

## Metamorphosis of a Leader

This past summer, I had the wonderful opportunity to be one of 13 YWALK youth leaders to learn and promote sustainable active transportation in Toronto. Long before day 1, the YWALK Crew proved to be an ideal youth team; the recruitment application asked me to express who I was on one sheet of paper with the option of words, song lyrics, poetry, and drawings as mediums. Preparing the application in itself was an exploration for me, and perhaps in this way the application was the first stepping stone to leadership.



by Inthuja Selvaratnam

When Day 1 came, I was unsure if I would truly enjoy YWALK because I had felt transportation was boring: the ice breakers of course helped change this. I learned to work with teens my age, younger than me, and older than me in various activities and workshops related to transportation. I soon went from being narrow minded to open minded, and found that –heck, we maybe young but we do have an impact on transportation. YWALK taught and motivated me to make that impact be positive. From urban planning, photographing city infrastructure, to walking and busing downtown; my peers and I developed the qualities necessary to be leaders: teamwork, initiative, problem solving, and passion.

Putting these skills into action came in the form of the YWALK Forum. My responsibility along with two of my peers -Erin and Devin- was to find a keynote speaker and provide success stories for the forum. At our first session to determine who we would like for a keynote speaker, we brainstormed the qualities we seek in great key note speakers, and if I remember correctly we narrowed it down to a presenter who was engaging and who had demonstrated youth activism. With the help of our coordinator Arthur, we researched some wonderful youth leaders in our community. We came across many youth activists and we were amazed and inspired by all the leaders we had researched. As we could only choose one, it was only wise to interview all our researched candidates, and see for ourselves.

Interviewing the candidates was a great experience as we talked over coffee and connected with local environmental activists about the same age as us. It was all so inspiring - I remember taking notes of ideas that I wanted to see happen in my school. Eventually we decided on one key note speaker, and invited the other candidates to present their success stories at a panel discussion. We were thoroughly satisfied by our decisions, and glad that the forum would be genuinely our creation, as Arthur provided guidance. The preparation for the forum gave us more ownership and enthusiasm that in the end proved to be successful.

When I think of YWALK, I think of two things: youth empowerment and positive leadership. Aside from all the valuable knowledge on safe alternative transportation, as a member of YWALK Crew I could feel that I was becoming more of a leader. I feel that my leadership skills developed in YWALK are to be treasured for years to come. My peers and I led in our meetings, in our actions, and ultimately we led a massive engagement with other youth in the community for positive change: the YWALK Forum.