

High School Seniors

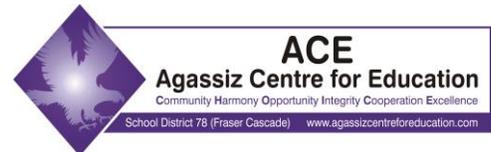
by Sandy Balascak

In June, 2013, the Agassiz Centre for Education (ACE), a small school delivering Alternate and Continuing Education programs, made history. Three women, aged 76, 80 and 89, graduated high school, with the 89 year old being the oldest graduate in BC history and quite possibly in Canada. These were not honorary diplomas, as is often the case with seniors who graduate. All three women attended class with the youth, earned their Dogwood Diplomas, and attended their long overdue graduation ceremony with the youth and adults who had worked alongside them.



It was a very exciting time for ACE. We had coverage nationally from all of the television stations and newspapers and I was doing telephone interviews for MSN news in the US as well. Although the excitement was high and one of the most incredible grads we ever had, what was more important was the impact that it had on the youth. Certainly the youth in that grad class had more extensive and positive media attention than an Alternate school has ever seen and they were able to be part of a historic graduation class. Every year our community rallies around the ACE grad and everyone, including local press, applauds the accomplishments of both the youth and the adults who must overcome so much to get that Dogwood, but this one was certainly different. Additionally, we had more school age graduates than we had ever had. However, the journey leading to June 2013 and the ongoing benefits since are in many ways more notable than the great media coverage.

The journey began 7 years ago when I walked into a school that had been a Continuing Education Centre, but had recently had the Alternate program moved into their building. The Alternate school, under a different name at that time, had a terrible reputation and there were community members who had fought hard at meetings to keep them out of town. They did not want “those kids”, and other more derogatory terms, in their town. I landed in the middle of a very unhappy situation. I regretted taking the position and truly did not think that I would be able to accomplish anything, but the students described themselves as stupid and bad, and I knew I had to at least change that, and I could not walk away. The 3 R's for me became rebranding, rebuilding, and reprogramming.



I brought in structure, rules, and appropriate courses, and discipline; none of which won me any popularity points. It was an arduous journey in the beginning and, although I had great support from Ray Steigvilas, the adult teacher who was/is an integral part of our success, I knew I could not do this without outside help, so I started creating community partnerships. I took them to the public library and just let them be there and get to know the staff and make it a place they were comfortable and wanted to go on their own. Community Services helped out a great deal with youth workers, programs, etc. I also created a partnership with the Legion, and this turned out to be one of the best decisions I made.

The previous Alternate program had a yearly Christmas dinner for families, but space was an issue and, as we grew and our guest list grew, we turned to the Legion for the use of their hall and commercial kitchen. Christmas evolved into Grinchmas, because Christmas is not always a happy time for our kids and we all love Dr. Seuss, and with the free use of the hall, we are able to host the dinner for 60 people now. Donations are always enough to cover the food expense, but not having to pay for the space is the only reason it can keep going.

The first 2 graduations after my arrival were small, informal ceremonies at lunch, and there were no youth graduating from the Alternate program; just adults who had come back to finish their secondary education. I knew it would be important to have a better graduation both for the adults, but more importantly to give the students a goal to aim for so they would stay and complete their education. With the Legion as a partner, I turned to them for the use of the hall, found a great support for cap and gown supplies, a volunteer caterer, and our first formal grad happened in 2009. I had already changed the name, created a new logo and motto with input from the students, and let them choose the school colors of black and purple, so we were able to have the name, logo, motto and colors at that graduation to increase the pride in their school. Those who were still too young to graduate were able to see the excitement generated from the ceremony and banquet, and it gave them something to look forward to.

At the first graduation Frank Royle, the grandfather of one of our graduates, approached me about the possibility of working with seniors in the fall, so I told him to see me in September and we could discuss it. He came into the school and told me that many of the seniors were afraid of “those kids” and did not have a very positive view of them, but that he could see what we were accomplishing now and he wanted to get the two groups together to change that. After 2 years, I was still struggling with getting the school on track, so I adopted an “I don’t see why not” attitude and was willing to try new things. We created a Senior/Teen event where they would have lunch together at the Legion hall, my students would serve the seniors, then they would spend the afternoon in an activity; ultimately it ended up always being bingo because everyone liked that the best. My students were initially not thrilled with the idea, but they did like the idea of getting out of school for the afternoon, so they were willing to go. It was not long before they were building



friendships with the seniors and I would get feedback from people about my kids opening doors for them, helping them with packages, etc. “Those kids” now had names and the 2 groups really liked each other. It makes perfect sense actually. Seniors are a group with a lot of love to give and they don’t always have family around to give it to. Alternate students have often not been given a lot of love and really need it. Put them together, and magic happens. The events, which originally were at about 50% capacity, are now full, and sometimes we don’t even have enough room for all those who want to attend. Chris Wejr, the principal of Kent Elementary at the time, saw the value of the program so his school became a partner and we now have elementary students involved as well.

The Senior/Teen events were a driving force in my idea for the Christmas Morning Brunch for seniors who would otherwise be alone. The idea popped into my head driving to work about 10 days before Christmas. I ran it by my students and they thought it was a great idea so the ACE team set to work, very quickly, gathering donations for the food and the gifts and the Legion members were all too happy to support us with a hall and someone to dress up as Santa. All of the students were involved with the organization, and some were able to be there Christmas morning as well. The Harrison Beach Hotel donated 3 rooms, and I took the youth who would be there Christmas morning and we had Christmas Eve dinner and I watched their excitement at staying in a nice hotel. I kept thinking how the saying “like a little kid at Christmas” was so fitting as I watched their excitement and enjoyment of such a treat. For me, it was only logical to have them all in one place because we all had to be at the Legion at 6:00 am and it was far easier to knock on hotel room doors than drive to their homes if they overslept. I also had an immense sense of pride



in what my kids had become and that I could take them to a nice hotel and have no concerns whatsoever about behavior. By this point, behavior was really no longer an issue. I had instilled in them a sense of pride and when they are at ACE or representing ACE, they will do nothing to jeopardize the hard work we have all done to change the community's perception of us.

