youth transitioning out of care. Please accept my one time gift of:

- $100
- $50
- $25
- $ __________

Gifts will be acknowledged, and an official receipt for income tax purposes will be mailed to you.

All donations will be used for Board-approved programs and projects. When any need or project goal has been met, extra funds will be used in areas of greatest need.

We respect your privacy and do not rent or sell our mailing lists.

Donate Online at auntleahs.org or by Phone at 604-525-1204
Pulling Together
Aunt Leah’s Inspiring Canoe Journey

Last July, Aunt Leah’s Youth and Staff embarked on an amazing week-long canoe journey down the mighty Fraser River. Traveling from Harrison Lake to the Semiahmoo Bridge, participants were exposed to the beauty of the Coast Salish Territories and immersed in a one-of-a-kind outdoor experience.

The trip was organized by the Pulling Together Society, an organization whose mission is to “enhance understanding between Public Service Agencies and Aboriginal Peoples by Canoeing the traditional highway (emphasis added).”

What defines the experience is the sense of community and respect that is developed during the journey. Participants paddled side-by-side with members of the RCMP, MCFD, local aboriginal societies, and other youth serving organizations.

For 7 days, all members of the journey were treated as equals. They traveled together, lodged together on local First Nations territories, ate the same food, and participated in the same activities. The trip was truly inspiring for both the youth and staff who attended.

“We will forever be connected to one another in words we cannot describe. Watching these youth work together and bond was a unique experience that I was privileged to witness.” - ALP Staff

Last summer’s experience has encouraged members of Aunt Leah’s Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) to attend the journey again, only this time in a youth-organized canoe. This separate canoe will give the YAC a distinct, but equal voice as they travel with other agencies and aboriginal peoples. After the journey, the group will turn their experience into a presentation, which they will use to advocate for fellow youth in foster care.

Planning for the trip started nearly eight months ago, when word spread about last year’s journey and prompted donations for the 2016 journey. A few months later the group applied for and secured additional funding from the Vancouver Foundation. The Canoe Journey has given the YAC a clear focus and united the group’s efforts. The work involved in planning this trip has challenged the group and forced them to act on key decisions and learn new skills. This experience will serve the group well into the future and it reminds us that success is a process, not an event.

“The YAC may not be in the water yet, but it’s clear that the journey has already begun. We wish our YAC the best of luck, as they work together to forge relationships and raise awareness for youth in care.
“WAIT, we’ve made how much?” I remember asking our bookkeeper Pam in disbelief as she relayed the totals to me. The 2015 Tree Lots had only been open for two weeks and we had already surpassed last year’s record breaking sales. Just over a week later we closed the lots, having sold 4,607 trees and grossing over $300,000.

All this from a humble fundraising effort started 21 years ago, one of five created to keep the organization non-government funded programs operating. As Gale Stewart, Founder & Executive Director of Aunt Leah’s, recounts, the organization at the time was going through an uncertain and tumultuous time of growth. While the other social enterprises struggled to remain viable and closed after a few years of operation, the tree lots had continually outperformed and quickly became a key stream of revenue for the organization.

Today, the tree lots account for nearly 10% of Aunt Leah’s gross income and help provide vital funding for mothers in Aunt Leah’s Thresholds House and “aged out” youth in The Link program.

The success of the tree lots rests on the shoulders of Aunt Leah’s incredible volunteer base. Volunteers help keep costs down and maximize profit. This year, over 450 individuals volunteered at one of our 4 tree lot locations.

We want to send a huge thank you to all of those who have volunteered or purchased a tree over the years. Thanks for helping us build a great tradition.

2015 Tree Lot Sales Figures

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<td>Trees Sold</td>
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<td>100% Goes to Local Foster Kids &amp; Young Mothers</td>
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From Previous Year
The Friendly Landlord Network

This past January, Aunt Leah’s Place unveiled its new Friendly Landlord Network. Taking its lead from the National At Home/Chez Soi project and Aunt Leah’s Support Link program, this collaborative housing initiative aims to address the high levels of homelessness experienced by youth as they age out of foster care, by connecting landlords across Metro Vancouver with youth-serving organizations who can offer supported tenancies.

A coalition of 12 youth-serving organizations across Metro Vancouver have partnered to create The Friendly Landlord Network. The network aims to make it possible for youth from foster care to secure housing by providing landlord incentives such as market rent, tenancy support and regular check-ins. Every youth has an existing relationship with a housing support worker who checks in at the suite at a minimum once per month, and has access to various kinds of programmatic and one-to-one support from Ready-to-Rent workshops to financial planning to cooking clubs, and other life skills training and support.

Some of the youth are eligible for guaranteed rent, meaning cheques will come to the landlord from the youth-serving organization.

Giving Foster Youth the Keys to Success

Having a home is critical to well-being and provides the stability and security that is important to plan for the future and work toward life goals. The Friendly Landlord Network is a unique opportunity for landlords, with the support of experienced housing workers, to fill a rental unit while helping youth as they transition into adulthood: providing foster youth a set of keys to unlock their potential.

The program is just one more step in Aunt Leah’s mission to create an environment where all children connected to the Foster Care System have equal opportunities akin to what parented children receive. To find out more about The Friendly Landlord Network, or how to become a Friendly Landlord visit www.friendlylandlordnetwork.com or contact:

Christina Grammenos
Community Engagement Coordinator
cgrammenos@auntleahs.org or (604) 825-8331

Love to Give
Music Night

Enjoy live music and amazing deals at Aunt Leah’s Urban Thrift.
Upcoming Performances include:

March 24th
Reid & Carolyn Jamieson

April 29th
Ultrasound with special guests The Pinky Swears

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