

URBAN YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION SERVICE

Participants' Stories

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LEARNING FROM YOUTH: CASE STUDIES OF UYES! PARTICIPANTS

The Urban Youth Education/Employment Service (UYES!) is a comprehensive community response to meeting the needs of the high number of at-risk youth in Saint John, who are Not in Employment, Education or Training programs (NEET).

The case studies follow a small cross-section of youth at different intervals during their involvement with the UYES! initiative. They illustrate the variety of living situations and personal challenges these young people face and the outcomes they experience at UYES!. The case studies provide insight into the design of the initiative and which aspects and components contribute to progress.

Ten youth were interviewed; three females, four males, and one who identifies as 2SLGBTQ. Three individuals are parents, two of whom are single parents (one with partial custody), and two individuals are newcomers. Six youth participated in follow-up interviews, at intervals ranging from six to 18 months. All interviews occurred between January 2021 - December 2022.

- Key learnings include:
- Youth face a number of challenges, particularly in regard to housing, mental health, and family support.
 - Youth are willing to engage with coaches, case managers, and outreach support coordinators in order to work through challenges. Their experience of UYES! has been one of trust and comfort.
 - Youth are very positive about their experience with UYES! and take pride in their successes.
 - Youth view an [Adult High School Diploma](#) as essential to future employment opportunities.
 - Wraparound supports are integral to progress on education and employment goals.
 - Pathways to sustainable employment are uneven and complex; the journey takes time.

DONNA, aged 19, is a single parent of a two year-old daughter, living with her parents and three brothers. She balances parenting, school, and employment. Her parents are very supportive; she pays her mother for babysitting and is pleased with her daughter’s development. She is grateful for her family, especially when she sees others who are not well supported by their families.

Donna describes herself as not attending class or completing her homework while in the regular school system. When she became pregnant in Grade 10 she left school. Encouraged by friends, she started at UYES! in August 2020. She attends [GOALS](#) (Growing Occupational, Academic, and Life Skills) twice a week and is part of the [WorkLinks](#) program. She appreciates the support to help her understand what she is working on and that homework expectations are flexible. Her instructors describe her as strong academically and doing double the workload to achieve her credits. She hopes to be finished in the next two months.

Donna started working 20 to 30 hours a week at an Irving Gas Station four months ago. She was referred by a friend and received help from the WorkLinks program to complete her resume and cover letter. She had previously considered post-secondary education as both parents are in the trades, but she credits a presentation to the GOALS class from the [Teen Resource Centre](#) (TRC) for the extra push to apply to a post-secondary institution. She was accepted into the Steamfitter/Pipefitter program at [New Brunswick Community College](#) (NBCC) starting in September 2021.

” **One success led to another for Donna. She achieved her Adult High School Diploma (AHSD) and her driver’s licence. She has more confidence and her future looks better.**

CHELSEA: Having spent most of her life in South Africa, Chelsea arrived with her family in Saint John in April 2020. She presents herself as a very determined 17-year-old. She wants to live on her own, work full-time, achieve her AHSD, and pursue post-secondary education.

She is very positive about her time at the [Learning Exchange](#), starting in April 2021, and working both online and in person. She appreciates the friendly social atmosphere and the acceptance of different lifestyles. Staff are also helping her achieve an upgrade in mathematics and English and a biology credit so she can apply to the university for the psychology program.

She receives significant support from her mother, who, for example, provides transportation from their rural residence so Chelsea can both work and attend GOALS. She says little about her father and brother except to emphasize that she has minimal contact with them.

Chelsea says that she has been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and knows she suffers from depression and anxiety. She feels the mental health system failed her because they did not take her issues seriously. Although she saw a psychiatrist, there was no follow-up. After further unsuccessful attempts to get treatment, she was referred to a therapist. She feels this, together with the right medication, is helping her. She recognizes the importance of being busy and productive and feels she has more control over her emotions. She finds it difficult to make friends but is learning more about herself.

Through WorkLinks she updated her resume and received coaching on approaching employers. She secured a full-time job, her first “on-the-resume” job, at a local pub as a line cook. She readily admits the work is hard and isolating, especially because she is the only young person employed there. When members of her family received permanent residency status she felt more encouraged to plan her next steps.