The Christmas morning event is now an annual event and this year was the third. It has doubled in size for both volunteers and attendees, and both the event and the students are embraced by the community and the donations and number of volunteers has become overwhelming. This past year, Global TV and the Vancouver Sun were there. The students still did all of the preparation, and this year, 2 of our grads were Santa and his Elf. The Elf ended up on the front page of the Vancouver Sun in a color picture with a volunteer and Santa had a big part in the Global coverage. For all kids, that recognition is fabulous, but for Alternate kids, it is even more so, given what they had to go through to get to that place.

From the work with seniors came the Christmas morning event and from the first event came the Betty Urquhart award for community service chosen by the UFV Board of Governors. Although to me and my district the award was a monumental honor, for my kids there was not a deep understanding of how important it was. They were excited by the award, but not that excited. However, when I asked if I could bring 10 of the students to get the award and was told I could, their excitement heightened, and they became interested. When I had promoted the event in a press release, I used the phrase "When bad kids go good" in the subject line to catch attention. UFV had that tag line and I was going to have it removed, but the kids insisted I keep it. Now that they were interested in it, they wanted it a certain way, and they wanted people to know that they were once thought of as "the bad kids".



I talked a limo company into giving us an amazing rate and that sparked something in the students I had not anticipated. I told them that I wanted them to wear dress pants and a nice shirt, and arranged for our local thrift store to donate clothes if they needed them. The students took that request even further and were soon setting their own rules. Anyone coming in the limo had to be dressed up (those that did not meet the standard were re-dressed by the students using the thrift store), they had to be in school colors, and one of the parents who was a hair stylist was doing the hair and bought everyone corsages. I had brought in tuxedo vests and ties, in school colors, and they excitedly wore those. I ended up with a group that looked like they were going to prom. By the time we arrived at UFV we were already on the local press Facebook page and a photographer at UFV was there to greet us. The university treated us like VIPs, and gave them each gifts. I had arranged to have lunch for not only us, but the group of about 20 Agassiz residents, Trustees and our Superintendent, all of whom had made the journey to watch us receive the award, and the lunch was served backstage in the Abbotsford Entertainment Centre, where some famous musicians had been as well, so the students were thrilled. The award was presented at the convocation and we were seated in the front row. For 3 hours my "bad kids" had to sit through convocation and did so respectfully and without incident; I had numerous compliments on their conduct. Being in the front row, their behavior had to be exemplary even though I know they found it hard to sit there for that long watching people receive their degrees, but they did it with dignity and respect. I could not have been more proud of them if they were my own kids.

In the year following the award, I created the High School Seniors program to bring the seniors into the school both for the sake of those who lamented not being able to finish their education in their youth, but more importantly to continue and to strengthen the relationships already established. Ray

would be the instructor and I knew he would be successful at spearheading the program. The program was successful for both groups, and led to our historic graduation in which the kids could share. After the graduation, we took a group of previous and present grads to the Ministry of Education. The students were part of a focus group, interviewed for the BC Education Plan blog resulting in a blog entry that portrayed the school and the students very positively and was a source of excitement and pride for those who were there, and the students were just generally listened to, with their feedback being appreciated. From seeing our logo on the closed circuit television system announcing our visit, to being listened to and having a blog entry written about them, the students said that the visit to the Ministry was their favorite part of the trip.

Sadly, despite these successes, I have encountered negative reactions to the program. Some people believe that it is a waste of taxpayer money to bring seniors back to high school, and others think that “those kids” have no place in working with seniors. There are numerous studies that indicate the value to overall health of keeping physically and mentally active, and certainly the feedback we have had from our seniors would indicate that as well. Given the high cost of health care as opposed to the much smaller cost of education, I have always said that it is cheaper to educate than medicate. As for “those kids” having no place working with seniors, the success of the program would disprove that theory. The groups are bonded, close and really enjoy each other’s company. I think there is a place for that.

The quantifiable benefits to our students stemming from our work with seniors, such as those above, have been numerous, and have had a significant impact on their self-esteem and pride in not only themselves, but their school as well. However, there have been numerous unquantifiable benefits as well, that are equally important. The students see seniors in a different light, strong and long-lasting relationships have been established, and the level of respect for all adults has definitely increased. I see my main function with Alternate youth as guiding them on a path to becoming respectable, productive members of society, and this program has been invaluable in achieving that goal.

ACE has gone from the outcast school that people fought to keep out of town, to the “in-cast” school that has been described in the press as part of the community fabric. If you walk into ACE today, it is highly unlikely that you will hear any bad language; they do not swear while they are at, or representing, their school. If you arrive while we are having the lunch we provide for them every day, you will be offered food, someone will give up a chair if all of them are taken, and the students will wait until everyone has had a share before taking seconds. I will be taking them on a trip to the Ministry again this year and have no worries about their conduct there or in the hotel. They are a group of respectable youth who now see value in themselves, and their behavior would rival, if not be better than, any other group their age. There are, of course, many changes we have made in the school and everything has had an impact on the progression of our program and the doubling of our enrollment, and the team of staff have played a major role; however, the work with seniors has certainly been one of the most significant contributing factors. Our High School Seniors program for the senior citizens has certainly contributed to the increased number of our youth becoming high school seniors themselves.