

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: SUNDRE'S NEW YOUTH CENTRE A HIT WITH LOCAL TEENS

'The Den' is bringing many in the community together

Getting involved and investing in the communities where we work and live in is a pillar for us at Pieridae. It is important to strengthen our community bonds by giving back and helping out.

In the town of Sundre near our Caroline Gas Plant, we have dedicated support to the Greenwood Neighborhood Place Society. Greenwood is a non-profit that is focused on responding to community needs in Sundre and the surrounding area with initiatives such as: community gardens, help for Seniors, family support systems and more.

In our latest blog, we profile a new youth centre in Sundre called 'The Den'. With the past two years being clouded with COVID, youth in the Sundre area did not have a safe place to go after school while parents were away working. The Den is a safe space for teens from junior high to high school to come after classes where they can hang out, participate in a variety of activities or get some schoolwork done.

Getting the Youth Centre Started

Russ Klassen is the program director for the youth centre, which is part of Greenwood's Youth Enrichment Program (YEP). With 20 years of experience working with teens, his passion for connecting and helping youth runs deep. Russ had wanted to open a youth centre in Sundre for years, but it just wasn't feasible until Greenwood reached out to him to create The Den.

"YEP is really there to give teens their own space and to help create community with young people. It also serves to validate them," says Russ. "How it works is there might be day programs or support systems in place, including the youth centre which I am a big part of."

Despite Russ' years of helping youth, he wasn't sure when asked to be a part of The Den. "I had a pretty rough exit from my previous work with young people so I took a couple years off and just kind of grieved a bit of that period in my life. Then, Greenwood Neighbourhood Place approached me and asked if I would be interested in helping them think about what a youth centre would look like. I actually took a little bit of time to answer, it wasn't an automatic yes. It actually brought back a lot of difficult feelings, emotions and expressions in my life. In the end, both my wife and I said, 'well, if I don't hop on this opportunity, I'll regret it and I'll want to be involved anyways'."

The Den opened in November of 2021 after more than ten months of planning. Greenwood conducted an extensive needs assessment survey, asking locals what they wanted to see in their communities - what was working well, what was lacking, and what services were not being utilized.

Russ says a small group started the process of figuring out what the youth centre would look like. "After the initial assessment, they started asking more specific questions. They talked to schools, did youth focus groups just saying, 'hey, is this something that you would actually take part in? Is that a cool thing? Is that just lame or nice on paper to a bunch of adults?' Everyone came back saying 'this would be a great thing for Sundre and we really need this'."

Word of what the group was trying to accomplish spread throughout the community leading to widespread support for the youth centre, with many chipping in to help. "The business support in Sundre has been incredible, large and small. People just helping with different odd jobs as well.

Donations kept coming in and coming in and coming in. We'd be in a place where we're running out of money for a specific renovation or whatever it might be and all of a sudden, another check would get dropped off to say this is for the young people," Russ says with appreciation. "Lots of businesses came and just did work for us for no cost at all, or for a limited cost, so that was incredible. Grants from businesses such as Pieridae have helped a ton."

Besides business support, locals want to help out in other ways. The Den has about 25 volunteers presently and the list is growing, with applications continuing to flow in.

Any challenge that came their way, the Russ and others at The Den were able to overcome them with great community support and an excellent perspective: "Challenge is opportunity wrapped in complication. With the help we got overcoming obstacles, it restores your confidence in humanity," adds Russ. "There's so many people that want to help and it's really a beautiful thing when the whole community comes together like this."

The Den and the Impact it Has Already Had

With the centre now up and running for the past few months, teens in the Sundre community have access to a place where they can take part in many different activities. Those operating The Den wanted to have a wide range of opportunities to try and offer something for everyone. There's always something different to do at The Den whether it's workout Mondays, board game Wednesdays, or Friday's which they rotate and do different group activities such as Dungeons & Dragons, or a movie and pizza night.