” **Chelsea graduated with her AHSD in June. This brought her a big sense of relief, partly because of the challenge of working and attending school at the same time.**

Twelve months later: Chelsea feels very positive about her situation. She has appreciated the flexibility of UYES! and its financial help when moving.

In the past year she worked at several jobs – a summer job through UYES! as an administrative assistant in the Ethics Department at [Horizon](#), a line cook, waitressing, and childcare. She has been living on her own for a year and is proud to be able to sustain this. For the last six months, her therapist has been helping her cope and putting issues in perspective. She describes having a great group of friends.

For the past month, Chelsea has been working full-time from home, telemarketing for an international firm fundraising for charities. She feels this job will be good for her career. She connects with her team online, is building customer service skills (including communication), and earns a better income. She has been accepted at the [University of New Brunswick – Saint John](#) (UNBSJ) and will apply for student loans. She hopes to continue working part-time.

ANNIE is 26 and lives with a partner who is not involved in any programs or employed. She has shared little about her partner except that he is working on some issues. Her goal is to live in a one-bedroom apartment with her partner and have a safe backyard for her dog. Annie has been involved in different programs in the past, as a youth, as one of a group of women building their confidence, and in an introductory construction program.

She attended the [Outflow Carpentry Training](#) program. Staff describe her as a very determined individual, coming to class despite living precariously for six months. She proudly describes the eight-week work term where they built a weather-tight tiny home. Annie was offered a job in renovation through [Kaleidoscope](#).

Staff assisted Annie and her boyfriend when they moved to a one-bedroom apartment, hoping to keep it long enough to obtain a reference for a nicer place.

Annie has a comfort level working in construction, taking down sheetrock and walls in order to ready a building for renovation. She also likes learning about different tools. Both her father and grandfather were carpenters. Attending NBCC for the carpenters training program is a goal but first she would like to learn more.

Annie’s support network is limited. Her early homelife was an unsettling experience. Her parents separated when she was young and her mother struggled with addiction issues. Her earlier years made it difficult to trust people but she feels this is changing as she becomes more self-aware. According to Annie, she was diagnosed with a disability at a young age (possibly a learning disability or an intellectual disability) and is receiving a disability cheque.

” **Being homeless can be very unsettling and even dangerous as she had her work clothes stolen and her tent attacked. Despite this, she maintained a daily commitment to the construction job with a positive attitude.**

Six months later: Having successfully finished her demolition job, Annie has taken short-term jobs and she has proven herself to be a capable and reliable employee. Committed to working in the construction industry, she has been applying for work and participating in construction training modules. UYES! staff connected Annie to [Hire Potential](#), a program of

[Inclusion NB](#) for case management support to further her employment goals. The apartment she has been in for the past six months is not ideal. It has bedbugs and the environment in the building is at times unstable and violent. This makes it challenging to present herself confidently to employers.

CAITLIN is a 23-year-old graduate of Outflow’s Carpentry Training Program, who has been working full-time since August 2022 at [Strescon](#) in the Carpentry Division. She is their first female mold maker. She is continually being given more responsibility, and feels respected in a predominantly male environment.

Prior to her involvement with UYES!, Caitlin worked as a bartender for a number of years. She struggled with mental health issues and had little high-school education. She felt no one really cared about her and she lacked the courage to move on. Her attitude about herself and her situation have changed significantly. Now she feels much more confident in herself. Staff listened to her, connected with her as an individual, and made her feel comfortable with herself and her voice.

While attending the eight-month carpentry training program she also achieved her GED. Staff from WorkLinks assisted in updating her resume and she proudly stated that “it looked good!” Caitlin feels she gained valuable carpentry skills but also the ability to work with others. She volunteers to speak to new participants as part of Outflow’s orientation program. She eventually hopes to get her Red Seal in carpentry. Both her parents and grandparents have been successful in the renovation business.

Caitlin keeps in touch with UYES!, letting WorkLinks know how she is doing. She speaks of connecting Callie (UYES! Coordinator) with her employer who is interested in hiring individuals from the carpentry training program because of their training experience.

