

Popular youth program in Scarborough finds a permanent home

'It's like a family. It's like my second house.' youth participant

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Anjana Krishnan, left, and Sarah Dobson, Mind and Spirit Youth Leadership co-chief, enjoy the new youth space at The Hub Mid-Scarborough. - Dan Pearce/Torstar

Friends Anjana Krishnan, 18, and Sarah Dobson, 16, have a safe home away from home, located in an area of Scarborough that needs welcoming youth spaces.

The pair are participants of the Mind and Spirit Youth Leadership (MSYL) program, which functions at [The Hub Mid-Scarborough](#), at Eglinton Avenue and Brimley Road, operated by the [Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities](#) (SCHC).

"It's like a family. It's like my second house," Krishnan said. Now that she's graduated high school, Krishnan no longer receives volunteer hours for taking on leadership roles within the program but continues to come anyway. She's been a regular since Grade 6.

The program operates in a community that's in one of Toronto's 31 [Neighbourhood Improvement Areas](#), and the youth need it, she said.

“There are kids who suffer,” she said. “We wouldn’t know what they go through on a day-to-day basis, but we have these programs that they can come into and whatever is said here stays here.”

Mind and Spirit Youth Leadership programs such as Glitter Girls (which is for teen girls) and D-Talks (for teen boys) address issues such as self-confidence, body image, toxic masculinity and more.

Dobson, who is co-chief and leads the Glitter Girls program, said the program has helped her grow a lot.

“It gives youth a sense of purpose,” she said. “They’re coming in and getting stuff done and trying new things and I think that encourages youth to take on leadership roles within these programs, and probably also when they move on to post-secondary education.”

Dobson said she’s a more confident public speaker now as a result of the program.



In front row, Mind and Spirit Youth Leadership (MSYL) program co-ordinator Charanjit Singh, left, Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities CEO Jeanie Joaquin, Scarborough Centre MP Christina Mitas, and MSYL participants Rashme Nandakumar and Janusan Jeyarajah cut the ribbon at the opening of a new youth space at The Hub Mid-Scarborough. — Dominik Kurek/Torstar

Youth programming has been running at The Hub since 2012, said Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities child/youth health program co-ordinator Charanjit Singh, while the Mind and Spirit youth council launched in 2015. The youth council, which has approximately 30 members, plans activities and programs for participants and the wider community. High school participants get volunteer hours for their work. Programs, which are open to all youth in the community, run Monday to Friday after school. They are health-based and address topics such as mental health, physical health, nutrition, leadership and more.

The fact that so many young people participate is proof the program is both needed and wanted, Singh said.

“Youth need a lot of positive and safe spaces in Scarborough, where youth can really connect with adult allies and be supported by them. It’s so vital for youth to have spaces where they feel connected and there’s a strong sense of community belonging,” he said.

The youth program received a three-year, \$656,000 grant from Ontario Trillium Foundation, to help it grow and to renovate a space within The Hub to build a permanent youth space, which opened Thursday, Oct. 10. Until now, programs ran out of wherever the youth could find vacant spaces in The Hub, including sometimes in people’s offices.

Scarborough Centre MP Christina Mitas, who helped open the new space, called Youniverse Youth Space, said places such as this help build future leaders.

“It’s critical that our youth grow up having a place where you can thrive, you can do so in a safe environment, in your own community, a place that is familiar, a place where you can create and engage with confidence,” she told a gathering of dozens of young people.



Rashme Nandakumar speaks about the Mind and Spirit Youth Leadership program during the opening of a new youth space at The Hub Mid-Scarborough. — Dominik Kurek/Torstar

One leader among the group, 18-year-old Rashme Nandakumar spoke about her experience at Mind and Spirit Youth Leadership. She and Krishnan first went to get some volunteer hours, but the program became much more important to them.

“After sitting in that first MSYL meeting, Charanjit had so much to say and I found that he was passionate about everything that he was talking about, it just transferred to all of us,” she said.

She became passionate about making positive change in the community, and she found others who shared that passion.

Nandakumar became the Mind and Spirit Youth Leadership chief, a position she held for four years, and is now studying to become a social worker at Trent University, something she said she was influenced to do by her work at The Hub.

“I’ve fallen a lot, I made a lot of mistakes, but this has been a space for me to safely grow and push myself to my absolute limit.”

Credit: <https://www.toronto.com/news-story/9644847-popular-youth-program-in-scarborough-finds-a-permanent-home/>