



Off the Grill 2014

Off the Grill (OTG) is a uniquely effective youth program. It provides significant benefits to some of the most vulnerable teens in the Britannia area as well as the community at large. Via a social development and collaborative approach and through a sharing of a communal meal, OTG creates the space to nurture positive social connections and experiences amongst the youth, community members, and professional youth supports.

Food is probably the most basic way to connect and build emotional safety with the youth. This is why we invite various youth support people to join us for the twice weekly meals. During the winter, meals are served in the Teen Centre while in the warm weather, the meals are served outdoors in the Britannia Plaza where the youth congregate creating an lively, positive atmosphere. Here, community members are invited to eat as well.

The teens really appreciated the high protein nutritious food and many stepped up to help with the program. Some teens simply helped by carrying a table, others spent hours program planning. All levels of youth involvement are celebrated, giving our young friends a much-needed feeling of success and welcome by the larger community. The teens that join us each evening at OTG are amazing individuals and deserve our committed support.

So let's talk about the key program benefits.



Health Promotion

The program support teens in gaining health knowledge that is very accessible. Conversation with the teens often centres around nutritious eating and the youth gain important health and nutrition information along with positive food habits. The more good food that our teens eat, the more likely they are to continue to eat the same good food. Many who scoffed at a salad in the early days of the program now request certain veggies because they have grown to love them.

Health promotion is a key pillar of Off the Grill. Our partnership with the BC Children's Hospital Responsive Intersectoral Child, Health Education and Research (RICHER) initiative provides youth direct access to an adolescent medicine physician and nurse practitioner who attend OTG. Since OTG started, health related conversations initiated by youth have increased as youth have gotten to know and trust the health professionals better.

Off the Grill relies on socially healthy cooperation, clear communication, and a positive attitude. When OTG takes over the Britannia Plaza to serve tasty nutritious food, we create a healthy environment that respects and appreciates these teens... in other words the OTG program creates a space where friends can come together in a life affirming way.



Life Skills

Off the Grill provides valuable opportunities for youth to develop personal life skills. These include every aspect of running a meal program - planning meals, shopping for groceries, prepping food, serving customers, setting up the space and cleaning up afterwards. These are especially important skills for youth to have as they make food choices and develop into healthy individuals. These are also important employment skills, particularly given the number of teens who may look for entry level work in the food industry. Gaining food-related life skills through OTG provides the youth a hands up when job seeking.

For many of the youth involved, OTG is providing a first experience preparing and eating healthy food. From our observations and discussions with teens, it is clear that, due to life circumstances beyond their control, many youth are entirely unfamiliar with the healthy foods and basic nutrition information that most of us take for granted.

The teens work alongside positive and motivational adult role models who celebrate youth successes and show genuine appreciation towards the youth for their contributions to OTG. This investment boosts confidence, something the youth urgently need as many face racial discrimination and stigmatization in our communities.



Community

Britannia plaza is where youth congregate. This is also where the public walk and in the past some had expressed feeling uneasy in the presence of teens who at times are involved in unhealthy behaviors including alcohol and drug use. Alternatively, OTG is creating a positive space in the plaza and food is the anchor that helps us establish connection with the youth. Food is helping bridge the social gaps between the youth and their neighbors by offering people a chance to come together in a way that is easy, fun, and safe. Our teens want to be seen and known, they definitely do not want to be disliked and misunderstood.

The youth respond positively to the program, helping serve food to the community and engaging in pro-social activities like playing ball, listening to music and dancing. OTG allows the public to see the youth in a positive light. Thereby, the program works to give our young friends a much needed feeling of belonging and inclusion in their neighborhood.

The program builds the community's capacity to learn what our teens need and explore ways to meet those needs. A variety of community partners including the library, youth outreach, and the police have at various times, been on site to share a meal and connect with the youth.