AYAAN is a confident teen who has adjusted well since coming to Canada three years ago with her two brothers, originally from Somalia. She is happy and interested in life and doing well in school. She received tangible and moral support from the TRC and Learning Exchange in accessing housing, government identification, and a part-time job. She receives a bus pass every month. As a Grade 12 student at Saint John High School, she receives assistance from [Pathways to Education](#), particularly in subject areas such as history.

She describes learning English through speaking with other youth and staff at the TRC. She has an aptitude for languages, including Arabic, Somali, Swahili, and English and is learning French.

Since December of 2019, she and her brothers have been living in subsidized housing, obtained with the help of her case manager. With assistance from WorkLinks, Ayaan has been working 14 hours a week for five months at a pub. She added another part-time job, working five to six hours a week at a fast food restaurant.

Twelve months later: She continues to live in subsidized housing but is anxious about how long this will continue since she and both her brothers are now working. (One is going to school as well.) Her employment at one location was short-lived as she would show up for a three- to four-hour shift and find there was only one hour of work. She is very determined to work as much as possible and save money for post-secondary education.

She applied in May and is currently on a waiting list for the two-year Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) program at NBCC. She does not want to incur debt but knows once she has her certificate, she will be paid more. Initially working one day a week, she now works both day and night shift jobs, a couple of days a week. She is currently applying for another job. Having completed an online course, she hopes this could result in even more hours.

” Ayaan is proud to have successfully graduated from high school. Nine months ago, in order to get enough hours, she started working in the homecare field for different agencies.

She has her driver’s permit but attending the driver’s education program is not affordable. She feels positive about how she is doing and knows that she is “pushing herself”. She keeps in touch with the TRC, reaching out when she needs assistance.

ALTON, aged 18, is very positive about his experience with UYES! programs and their focus on him as an individual. He started without any credits and is currently completing his last credit to achieve his AHSD. He says, “one good accomplishment out of the way,” proud to dispel the assumption of his family and others that he couldn’t get his high school diploma. He said even staff were surprised he came back after dropping out of the program (as did his sister). But Alton says he doesn’t want to continue “being on welfare and using marijuana.”

Alton struggles with anger, depression, and insomnia. He feels he is making some progress since visits to his mother now leave him feeling “neutral,” instead of angry. Due to his unstable family situation, he is living at [Beacon Cove](#) . This housing situation and access to a mental health counsellor will cease once he turns 19 and is no longer eligible for the [YES](#) program.

Alton enjoyed the work experience at the [Social Enterprise Hub](#), where he felt like part of a community. He recognized that repeated absences resulted in his being fired despite the chances he was given. He is easily influenced to skip classes by his girlfriend. She is in an alternative education program run by the school district and not doing well. He struggles with attendance at the UYES!-Outflow Carpentry Training Program but continues with GOALS.

He is exploring an apprenticeship in carpentry and has kept appointments with staff at the Learning Exchange, NBCC and the Province. He thinks his experience in the training program can qualify him for the first apprenticeship exam and could lead to summer employment, depending on his attendance.

Seven months later: Alton speaks with a great deal of pride in achieving his AHSD. Through Beacon Cove, he obtained his driver’s permit but will need financial aid to do the driver’s education course. He dropped out of the Outflow Carpentry program, although he feels he benefitted from the training and hands-on work. He remains interested in carpentry and apprenticeship.

In a period of less than six months, Alton moved three times. From Beacon Cove, he moved into a rooming house. It was difficult there because some residents were fighting and the neighbours complained, blaming all the youth. With the help of his case manager, he moved into a subsidized two-bedroom apartment with his girlfriend. But he did not feel safe in the neighbourhood and his now ex-girlfriend was asked to leave. With assistance from the TRC, he moved into a one-bedroom subsidized apartment where he pays 25% of the rent, instead of the usual 30%.

Alton’s mental health issues and lack of a supportive network including friends continue to challenge him. The presence of wraparound supports from his case manager, from Learning Exchange staff and from the mental health outreach counsellor at the TRC continue to play a key role in his progress.

Fourteen months later: After three employment stints, Alton has been working for the past month for a landscaping and tree service company. A close friend employed with the company encouraged him to apply. He works full-time and has a comfort level operating heavy equipment. He is paid \$15/hour and is promised a raise in three months’ time; the job may extend into winter.

