



Newcomer to Canada embraces youth engagement role in the community

THE PARKS & RECREATION STAFF AT THE City of New Westminster, British Columbia, had a vision for a new youth outreach program for the summer of 2021 – one that would bring young people back to indoor community spaces and motivate them to re-engage with youth programs and services, now that COVID-19 lockdowns had eased.

To get the Roots & Relationships program up and running, the City needed to hire a new employee for the position of “roving youth leader,” serving both the Park Services and Youth Services departments. The job was to visit parks and other outdoor venues, cultivate relationships with youth ages 11 to 18 and connect them to recreation opportunities and other resources and programs.



NEW WESTMINSTER,
BRITISH COLUMBIA

Canada

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Mason and Ana connecting with some youth playing volleyball in the park.

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Mason Mellor, Assistant Program
Co-ordinator

Several times week, Ana and Mason would walk or ride electric bicycles to parks to meet youth, giving away refreshments and promotional items to spark conversations about services and upcoming special events.

One highlight was their visits to Westminster Pier Park by the Fraser River to showcase Youth Services’ Royal City Sound DJ program, through which youth are mentored to learn DJ or music production skills, with the potential to be hired to perform at public events. While the DJs entertained park-goers, Ana and Mason and other staff had the perfect backdrop to profile that program and other services for young people.

Roots & Relationships was a solid success, says Mason. “We truly saw the impact. Youth would often recognize us when we returned to parks and over time, that translated into higher numbers at the New West Youth Centre.”

As Ana’s mentor, Mason helped her to build on her foundational skills as a teacher to learn about the job of being a youth worker and the development and rollout of youth programming. Ana also had the opportunity to learn about other departments and services – by working at the animal shelter, the library and the Anvil Centre arts and cultural hub.

“Mason and his team have been so patient, answering all my questions, and thanks to them, I have learned something new every day,” says Ana. “And it means so much to me when I see youth I’ve connected with in the parks start coming to the youth centre – to know I’ve made an impact on their lives.”

The success of the engagement program has also meant success for Ana; she’s been invited to continue to work at Youth Services this fall.

Ana and Mason have discussed the idea of her starting a painting program for youth as she continues as part of Youth Services’ core team. “As Ana gets more comfortable with us and our program, we know there will plenty of opportunities for her to showcase her abilities,” Mason says. 🍁

Thanks to funding from the CPRA Youth Employment Experience program, Roots & Relationships came to life, and the City hired a newcomer to Canada, Ana Campos Santin, whose employment helped her establish roots of her own in her new community.

The objectives of the CPRA program, which is funded by the Government of Canada’s Youth Employment Skills Strategy program, include supporting a diverse group of young people to gain skills and build experience in the community parks and recreation sector, including people who might otherwise face employment barriers.

Ana is from El Salvador and had been in New Westminster for just six months when she won the competition for the position. She had been a teacher in her home country and says she didn’t expect she’d be so fortunate to find a job that allowed her to connect with young people once again.

“I love talking to and getting to know the young people, as well as exploring the parks. We don’t have parks like this in El Salvador, and seeing that kind of nature was so impressive,” says Ana. “It’s inspiring to me because I like to paint landscapes.”

“The numbers of youth using outdoor green spaces and coming to the New West Youth Centre hadn’t really returned to pre-pandemic levels as we’d hoped,” says Mason Mellor, an Assistant Program Co-ordinator, who was Ana’s partner and mentor on the job.

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