Off the Grill is a program we started in 2013. We made healthy meals for the youth and the community. During this program I learned a lot of stuff about food prep, cooking and leadership skills. Before Off the Grill my drinking was very bad and my drug use was getting bad, but when I became a part of this program my drinking lessened and my drug use stopped. I began eating healthier as did many of the other youth here. Off the Grill was a good example on all of us here in this community. Before Off the Grill, Britannia was known as a place where all the bad teens hung out. People in our community thought all we did was just drink and do drugs and it was true, but this program has changed us youth in a positive way. Instead of spending our time doing negative stuff we started spending our time working at Off the Grill and eventually the adults of the community changed their minds about us. We weren't just those alcoholic drug addicted teens anymore. We changed. For some we were leaders, others we were role models, but most importantly, we were a part of the community again.

- Sam, Youth Participant

Off the Grill is perhaps best described in snapshots – moments where it is clear that things were really working. My favorite snapshots? Four teen boys who routinely butted their cigarettes and jogged over from the library to help set up the white soccer tent. A teen who proudly brought her parents and aunties to share a meal with the program, happy to have joined in the preparation and the service of the food. A young mother, new to the city, who was grateful her family of four could buy an inexpensive dinner that she didn't have to prepare. The flock of teenagers who came back early from a day of cliff jumping on the North Shore because they know that there will be food at Britannia. The elderly couple who came for a meal every Wednesday and Friday, and who occasionally donated a cake or some other treat for dessert. A group of teen girls who, after a summer of joining community meals, trusted the teen centre staff enough to join them for a surf trip. The Britannia courtyard, filled with people – teens, a few of their siblings and occasionally parents, members of the community, and staff - eating delicious food and experimenting with conversation in the fading summer light.

- Jen, Adult Volunteer

With all of the help from our volunteers my time was much more free to connect with the community who were drawn to the BBQ event. There were many conversations between myself and community members about how important it is to support teenagers and give them challenging experiences with positive role models. Chaltu, a volunteer herself mentioned how positive the energy was around the public concourse. I had time to debrief with the whole team at various points throughout the night, gaining valuable input on what is working and what can improve. Lastly, I had time to interview another youth and solidify his availability and commitment level in regards to helping with the program and to receive specific chef training from our wonderful chef, Val.

- Trevor, Off the Grill Coordinator

After collecting a large plate of fresh food I sat down next to a stranger, a lovely young gentleman, and we had a long conversation about how things were going in his life. We talked first about the weather, but before long it turned to the start of school, his plans to get a high paying job after finishing school and his desires to support his parents and younger sister. Before long, he noticed the stethoscope around my neck and turned towards me, leaning in to inquire about his own health. He had injured his arm and was in pain. I explored his health concerns, examining his hand, arm and shoulder discretely. Finally, very casually, he asked “if you hear voices, does it mean you’re schizophrenic?”

Our sitting together was not incidental. I had been trying to connect with him for over a year. In efforts to have him psychiatrically assessed, I had previously had conversations with both of his parents, his uncle, his child protection social worker, his youth worker, the BC Children’s Emergency Department, and his school. I had reviewed his medical records from several local hospitals. But I could not track him down to even set up a medical appointment for him, let alone establish a doctor-patient relationship. Many hours had gone into establishing this one moment of connection between us.

There were over 60 youth discussed at the Grandview Woodland Youth Workers meeting last summer and they all have mental health, substance use, runaway, or serious injury concerns, similar to this young male. They cycle in and out of the local hospitals due to injuries, suicide attempts, overdoses and acute and chronic medical problems. Numerous have been referred to outpatient clinics at BC Children’s, mental health teams and family doctors, but we have not made much progress in connecting them to ongoing services. I have been working with dedicated community workers to navigate a complex system of medical services, guardianship, school and mental health services relevant to these young people. Even when we find appropriate services, too often the youth have had too many negative interactions with institutions that we struggle to make the connections to improve their health and wellbeing. The Off the Grill program is a vital piece among the network of support services that has allowed me and other service providers to connect with youth on their own terms.