Alton feels much happier and is making and saving money. He continues to see the mental health outreach counsellor monthly and feels inspired to set and reach more goals. He has resided in the same subsidized apartment for almost a year and it feels like home. His 18-year-old brother currently lives with him. Alton encouraged his brother to attend the Learning Exchange but he only stayed one day.

JERRIT is 18 years old and heard about UYES! programs from his sister, who also attended. He left high school in Grade 10. He and his friends were miserable at school and felt isolated from teachers except for his gym and football coach. He finds the atmosphere at the Learning Exchange friendlier like he is part of a team and was meant to be in the program. He first started in the winter of 2020 but did not have great attendance until starting again in the fall.

He is completing his last credit and will graduate with an AHSD. He has more confidence, especially as he did not think he was ever going to complete high school. Working with his case manager, he has made progress with his own personal goals. In the past, he often would stay up until early morning and then sleep all day. He is very self-conscious about his weight. Staff at the Learning Exchange are trying to get him a [YMCA](#) membership for the summer.

He and his friends constantly work on cars - wiring, welding and painting. He always wanted to attend the auto body technician course at NBCC. Staff helped him with the application process and he has been accepted. They are also exploring a possible funding opportunity from a survivor’s benefit because his father, now deceased, worked for a union.

” Jerrit is very positive about his experience with UYES! and credits the program for ensuring he is “not on the streets” or a nobody.

Jerrit will defer his seat at NBCC for a year as a previously broken wrist requires surgery and a cast for a year. He is not sure what he will do during the year but may talk with WorkLinks staff.

Jerrit has a stable living situation with a younger brother and their mother. For the past four years, she has been working at the Regional Hospital in cleaning and food services. His mother is very supportive of his goals and progress. His plans to move out with friends are on hold.

Twelve months later: Jerrit did not require surgery and instead received cortisone shots. Despite acceptance to NBCC, he did not feel ready to attend. The Learning Exchange covered the administrative fee to hold his seat. He spent the year working on cars with his friends, continuing to live at home. He was employed for less than a week with a company doing spray foam insulation but it “didn’t work out.” One of his goals has been to get his driver’s licence and he now has his permit.

He is working with staff at the Learning Exchange to apply for student loans and ensure all the paperwork is completed for the auto body technician course at NBCC. With their assistance he accessed a small survivor’s pension, which is available until the age of 25, if he attends school. WorkLinks staff also helped his younger brother find a job in the construction industry.

Eighteen months later: Jerrit is attending NBCC. He was a recipient of a bursary through [Emera](#) that covered the costs of textbooks and other college essentials.

BRAD is a 17 year old who was homeless and couch-surfing. He had been living with his father in Saskatchewan but neither this nor his experience in an alternative school there were working for him. He moved to Saint John in the fall of 2019. He and a friend were living with his mother for a short period, but left because of her addiction issues, which were

influencing his own addiction tendencies. He helps his grandmother, who has custody of his two younger brothers.

Brad connected with the TRC through a friend who was staying at the TRC rooming house (a partnership with [Housing Alternatives](#) that includes wraparound supports for youth). Brad’s case manager helped him access a place at the rooming house and his friend stayed with him until another room became available. He is in contact with his case manager three or four times a week, at the rooming house or through social media. He also appreciates receiving financial support, such as food vouchers.

When Brad started in UYES! he needed two credits for his AHSD and expected to finish in six months. He attends GOALS and is currently completing his soft skills credit. He feels he is good at communication, and describes himself as self-aware, kind and mature. He attributes his progress to the small class size and the personal approach of the teachers, who know you as a person and help you achieve your goals. The pace allows him to focus on other aspects of his personal life, rather than a lot of school work. He has been working with his coach on setting personal goals. He obtained his licence and appreciated having the costs covered.

Brad recognizes that he is more motivated. His case manager helped him move into a two-bedroom apartment that he shares with a friend (subsidized for a year). This was not something he expected to happen. He is eating better, has stopped using harder drugs for over six months, always pays his rent, and feels he is in a much better environment. Small stresses in his life have been removed. For example, he is now able to lock his door and know that his possessions are safe.

