

Summer jobs program deemed success for 100 Island youth

by Lindsay Kelly

SHEGUIANDAH—They worked in every sector—in restaurants or offices, body shops or hair salons—all thanks to a new job program aimed at providing Manitoulin youth with summer employment.

This year, 100 youth from across the Island gained work experience under the Summer Jobs for Youth Program, funded largely by the provincial government. The initiative partnered local businesses with youth, covering the cost of wages while participants received job training and paid employment.

The program began in 2006 with a focus on at-risk youth in large urban communities, but the program expanded this year, bringing Manitoulin into the fold. The Waubetek Business Development Corporation and the District Social Services Administration Board (DSSAB) were each allocated enough funding to provide employment to 50 students.

Though this is the first year for the program on Manitoulin, it was so successful that Waubetek general manager Dawn Madahbee reports a 100-percent success rate.

"We were pretty happy with this group of kids," she said during an afternoon graduation ceremony, celebrating the program's success. "I'm very proud of them. We tried our best to instill some good work ethic in them."

The participants learned quickly about what would be expected of them in a work environment, including good attendance, punctuality, and accountability. When one youth experienced difficulty in juggling personal matters and work responsibilities, Ms. Madahbee used the opportunity to illustrate that similar situations are faced by adults every day and are all a part of how life sometimes play out.

"It doesn't matter what age you are—everybody goes through it," she said. "Sometimes if you go to your job,

Participants in the Summer Jobs for Youth Program participated in fun outdoor activities during their graduation day on August 28.

you can get away from it for a little while, and at the end of the day, you go back and the problem doesn't seem so big, or you can get help from your support system."

Waubetek's program coordinator, Emma Wilkin, believes all the participants were happy with their placements. The coordinators acted as liaisons between the youth and their employers, guiding them through the pre-employment training, which helped them anticipate what to expect from their summer jobs.

By keeping in contact with the coordinators more often and getting to know the participants individually, it helped the participants gain confidence in dealing with real-life scenarios, she said.

"In our pre-employment training we could put a face to a name, and they weren't shy with us because they got to know us," she said. "They could come to us for help and we could teach them how to deal with the problem on their own."

DSSAB chair Ray Chenier was equally laudatory in his appraisal of the program—that the submission proposals outweighed slots is a clear indication that the program has a future in the area.

"We had larger numbers than students we could place," he said. "But at least it shows interest."

The work the students did was important both for them and for the employers for whom they worked, he added.

Algoma-Manitoulin MPP Mike Brown agreed, suggesting the program is a win-win scenario for both the employers and the youth of Manitoulin. "It provides the opportunity for a lot of people who never would have to get a T4 slip—that's the real graduation," he said, joking that now the participants can pay an increased tax to the provincial and federal governments.

"The young people have learned things and taught their employer some things," he said. "And I'm sure the employers have learned some things from the youth and taught them some things too."

The program was especially valuable in this year of recession because it provided as much opportunity for work as in other years, he added.

During the August 28 graduation day, students spent the morning learning cultural teachings and values, as well as participating in focus groups to help them determine the benefits of their placements that they could take with them into future, whether for employment or school. They then enjoyed a barbecue and outdoor activities before receiving certificates of completion and a braid of sweetgrass which Ms. Madahbee urged the youth to use to



Participants in the Ontario government's Summer Jobs for Youth Program gathered for a graduation day on August 28, during which they learned cultural teachings, played games, and received a certificate of completion.

photos by Lindsay Kelly

"clear your mind, clear your thoughts and clear your heart" when encountering any future work-related dilemmas.

The future of the program depends largely on the success of this year's endeavour—which, by all accounts, is being considered a success—but the funding has been flat-

ed for a second year in 2010. Ms. Madahbee believes there's no doubt that the program will have ripple effects that benefit the participants, the economy and the youth's outlook on future job prospects.

"It's a real feel-good thing," she said. "These are, probably, 100 kids that might not have had work otherwise."