The centre also serves as a place for teens to learn and think. "On Thursday's, we've got a dedicated homework spot where a teacher and former tutor supervise if anyone wants help with their work," says Russ. "We got this group called Inspire that does more introspective things. For example, they focused on black history month in February, where they looked at a few different inspirational names and talked about their lives. They also want this to be a place where they can share and talk about their feelings."

He adds has already seen benefits The Den has had on the community. "I chatted with a family for 10-15 minutes and they were so happy that their kid has a safe place to be after school while they are still at work, rather than being in someone's basement and not knowing what they're getting up to."

As for the future of The Den, Russ sees an opportunity to shape youth in the community. "A friend of mine said If you think you're leading and there's nobody walking behind you, you're just going for a walk. We really want to push into mentorship and leadership. We want to focus on leadership that's helping others..I think one core thing with leadership is mentoring. You're always pouring into somebody else and you're sharing life with that person. We want to just encourage that and create a place like that."

Opinions From the Community

One parent living in Sundre has witnessed the benefits of The Den firsthand. Monica Rosevear works at Pieridae's Caroline Gas Plant and volunteers in the Sundre community. Her daughter Brooke is a regular at The Den and is also part of a youth committee board that helped shaped the youth centre. Both mother and daughter saw it as a major need for the community.

“A lot of teens and kids wanted somewhere to go after school. It's really improved things, especially for me, because it's just somewhere nice to hang out and there's games there that you can play. It's a pretty fun place to hang out with your friends,” says Brooke. “With COVID, the kids really haven't had anywhere to go because most public places are not open. So, it's super nice to have a safe, supervised space for the kids to go after school and hang out with their friends,” adds mom Monica.

With projects like this that are designed to benefit youth in a community, sometimes, the individuals most impacted aren't asked about how this type of facility should be set up. This wasn't the case with The Den where the Greenwood Neighborhood Place Society wanted opinions from local youth to make the centre the best it could be. “I felt pretty glad and happy that they wanted our input. It's great that they actually got feedback from other ages instead of just an adult committee putting together a youth centre because with our input it has really made it something special,” says Brooke. For Monica, she was impressed with how it has all come together. “It's amazing that they know how to attract teenagers. They have a really robust group of volunteers that are trained and have all the necessary requirements in order to be supervising kids. So, as a parent, it's just a really nice option. When the kids say they're heading there, I have zero worries.

I chair many boards and I'm heavily involved in the youth side of things. We have a lot of great volunteers and that's a cool part about a small community is that we all know each other. So, you are doing it for your friends and family and neighbours,” says Monica.

She couldn't be happier with the positive impact the centre has had on her kids. “My son who is 12 also attends in addition to Brooke, so we do get benefits on both ends. It was nice that they got kids involved and then kids can understand that there there's that whole public consultation side of things. When you get community engagement into a project like that, I think that makes my kids even more committed to going there. It's just kind of a fun little time passer whenever you're at the youth centre that I really enjoy.

“You guys get off work at 4:30 and school ends at 3:30 so it's just that hour in between that we can go somewhere,” adds Brooke.

“Frankly, teenagers are unique creatures that it's all about friends and time with them. So that opportunity and that safe space that The Den has created, I would say is the biggest asset for sure, for our family and just the community in general. Instead of roaming the streets and going in out of stores, they're in a place supervised with adults and that's great,” says Monica.

As an employee of Pieridae, Monica is proud the company sponsored a much-needed centre like The Den. “As we were picking up the kids one day, I noticed that there was a Pieridae logo on the sponsor list. I got pretty excited and felt a sense of pride and happiness that Pieridae is able to contribute within the communities that they operate in. Many of our operators drive through town with the Pieridae logo on their vehicles and people associate us with that. I consider it to be quite important in a small knit community where many people do work for Pieridae. “Thank you to Pieridae for contributing in our communities where they can, and it does make a huge difference in the areas where we operate.”

How You Can Help

If are interested in helping out or learning more about Greenwood or The Den, do any of the following below:

Visit The Den Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/thedensyc>

Visit their Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/thedensyc/?hl=en>

Visit Greenwood's website: <https://www.mygnp.org/> or phone them directly at (403) 638-1011

Email Russ directly: russ@mygnp.org