Money is tight and although he is interested in working in a grocery store, there are some restrictions due to his involvement with the YES program.

YES program participants are allowed to earn a certain amount; additional money needs to be put into a savings account or one's eligibility is terminated.

Brad has had a lot of toxic experiences and wants to change his life. His anxiety makes it hard to focus on new things and he has never had a lot of constant encouragement. He seems to be developing a more supportive network, with his girlfriend and others. Although a referral to a private counsellor did not work out, his case manager will follow-up up with the mental health outreach counsellor at the TRC.

Brad's goals are to make money and he thinks that in the future he might look at post-secondary education. He is considering a future in the trades as his father works in the trades and makes a lot of money. He is confident that the Learning Exchange will help him.

” **Brad achieved his AHSD. He has been working in scaffolding for over six months. He is now a parent, living with his partner (the baby's mom), their child, as well as grandmother. He is receiving a Housing First rent subsidy.**

CALVIN, aged 29, graduated from high school and completed chef training at NBCC. He presents himself as a very willing worker, with experience in the cooking industry including five years at a local golf club. However, he was fired from his last job.

Calvin is interested in a new career and is nine weeks into the Outflow Carpentry Program. He is ambitious, speaking of plans to make a lot of money in the construction field. When he began at Outflow he was

homeless. He now lives in an apartment with a rent of \$500 but is struggling, as a single person receiving \$568/month in income assistance. He is currently two months behind in his rent. He spoke of the challenges to have money for food for himself and his two young children, aged three and seven, whom he sees on weekends. Both live with their mothers, one of whom is in another community.

Calvin seems very committed to being in his children's lives. The issue is fraught with challenges, including toxic relationships and not being able to visit without supervision. He feels there is a bias against single fathers and few services and supports.

Calvin acknowledges that he has ADHD (he may have difficulty paying attention or controlling impulsive behaviours) and anger issues. He is on medication and was seeing a mental health worker for five months who connected him to the Outflow Carpentry Program. He is currently seeing the mental health outreach counsellor at the TRC for stress management, particularly with his role as a parent and while in training full-time. His case manager is helping him look at possible financial resources to assist with his children, since support from his family is limited.

He hopes to work at Outflow for the summer. That would mean he could challenge the first block for apprenticeship at NBCC, which staff are helping him explore. He wants to be working full-time in a year. Outflow staff see increased resiliency and confidence in Calvin but have concerns with his attendance.

Twelve months later: Calvin completed the Outflow program. However, he was asked to leave and finish the program in another setting. He blames Outflow for not dealing with his concerns with another participant. He has been on medication for three years to help with his anger issues and feels he does control himself.

Calvin worked at a roofing company for three months. He found the work physically difficult and had conflicts with a fellow worker and left. He recently had his resume updated through WorkLinks and started working five days ago for a garbage company. He thinks that part-time work may be better.

He seems to have been in a stable relationship for the past eight months. His partner is a personal support worker and Calvin's children are fond of him. Calvin acquired a lawyer through legal aid to successfully gain access to his children. He sees his children three weekends a month.

He is living in an inadequate two-bedroom, unheated apartment with his partner and pays \$500 a month. He continues to have plans. He would like to work with his hands but is not sure what sort of work. He has his driver's licence and would like to get his Class 3 licence.

PRINCE, aged 18, is a trans non-binary individual who finally feels some acceptance for who they are. They did not expect to live beyond the age of 16 as they were an addict, in an abusive relationship, receiving minimal family support, and felt ostracized by their school.

” Prince feels they have benefitted from the Learning Exchange, personally, academically and financially. It is a very safe non-judgemental environment that offers guidance and support for their sexuality, including dealing with fears lingering from an abusive relationship.

Prince feels better able to look after themselves and is more confident. The GOALS soft-skills component of communication and conflict

resolution was helpful. Both Prince and staff recognize a decrease in Prince's "dramatic behaviour". Prince sees progress, being halfway through achieving the credits needed for an AHSD. The program is flexible; you can leave if it is a tough day, because its focus is to take care of yourself. The program provided a much-needed laptop. Prince is working with their coach to change their legal name and obtain their driver's licence. The TRC connected Prince with [Peer SJ](#). They are receiving hormone therapy and are proud of their progress and appreciate the support received.