Over the last few years, I’ve connected with about 20% of at-risk youth of concern in the neighborhood through Off the Grill, and I have been peripherally involved in another 30% to assist in connecting them to services. Often, even just seeing them across the plaza, eating and chatting with their friends, is more of a health assessment as anyone provider has had. Traumatized youth will have greater risks of chronic health disease across the life span, and their ability to seek health services in prevention, management and in times of crisis is imperative to their overall well-being. Off the Grill is an avenue to starting to repair the relationships between these young people and the social systems that they depend on.

My evening conversation with this young person did not result in a psychiatric assessment, but our interaction was the start of a respectful doctor-patient relationship. I offered to connect him with further services for his injuries and mental health concerns, which he politely declined, but he did agree to let me check in with him in the future. I saw him the next week at Off the Grill as he sat with his friends, enjoying the last few rays of summer sun. He waved and gave a friendly smile.

Dr. Eva Moore, Adolescent Pediatrician, RICHER Initiative



Off the Grill 2014 Activity - A Brief Timeline

Creative Challenge, Winter 2013/2014: In the winter after a successful summer program, we had an indoor meal and meeting with the teens to decide next steps. Although the community BBQs could not run in the cold seasons, they still wanted to have group meals. So with the same regularity of the summer program, the OTG staff would connect with a few teen helpers each session and hosted simple meals in the Teen Centre (TC). This created an opportunity to deepen the mentorship relationships through collective problem solving and family-like mealtime.

Benefits:

- Teens who were disengaged/at-risk begin to use the TC regularly
- Grocery store trips proved a great opportunity to connect/build relationships with individual teens and engage in a healthy way with the community
- Teens increasingly participated in food prep
- Teens explored new food options – buying different type of meats and cheeses, and eventually fruits and vegetables
- Teens started to engage with staff at the TC, building positive adult relationships
- Teens strengthened friendships with each other and benefited from the support of a peer group

Challenges

- Major use of TC space was at the expense of other programming
- Inconsistent food-prep support was reliant on volunteers and teens who could be wrangled
- Teens not yet accessing health care as much as had been hoped
- Low barrier engagement (everyone eats whether they help or not) means teens can take advantage of food “just being there”
- Money to fund the program was limited

Teenaged Takeover, Spring 2014: A smaller group of the teens decided that they wanted to try coordinating the teen meal program. OTG staff supported and encouraged these youth as they planned, shopped and cooked complicated four-course meals on their own. Shopping was done primarily within the local community and the meals were served in the Teen Centre.

Benefits:

- Meals improved in diversity and quality as the teens got excited about new recipes
- Increased self confidence for those teens who were involved in food prep
- All teens continued to have a reason to use the TC – great food is available!
- Teens increasingly engaged in activities at the TC including taking a food safe course
- Donated vegetables (Britannia Food Share) from nearby stores cut costs and exposed teens to new vegetables





Challenges

- Teens not in core group had limited chance to be engaged – core group shopped alone
- Considerable responsibility fell on the shoulders of a few teens who began to resent “those other kids” who are eating for free and never say thank you. Before long this team of teens doing prep seemed to “burn out”
- No one with major food prep experience supported preparation
- Donated vegetables were intimidating for food prep team, and collecting donated vegetables was an often forgotten task

In Full Swing, Summer 2014: Twice weekly Community BBQs were rolled out as the weather warmed up and money was secured. An unprecedented donation of \$5,000 from a community volunteer helped make the program possible. Area residents anticipated the program start, an obvious sign of community support and expression of the mutually beneficial nature of the program.

Meals for teens and the community were prepared, prepped and planned by our volunteer chef, Val and supported by practicum students, staff and volunteers, and teen engagement. Roasted veggies, herb-stuffed salmon, pork tenderloin, and our famous chicken skewers were served with our signature wedge of watermelon and salad.

The teenagers were looking brighter and healthier than ever before as they became accustomed to meals that are rich in natural vitamins and minerals, complex carbs, proteins and fatty acids.

