

Conne River teacher spearheads new youth centre initiative

By Sean Ridgeley
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Scott Oosterom, a teacher at Se't A'neywey School in Conne River, is about to step into the position of youth counselor. One of his main goals is to offer some healthy activities for the older high school students to be involved in.

"I have been puzzled as to how to go about starting something for them, cause what would they do that, for them, is more fun than getting drunk?" Oosterom, a recent graduate from Memorial University, wonders.

Se't A'neywey School (or St. Anne's) is the only school in Conne River, a small and tightly knit Indian reserve in central Newfoundland. The kindergarten-Grade 12 school employs a staff of 18 teachers.

A youth centre is already active in the community, offering movie nights, cooking events, computers with high-speed Internet, a big-screen TV, video game consoles, and more — but is essentially limited to younger kids. The seniors are permitted to use the facility only after the younger ones have left, and as Oosterom states, there isn't an organized group for them — or much time.

Senior student Kristien Hinks feels she and her classmates need their own space.

"I think people would like a place to go where there's no younger kids, where we could have the right to go whenever we wanted," she says. "With the youth centre now, we're only allowed there after the daycare is done using it. And there's a lot of young kids there that bother the older crowd, so we usually leave and wander about."

Oosterom takes over the position of youth counselor in January, effectively fulfilling the role of supervisor.

The area has had a problem with vandalism in the past. A lot of the older kids used to hang out at the arcade, but due to acts of vandalism, the business shut down.

Oosterom will be working with some of the older students, as well as the Conne River Health and Social Services, run by the Miawpukek band government that is instituted in the community.

"In order to make better use of the youth center, and perhaps the gym at school, the seniors need to have a supervisor or two," he says.

"See, I do seem to have a good standing with the kids ... They came to me specifically

asking me if I would be a youth counselor for them, and I think if I was willing to do this with them it would help, in many ways. I am not gonna let them down.”

It’s not going to be easy, admits April Hinks, a youth coordinator with the local social services organization.

“Donations from the community would be my biggest obstacle,” she says. “Some parents think because we are a branch of the health and social services we have all the money to buy the things we need.”

As was the case with the current youth centre, student fundraising activities are going to be organized to kick-start the centre and provide youth with the things they want. They’ll include wake-a-thons and selling draw tickets, among other events.

Financial difficulties aside, the challenge is still there: how are they supposed to attract the older students?

“Most of them are out drinking every weekend. The problem is there’s nothing else for them to do,” Oosterom says.

Things aren’t all bad. When asked, many of the seniors seemed enthusiastic about the prospect of a youth centre.

“I’d like to have a place to go to because we can’t go to other peoples houses all the time. We’re getting tired and bored of it,” responded Kristien Hinks. “And with it being winter, there’s no point to being outside and doing nothing but freezing.”

“I think it would be good to have a youth centre for the older kids,” said senior Ian Benoit. “I wouldn’t rather do anything else.”

Jacob Benoit, a Grade 10 student, echoed their feelings. “A youth centre with no little kids would be awesome!”

April Hinks, with health and social services, remembers her own teenaged experiences with the youth group.

“I just think, if the adults were more open minded and helpful, the senior high students would have a great time having a group. I did when I was a teen because the supervisors were awesome, open-minded, responsive, fun people.”

The process will get underway after the holidays.