Prince works eight hours a week at a grocery store, stocking shelves at night. Money is tight and assistance with groceries and encouragement to stay with the job all help. Their coach encouraged Prince to ask the employer for a day shift instead. With this change, they have maintained part-time employment for more than eight months. They feel better able to advocate for themselves.

Prince recently engaged in self-harm activities but recognized the trigger. They requested help with communication, a significant step - in the past they shared everything on social media. Counselling from [Family Plus](#) was also beneficial, according to staff.

Six months later: Prince changed their name, though not legally, married an American citizen and is preparing for the immigration process. The TRC helped them move into subsidized housing, sharing a two-bedroom apartment with another couple. After working over a year in the part-time job at the grocery store, they left.

Prince continues working on credits towards an AHSD, valuing the different classes. They hope to be finished within the year. They are interested in working in the health field. Although challenged by many stresses, Prince uses coping strategies such as playing the guitar or talking with UYES! staff.

Eighteen months later: With assistance from staff, Prince and their partner moved into their own subsidized apartment (to avoid more drama with another couple). Another agency, [Fresh Start](#), covered the damage deposit. Prince is anxious that the subsidized housing rate continue beyond June 2023 because they are not working and have self-exited from the Learning Exchange (due to personal stresses). They continue to receive support and assistance with food from UYES! staff. They plan to go back in the fall and are on a waiting list.

Prince feels physically and emotionally unable to work due to issues related to their autism, agoraphobia, and paranoia. They want a disability diagnosis and their doctor is supportive. However they also talked about the desire to work at the Learning Exchange. Despite these changes, Prince feels they have learned more about themselves and are more resilient.

UYES! appreciates the willingness of the ten individuals to share their challenges, hopes, and successes with us.

UYES! Glossary of terms and acronyms

Adult High School Diploma (AHSD) is an accelerated version of a high school diploma offered in the Province of New Brunswick. UYES! is unique in offering this option in a community setting with wraparound supports.

Case Management is primarily the role of case managers at the Teen Resource Centre (TRC), to assist youth in removing barriers, achieving their goals, and attaining stability in their lives.

Coaching is mainly provided by staff at the Learning Exchange, to assist youth in setting and achieving goals related to education and employment.

Financial interventions are provided immediately to youth to reduce specific barriers, such as food bills, bus fare, or housing costs, and thereby stabilize a young person's situation.

Financial Incentives are goal-based payments used by staff to encourage and reward a young person's participation as they work to identify and achieve their goals.

GED or General Educational Development. By passing all five GED tests, someone who has not completed high school can earn the equivalent of a high-school diploma.

GOALS or Growing Occupational, Academic, and Life Skills is a pre-employment skills training program accredited by the Saint John school district. GOALS participants earn Alternative High School Diploma credits while developing soft skills and exploring career options.

Housing First is a pilot partnership between the Learning Exchange, Teen Resource Centre, and Housing Alternatives to house up to 35 youth aged 15-30 who are struggling with insecure housing. Participants receive financial rent subsidies and case management support.

Mental Health Outreach Coordinator provides on-site mental health services to young people in response to their needs and with little or no wait time.

Outflow Carpentry Training Program delivered by Outflow Ministry, provides basic carpentry and construction skills training to UYES! youth over a four-month period. The carpentry training modules are recognized by the school district for a high school credit.

UYES! provides flexible opportunities for youth to learn, work, and grow personal networks, as well as assistance to navigate and surmount personal barriers. In these ways, it empowers youth to identify and achieve their own goals in education and employment.

WESLinks is a Soft Skills Series to build the confidence as well as the skills essential to success in the workforce, including communication, collaboration, time management, stress management, problem solving, and conflict resolution.

WorkLinks provides individualized coaching to help job seekers develop a plan for employment and address all aspects of searching for a job, getting a job, and keeping a job. If appropriate, they are connected to local employers offering jobs for which participants are eligible to apply.

Wraparound supports refers to a range of services (guidance, counselling, coaching, follow-up, and advocacy) that case managers, coaches, and mental health outreach coordinator can provide immediately in response to the needs of youth.