Benefits:

- Healthy, well balanced and delicious meals were appreciated by teens and community members – both groups arrive hungry and left satisfied
- Volunteer chef meant meals were high quality and nutritious. Chef put together a training module and taught a few teens basic food skills
- Between 5 and 15 teens ate meals each session. Youth workers and TC staff had a chance to connect with these teens and to check in on how they’re doing. For example, UNYA roving leaders have said they appreciate this point of access
- Many teens helped out in small ways, 14 teens helped out a significant amount. Within that group of 14, 6 teens helped in an ongoing basis and were considered OTG Staff
- Expert meal planning kept costs low, and community contributions almost cover the costs of feeding the teens
- Community members felt less threatened by teens who hung around the courtyard because teens were mingling with community members enjoying a meal
- The group of teens of primary concern seemed to have a more positive relationships with youth workers and with the TC

Challenges:

- Teens were disinclined to be involved unless there are financial incentives and even then many ten did not engage in prep
- Limited grant means we were still running on a very tight budget





Fall 2014: With the onset of cool weather, Off the Grill moved back into the Teen Centre, continuing to take place twice weekly. Due to limited funding only light snacks of veggies, fruit plates, soups and other easy to make food were prepared. We lost our volunteer chef so food preparation was assumed by adult volunteers, TC staff and youth.

At the end of the summer OTG hosted a feast in the Teen Centre to collect data and input from the teenagers. The 6 teenagers who became OTG Staff were celebrated with a night out on the town, enjoying a meal at the Spaghetti Factory in Gastown and watching a movie at Scotia Bank Theater on Burrard.


One of these youth put in 24.5 hours of work in August alone. He told OTG he'd planned to steer clear of negative influences by joining the OTG team. A teenaged girl used her hours of work at OTG to pay for a Teen Centre surfing trip to Tofino on Vancouver Island.


Key Lessons Learned:


 Centering the program around nutritious food benefits community and for the youth is comforting, celebratory, and supports food security for youth

 Activity-based mentoring relationships fit well with trauma-informed care. Teens who may have previously experienced trauma are engaged in positive activity that builds and maintains relationships between teens and adults


 A low barrier program allows numerous opportunities for teens to engage depending on ability. Teens really do appreciate the chance to help out, and it clearly benefits their self-esteem

 The broader community appreciates inexpensive and nutritious meals and these become an important point of connection between the youth and community

 By engaging teens in the various aspects of this community BBQ we can impart both life skills and practical knowledge about health and nutrition

 As the teens get used to adult connections, the length of conversations with teens increases and communications are less forced and more spontaneous

