

Bolton youth group tackling human trafficking

By Rob Paul

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Now more than ever, social media is impacting people's everyday lives. Although there are numerous positives of being online in today's day and age, there's a risk that comes with it, too.

Younger and younger generations are connecting sooner and sooner through the web.

COVID-19 has forced students of all ages to be online every day in the virtual classroom and that's been one of the most useful aspects of kids plugging in.

Despite the beneficial reasons for children to be online, groups like Youth Activists Inc. wanted to ensure Canadian youths and parents are educated in some of the detrimental effects of being on social media at an early age.

Youth Activists Inc. is a non-profit social advocacy organization founded and located in Caledon that focuses on the development of youth leadership skills, community organizing, and advocacy for youth related issues in Ontario?it's run by youth, for youth.

Coinciding with the end of National Youth Week, Youth Activists Inc. launched its Human Trafficking Awareness Campaign on May 7?supported by the Rotary Club of Palgrave.

The goal is to help educated youth across Peel Region about the dangers of Human Trafficking.

The campaign is centred on three different videos?focused on social media recruitment, myths and misconceptions, and modern-day human trafficking?that can be found at [ThisisHumanTrafficking.ca](#).

The videos aim to shed light on the dangers of human trafficking while educating youth on different details surrounding the concerns of human trafficking in Canada.

The increase in social media use to connect with friends and family as a result of the pandemic has caused Youth Activists Inc. to look at the situation critically with the reality that more Canadian youth are falling victim to human trafficking with traffickers targeting them via social media platforms.

?It is not just a crime that happens behind closed doors, it can happen in any community. We want to make sure young people are educated on the signs of human trafficking so that they can help prevent it from happening in their own communities?, said Olena Kania, Project Coordinator of the This is Human Trafficking campaign.

Kania alongside Youth Activists Inc. Executive Director Dmytro Basmat, developed the campaign and it was produced by youth entrepreneur Loucas Loucaiders. The goal is to provide a different perspective on an issue not widely discussed through a youth lens

?Human trafficking is a crime that disproportionately targets youth, and unfortunately many victims don't even realize they're being trafficked,? said Basmat. ?We've seen the impact of human trafficking in our communities, and we wanted to help tackle the challenge head on. A ?by youth for youth' awareness campaign ensures that our friends and classmates know about the signs and dangers of human trafficking, and what resources are available?.

With an issue like human trafficking in Canada, it can fall prey to the out of sight, out of mind mentality and that's part of the motivation behind the campaign for Youth Activists Inc. despite approximately 63 per cent of young women in Canada being effect

by it.

“During the pandemic, mental health became a key focus late last year and we've really shifted to human trafficking the last few months,” said Basmat. “It's such an underreported issue and misunderstood in the community, and frankly, there's no ‘for youth by youth’ campaign that puts a youth perspective on the issue.”

Knowing that human trafficking is a huge issue, and something not often spotlighted in Canada, they had always planned to work on raising awareness, but the pandemic accelerated things with the increased importance of social media in the lives of youth.

“Dymyro and I had been talking about this campaign over the last two years because we already knew that it was a pressing issue, but especially with the rise of COVID and the reliance on social media to remain connected with family and friends and the education system being on an online platform, we decided to shed some light on it,” said Kania.

“Traffickers lure their victims through social media. They go through things like Instagram or Twitter and put on a guise of what they think will attract victims. A lot of the times victims are 13 years of age and very vulnerable and traffickers manipulate their vulnerability in order to gain personal benefit. That's why we decided to really raise awareness because it's a pressing issue and people struggle to understand what it is and what it entails.”

“I used to think human trafficking was something that happened internationally; you'd have these very stereotypical images of human trafficking,” Basmat said. “That's not the reality of what's happening. It's happening in rural and urban Ontario, it happens everywhere. A big issue is Highway 10 that goes through Caledon—it's a gateway from the airport to both Dufferin and Caledon. The airport is a hub for human trafficking.”

Though it's a problem that's happening in Ontario, Basmat and Kania found there's a lack of education on human trafficking in Canada for the youth and that alarmed them which, in turn, drove them to put the campaign together.

“Our general goal is to reach and engage as many youths as possible and our specific goal is to reach 10,000 in Peel Region,” said Basmat. “Youth in Peel have seen friends, family, community members fall victim to human trafficking and sometimes they're never seen again. We wanted to educate on the dangers, as well as the signs and symptoms of human trafficking to make sure it doesn't happen as frequently as it does. We wanted to think about the issues that affect youth because we're youth centred and predominantly human trafficking impacts youth.”

While social media can be a great tool for kids, it can also put targets on them for traffickers to groom them if they're not educated on the risks. A simple direct message from a stranger can be so much more dangerous than people realize, says Basmat and Kania.

“We were thinking about how youth get sucked into human trafficking, and especially during COVID when everyone is online and doing virtual everything, those creepy guys that DM you out of nowhere, they can be human traffickers looking to capitalize on susceptible youth,” Basmat said. “We wanted to point that out and we wanted to look at the misconceptions of it because it's such a misunderstood crime. The reality is youth today don't really know what it is on a wide scale. We used that to say, ‘we have an opportunity to educate youth and plan this campaign around educating on it.’”

“That's a really important part about it, there's this whole misconception regarding human trafficking and human smuggling,” said Kania. “I have a background in criminology, and I took a course regarding immigration and refugee protection in the criminal justice system—I was floored because I didn't know that it was such a pressing issue. That's when I reached out to Dymtro and said, ‘we have to do something,’ because it's so common and nobody really knows what it entails. I even mention in one of the videos that it's hard to analyze if there's a crime happening or it's a weird act of endearment.”

“A lot of people will think it's just a creepy guy and it's not a big deal and there's this notion that it happens to every woman—any form of harassment is prominent, but not in terms of critically understanding it. These are tactics used to lure victims through human trafficking, especially when it comes to the idea of mental health and Stockholm Syndrome and PTSD. A lot of the reason why it

happens is because victims are forced to internalize their trauma in order to survive and don't know how else to cope because when they realize they're falling victim to a crime their main focus to get out of it is to survive and that's where the aspect of Stockholm Syndrome and PTSD come in.

?I'm 21 and Dymtro is 22, we're young and we should be able to use our youth platform to educate other people around our age and younger on this.?

There are immediate resources at [ThisIsHumanTrafficking.ca](https://thisishumantrafficking.ca) and anybody who is a victim or knows someone that is a victim of human trafficking, contact the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-833-900-1010. For more information on Youth Activists Inc. and the work they're doing in Peel Region, visit youthactivists.ca.