

## **Kerr Smith, OCA Education Manager (2010 - 2015)**

*"Education should not be the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."*

— William Butler Yeats

During my decade-long involvement with CYL, I have seen countless inspired fires lit. Young leaders energized by their experience within the program and primed to participate in our sector. However, frankly speaking, I've also witnessed too many of these fires fizzle shortly thereafter.

This is not due to an indifference or passivity on the participant's part, it should be noted - but because of an oversight in our sector to recognize the immense potential of this program beyond simply the weeks spent at camp. The immense potential for both the participants and for our co-ops.

Over the years, it's been disheartening to observe a pattern of many co-op sponsored teens blossoming over three years of camp, and then returning for many years as invaluable, devoted, volunteer facilitators - while simultaneously fading away from the rest of our sector due to a lack of opportunities to engage. Today, I'd like to shine a light on this missed opportunity - and issue a call to action.

CYL is much more than a camp. Or, at least it can be. Without a doubt, the time spent with peers and mentors at the program is powerful - as was eloquently articulated by Sonja in last month's newsletter. But this transformative power has the potential to incite great change and growth in not only our young members, but also in our own co-ops and sector-at-large. When we sponsor teens to attend CYL, we are outfitting them with the tools, information, and "spark" required to spread an awareness about our co-ops. However, all too often, I feel we neglect the critical next step: providing them with a platform or vehicle to apply these skills and promote our cause.

Within each co-op we craft elaborate marketing campaigns and discuss outside "influencers" and advertising angles, while sailing right by the fact that we already have a team of passionate ambassadors standing ready right in front of us, waiting for meaningful opportunities to get involved. After we created the very successful All 4 Each project - an education initiative designed to support teachers in introducing co-ops into High Schools and Colleges - it was our CYL participants who helped to get it off the ground by doing the grassroots, word-of-mouth work

of promoting the project within their schools and communities. We couldn't have done it without them, and they were very proud to have taken part.

A quick Google search on topics such as "how to build a movement", "how to engage members" and "most effective outreach campaigns" will consistently reveal a few key components:

- Identify and engage those who are passionate about your cause
- Outfit them with the tools and training necessary for success
- Allow them a voice, and provide them with meaningful, tangible, and mutually beneficial opportunities to get involved

**And so, my call to action is this: when considering your co-op's participation in sponsoring youth, look at CYL through a wider scope, a longer lens.** Regard the CYL camp as an amazing introduction, training ground and FIRST STAGE of a larger plan for your organization: a proven program to ignite and educate your young members, before they return to your co-op to be activated as a new generation of co-op ambassadors. See CYL for what it is, as well as what it can be with a little extra elbow grease and progressive thinking: a fantastic chance to facilitate the growth of our young leaders while simultaneously strengthening the sustainability of, and engagement within our co-operatives.

Let us fan these excited fires and open our eyes to the new light and energy they provide.