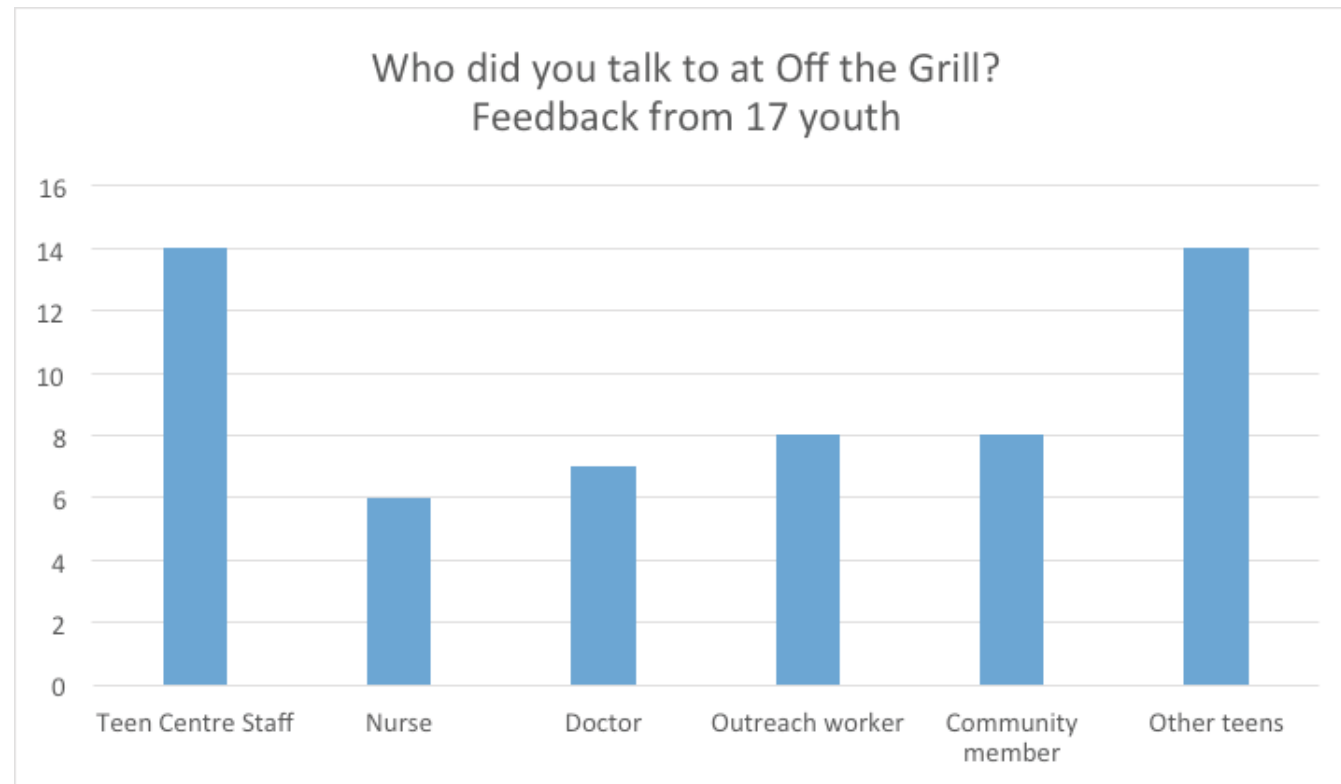
 Food provision near the TC is a great point of access, encouraging teens to use Teen Centre facilities and programming

 Transforming the community space so that it is a common mixing space for people of all ages, backgrounds, and sectors allows all to come together to support youth. There is an essential social service happening by supporting teens emotionally and nutritionally. There is opportunity for both professional and community dialogue about teenagers, and it's all in the public sphere

Youth Survey

17 youth completed a paper survey on September 24, 2014

- 90% talked with another adult at OTG
- New foods the youth said they tried and enjoyed included yam, potatoes, chicken, fish tacos, veggies, salmon, salad, burgers, health stuff, hot dogs, tortilla, burgers, everything.
- Six youth admitted that if it were not for OTG they would not eat anything, would eat high caloric low nutrient food or would have to wait until late to eat.
- The youth learned - That coleslaw is actually good / A bunch of ways to make food / Not to eat raw meat / That its nutrients / Health and eating healthy / That you have to wash vegetables / There's a lot of variety



Adult Survey Highlights

9 adults completed a survey on 2 nights of OTG in August.

- Adults liked the quality, value and health of the food.
- They talked positively of the staff, people and the food.
- People who came were using the facilities or on site, and some changed their schedules so that they could attend.
- They liked that the food supported the youth.

Youth Survey at OTG

7 youth completed a survey on 2 nights of OTG in August

- Not all youth used the teen centre and were onsite for other programming or to see friends.
- Youth liked the free food and thought it was delicious.
- Youth wanted it at least 2-3 times a week.
- Four youth travelled more than 15 minutes to get to the program.
- Most had been there before and many came the year before as well.

Thank you to the following community partners who have supported Off the Grill

Grandview Woodland Food Connection
BC Children's Hospital Responsive Intersectoral Children Health Education and Research (RICHER) Initiative
Britannia Teen Centre
Britannia Library
Urban Native Youth Association
WATARI Youth Outreach
Red Fox
Vancouver Aboriginal Community Policing Centre
Network of Inner City Community Services Society
Vancouver Police, Youth Referral
Vancouver Police, Yankee 10 & 20 Youth Cars
Vancouver Coastal Health
Boys & Girls Club Odyssey II
Eternal Abundance
Drive Organics



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