

# Viewing our community through a new lens

BY NOELLE DICKEY

At a lunch meeting held at Huntsville's YMCA Employment Services, the conversation was passionate, informed, even heated at times. The topic was about poverty, the day-to-day struggles people face, and ideas around what can be done as a community to move together in an inclusive way that gives everyone a chance.

This was a part of the YWCA's Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin' By World program, in which six local ladies participated in a 15-week course that had them access their community and their personal situations and identify opportunities. To present what they discovered, the YWCA invited the media as well as representatives from People First, The Table Soup Kitchen Foundation and the YWCA.

But this intriguing conversation was also about changing our social perspective. In Muskoka there is still a huge disconnection between those in poverty, middleclass and the rich.

Each of the participants were referred to as investigators throughout the course, as they were on a fact-finding mission to break down challenges, issues and barriers many people are faced with when trying to get ahead.

Investigator, Shannon Daultrey, delivered a heartfelt overview to kick off the meeting. "If you don't live in poverty or are in circles affected by it, you may not understand its impact – both the long- and short-term consequences that someone who lives in poverty faces each day," she said. "There's a stigma carried around on the tips of community tongue. Whether or not they speak it aloud, it's felt – that those that live in poverty must not want to help themselves and continue to sit at home and collect their free cheque. Yes, we said free, but it's the furthest thing from free as there's always strings attached."

Many people that are in poverty or find themselves in situational poverty spend their days working on survival skills. This means figuring out how to stretch the ever-fleeting dollar to feed a family on what others might spend on the cost of a bagel and coffee for one's morning commute, and how to keep a roof over their heads.

"We don't want apologies for the lucky hand some of you have drawn from life's deck of cards,"



**FRESH FOCUS:** Hannah Lin, executive director of YWCA Muskoka, and some of the participants of the YWCA Getting Ahead program discuss what they found while doing a community assessment and ideas for moving forward to create a stronger, more unified community. (Photo by Noelle Dickey)

said Daultrey, "but to be more aware that not everyone has been blessed with all the good things life has to offer. We're not wanting to rant about all of the barriers, yesterdays haunts and tomorrows uncertainties, we just want to have a chance to put a voice to matters that concern us."

It's no secret that Muskoka

broken, out-of-date policies. If everyone could leave their judgments at the door and differences aside, we could focus on the big picture. We're all human."

Indeed, the last thing anyone would want to feel is being treated like a second-class citizen. Terri Hewitt, a program investigator, raised this point using what's available at the local food

suggested best-before dates, it's the general feeling it portrays when people donate expired, or close to, food. "Old food should be thrown out, not put out for the already desperate folks to choose from," she said.

Heather Berg, CEO of The Table Food Bank, responded, "Our suppliers are very conscientious of dates. We do check all the food, but we are human, so we apologize if some gets missed. There is certainly no disrespect that we're trying to put out there."

Grabbing one of the high-priced Cliff bars that was supplied as an example of expired food from the bank, Berg rips open the package and explains these are still good up to six months past the date on the package. Taking a bite, she said that she gave these very bars to her kids the day before. "This is still good food."

YWCA program co-ordinator and facilitator, Liz Angell, applauded this dialogue, "This is what it's about – bridging and communicating."

The group also assessed the community for strengths and weaknesses, identifying that education is the most readily accessible resource. But the effectiveness of the education system is

tied to other elements.

"If you're poor and your children aren't eating breakfast or getting a good lunch, or if you're worried about having a roof over your head, that's going to affect the children," said Ella Taylor, a program participant.

Regarding the overall program, Taylor said, "This program taught me to take control over my life." When she found herself in poverty she didn't know where to start to get out.

The other participants agree, courses such as Getting Ahead give them a voice with valuable insight.

"Hopefully discussions like these will change the way people think," said Daultrey. "And as people become more aware of the need to change, adapt and transition, they'll become more tolerant and understanding of individual situations. We all have needs, wants and dreams, we're just a little further down the ladder. Perhaps we can meet in the middle."

The YWCA is now running the Getting Ahead program in Gravenhurst. Those interested in registering should visit [ywca-muskoka.com](http://ywca-muskoka.com) or phone 705-645-9827.

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– Shannon Daultrey

needs more affordable housing options, year-round employment opportunities, expanded public transportation and increased accessibility for medical care.

And while there are those that do get assistance, there are still not enough affordable resources for those that don't fit into "a nice neat category," she adds. "There is a need to fix, replace, and revamp

banks as an example. She said, "Thankfully food banks exist. And while it may not be the first choice, many families find they must go there to eat."

Hewitt points out that some foods found at the food banks are close to the expiry date. Although it's still good food and we all understand that some foods do remain safe for months after the