

A safe month ahead

by BROCK WEIR

Hearing and observing is one thing, but having that important lived experience is something altogether different.

Despite being in my late 30s, I like to think I have a decent handle on the basics. This job affords a lot of opportunity to interview kids and youth in their school environment, and even sometimes in their home environment, on the wonderful and often innovative ways they're striving to make a difference both in the classroom and the wider community.

Finding out what makes them tick, the causes they adopt and place close to their hearts, and just having a good ol' fashioned conversation can often provide a bit of a thumbnail about who they are and what drives them. After all, if you ask youth who they are, they'll tell you ? it's just a matter of taking that important step and, most importantly, listening.

For those youth who are trailblazers in their schools, neighbourhoods and beyond, there are more similarities than there are differences and a unifying factor that binds most if not all of them is being able to identify a problem in whatever sphere they pick and brainstorm practical ways to make a real-time difference on a real-world problem.

Helping them along the way, of course, are parents who invariably encourage their kids to get out of their shells and flourish in environments that fuel their passions. They are also backed by often-underappreciated efforts of educators who, regardless of how many years they have been in the classroom, remember what it means to be a youth and, therefore, the tools they need to make the most out of these very formative years. And what it means to harness that energy for the greater good.

But, as much as youth are flourishing in these environments, it almost goes without saying there are challenges, sometimes invisible ones, that make rising to the top more difficult for some than others.

May was Mental Health Awareness Month, an observance that takes place in Canada each year, to promote education and awareness surrounding mental health, how it impacts people's lives in different ways, and promote deliberate methods which associated stigma can be reduced and ideally eliminated.

To mark the occasion, our co-op student, Emma Chianelli, penned a very personal article on how she and her peers perceive mental health challenges.

?Growing up in today's society is not a simple feat,? she wrote. ?The pressure of trying to decide what post-secondary education will look like when trying to grow into adulthood has never had so many difficult passages. Technology has changed the way the world works, and where it makes something easier, the natural way to learn and make decisions has never been harder. Balancing school work, a part-time job, and extracurricular activities, while trying to navigate into your future, with little guidance leads to confusion and anxiety. The worldwide pandemic changed a lot in today's world, and for a teenager trying to find their way ? after being isolated for such a long time ? creates further fear and anxiety. We've been trained to learn digitally, how have we been taught to talk to people.

?Times can get difficult and we need to find our own ways to cope. My thoughts, opinions, and feelings are often kept to myself. But doing this to me isn't the smartest thing to do since I end up under a lot of strain and I start worrying about the little things and begin overthinking. This, I believe, is due to my difficulty in placing my trust in others. Despite the fact I may have known them for a significant portion of my life, I feel as though my thoughts are not important to occupy their time or that they might share the things that I would have preferred to remain private. Despite their repeated demonstrations that this is not the case.?

Emma shared these thoughts as a teen who is preparing for wherever her post-secondary journey takes her, but I think in many ways the insights she provided here can also be applicable to youth of all ages ? even those in elementary school who are both trying to

find their way while also learning who they are.

Yet, it sadly feels this journey of discovery is being hindered all too often.

One only needs to look at the discouraging scenes that have been beamed around the world in recent weeks primarily from south of the border in the lead-up to June's Pride Month, with drag queen story hours ? a tried, tested, and popular family-friendly endeavour that encourages kids to be themselves ? the scene of disheartening protests that have to be taken in by attending parents, families, and their children.

In fact, we don't even need to look south of the border for these unfortunate displays. Now that we're in June, given the heated rhetoric we've all been seeing online in sudden fits of outrage despite these events taking place for the better part of a decade, we're sadly in store for more before the month's end.

We don't even have to wait. We've already heard much of the rhetoric that has come out of recent meetings of the York Catholic District School Board over an act as simple as flying a rainbow flag.

While everyone has the right to express their views, I often wonder why some of the comments made are done so without giving a moment's consideration to how their words might affect their children, their neighbour's children, and the community writ large. (And if they are, well, that could be the subject of a deep dive that's beyond this column) That mere words don't have weight, or consequence for those who catch them. That, even as a child, if they experience the world differently, that they might have to fight extra hard to even get a place at the table.

It fosters an environment where, indeed, thoughts, opinions and feelings are in danger of being bottled up, potentially with tragic circumstances.

This month, all that can be asked in this climate, is for people to express their views in mutual respect ? something which, believe it or not, can still be accomplished ? and through the lens of being not only being the parent, caregiver, or looked-up-to adult you would have wanted as a child but the parent, caregiver, or looked-up-to adult your child needs today.

To those who celebrate, I wish you a happy and, most importantly, safe Pride Month.