

Open house Saturday ? Summer job at Bolton Camp was a time of discovery

By Bill Rea

The expression 'work in progress' is sometimes over used, but it is most applicable to what's been going on over the summer on the Bolton Camp property.

Roughly 250 acres that had basically been vacant and abandoned for years were a hive of activity over the summer, with young people trying to claim back what was allowed to let go.

The public is going to be able to take a look at what's been accomplished so far this coming Saturday (Oct. 4). The camp will be hosting an open house from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. There will be no parking on the site, but there will be shuttle buses running from Humberview Secondary School and St. Michael Catholic Secondary School.

The camp on the site was established in 1922 as a facility for mothers with small children from low-income families to get away for a time.

The property was acquired a little more than three years ago by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), with the support of the Region of Peel and City of Toronto. Soon after that, ideas started being kicked around on what to do with it.

The issue, according to Darryl Grey, senior manager of education with TRCA, was coming up with something that would have wide-ranging advantages for the community, both locally and beyond.

Grey agreed this project had called for a different approach from TRCA, as they were working to come up with an operating model, as well as a way to engage the community.

One way to do that was to have students from the area working on the site over the summer. Grey said about 70 young people, including representatives from the local high schools, were involved in this work.

And there had been planning going into this activity. Grey stated they held two design charrets, with help from George Brown College, to see what would work on the property, and the young people had been starting to put that into action.

Grey explained the vision was to 'take a community centre and turn it inside-out.'

It included creating a centre for a variety of activities, like sports, recreation, learning, drama, etc., all in one place. The difference is they'll be working with the community and local youth to set up small business enterprises to run the programs. Grey said the vision was to create something like a mall, with TRCA helping to get the businesses going.

Those who think they're soon going to see a finished result have a bit of a wait ahead of them.

'It's a 10-year-project,' Grey said. 'We're taking a good first step this year.'

The main work over the summer was getting the site cleaned up, and that's where the students came in.

'They're doing all kinds of different work,' Grey said. 'They're doing everything from habitat reclamations to trail clearing.'

And a lot of work needed to be done on the site.

'It looked abandoned,' he said. 'It had been pretty heavily vandalized. There weren't many windows that hadn't been smashed. Kids were using it as a party spot.'

Part of the idea was to get young people engaged in a positive way.

'Spaces like this belong to the community,' Grey said.

There were complications to be overcome, such as the fact the property is in a floodplain, which means ways have to be found to deliver programs without a flood risk.

'Ironically, the only part that isn't part of the floodplain is the swimming pool,' Grey observed.

One of the crew leaders on the project was Lisa Erdle, who has a masters degree in forestry and ecology. She was working on renaturalizing the camp.

Old bridges and culverts have not been maintained and have started being washed out, she said, adding they're trying to control the erosion.

Recent high school graduate Connor Johnston of Bolton, who's starting to study landscape architecture at University of Guelph, was part of a restoration team focusing on three of the many cabins on site. That included cleaning, sanding decks, getting rid of graffiti and making them accessible.

Even getting at these cabins was not easy. Erdle said they had to cut through a lot of growth to access them.

'You couldn't walk anywhere in the field without being in waist-high, deep grass,' she said.

Despite that, she said the experience was worthwhile.

'It's a job that allows me to teach, to do on-the-ground conservation work and be creative,' she commented. 'It's an inspiring place because there are so many options.'

?It's been extremely rewarding,? Johnston added, observing it let him meet professionals in the field he's hoping to join. ?You're able to apply some knowledge to something that's going to be made practical.?

Since this was the first year of the project, there had been a lot of discoveries made.

?You see some of the old infrastructure,? Erdle observed, like clay pipes, old hydro lines, etc.

She added some of the cabins have been used as nesting habitats for birds. That was addressed by erecting bird boxes on trees, thus maintaining the habitat.

It was a time of discovery for Johnston too, considering he grew up nearby.

?I knew it was here all of my life,? he said, adding he had never thought of exploring the site. ?To think this is just two minutes from my house. It's really remarkable.?



Lisa Erdle and Connor Johnston stand near some waist-high grass they had to deal with.



The numerous cabins on the Bolton Camp property have had graffiti added over the years.



Efforts are being made to make sure birds that had been nesting in the cabins find alternate accommodation.