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# OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

# OUR SELVES

# POWER OF YOUTH

YOUTH AND COMMUNITY-LED  
ACTIVISM IN CANADA







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ACTIVISM IN CANADA





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BY ERIKA SHAKER

## Preface

**E**very issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves*, is, for me, an education. On a quarterly basis I am reminded of how lucky I am to edit a magazine that provides a wealth of information, perspectives, commentaries, opinions and debates on topics ranging from technology to social justice to anti-racism to standardization to privacy to democracy to gender analysis to popular education....

Given the range, there are some topics I know I cannot do justice to, much as I would like to think otherwise. And on those occasions I am once again lucky to have the opportunity to work with guest editors who open up a whole new world to myself, the magazine, and the readers.

This is one such issue of *OS/OS*.

I have been involved in education policy and in the progressive world since I was 20 — and while I like to think it “keeps me young,” in my honest moments I am very aware that, as a Gen Xer, I am no longer able to don the “youth” mantle.

It doesn’t bother me (well, not all that much), because each day that I work with so many young leaders, activists, thinkers and doers I am amazed at their creativity, their determination, their accomplishments and their tenacity. I am overwhelmed with what they teach me about progress.



But as they are finding new ways to make effective change in the world, the generations who came before — the Gen Xers, the Boomers, the Veterans of Change — are figuring out how to let go, to support, to offer knowledge, and to learn. It's a necessary process that's fraught with difficult (personal and professional) negotiation.

"We don't do shared leadership very well, yet," Kevin Millsip from Next Up! once told me. I think he's right. But we're beginning to understand that unless we start to learn — and fast — how to do it properly, we're well on our way to being one more self-imposed roadblock to the very social progress our young leaders are working so hard to create for all of us.

This collection of articles is passionate, challenging, inspiring, thoughtful, honest and ultimately extremely optimistic. The optimism is particularly striking when we look at the backdrop: a 14.5% youth unemployment rate; skyrocketing student debt; the systematic shredding of our public services; decreasing social and economic security; environmental degradation; government policies that privilege military equipment, prisons and mandatory sentences above child care or a national housing strategy; and growing income inequality. Consider the irony of Human Resources Minister Diane Finley claiming that "changes" to OAS were really about ensuring the younger generation wouldn't have to shoulder the burden of paying for seniors, and then one week later the same Minister quietly axing funding for hundreds of student summer job centres across Canada.

This social, political and economic context is potentially overwhelming; it underscores the power of the youth-led movements profiled in this book. In spite of system and systemic failure, youth are — with creativity, passion and determination — fighting for change across sectors and within communities. They are pushing the progress envelope. And we need to celebrate their victories — because they are in all our interests, too — and support them where we can, with knowledge, with numbers, and with resources.

This book would never have happened without Brigitte's skill and dedication. She clearly and thoughtfully conceptualized what she wanted to explore, and approached a range of young leaders to contribute their energy, thoughts and experiences so that we could learn from and celebrate these leaders and the incredible work they have done on our behalf.

Brigette has compiled an impressive range of articles, but this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* is by no means exhaustive; important work is being done in all sectors and in all communities by young people who are living the reality of social, economic, political and environmental injustice every day, and fighting against it. They deserve recognition. But more than that, they need our support. The first step is education — and that is part of what this issue is about.

After all, how can we know — or appreciate, or understand, or learn from — what we don't know?

I would like to express my profound thanks to Brigette for helping all of us know more of what we need to know, so that we can continue to work together for all of our collective goals. And, more personally, I would like to thank her for being such a pleasure to meet and learn from. I would also like to thank Dirk Van Stralen for another brilliant cover illustration, and Nancy Reid for her enthusiasm, skill and thoughtfulness in laying out this issue of *OS/OS*.

\* \* \*

**Erika Shaker** is Executive Editor of *Our Schools/Our Selves*.



Photo credit: Ian McAllister

More than 2000 people of all walks of life took to the streets in Prince Rupert, B.C. to oppose Enbridge's proposed Northern Gateway pipeline from the tar sands in Alberta's to Kitimat in B.C. To learn more, visit [yinkadene.ca](http://yinkadene.ca). To contribute to the largest environmental campaign in Canadian history, people can contact the Yinka Dene Alliance Campaign Coordinator Geraldine-Thomas Flurer at [yinkadenealliance@gmail.com](mailto:yinkadenealliance@gmail.com).



BY BRIGETTE DePAPE

## Power of Youth

### Youth and community-led activism in Canada

#### Introduction

Many of us young people are fed up with the system and approach of current governments. We know that in spite of what we're told, wealth doesn't trickle down; it's only environmental destruction that trickles down to us. So when they say trickle down, we say *grow up*!

What do we mean by this? We mean that we need power *from the bottom up* to create a society for real democracy and justice. The structures in our society are top down, where those with power tell us without power, including youth (especially those who come from other marginalized communities) what to do. We are here to tell power-holders to stop and listen. We are speaking out and acting together to make change now.

#### Who should read this book?

Read this book if you are:

- A young person who wants to make a difference, but are not sure how or what is the most effective way.
- You are an activist and want to hear about some of the

challenges other activists are facing, and learn some potential ways forward.

- You are no longer a young person, and are worried that youth are only about Macbooks and Starbucks and are wondering how they will take the reins when you retire.
- Anyone interested in making progressive change.

**For those of you who are thinking of getting involved in grassroots activism:** wicked. It's always so exciting meeting people who are interested in getting involved. And with each new person in our movement, we get closer to winning. I was at a coffee shop the other day chatting with a friend about an upcoming climate campaign, when two people asked me how they could get involved. I was so stoked! Since I became involved in activism, we have been spending a lot of time growing the movement and trying to get other people involved. It is so refreshing when a stranger, who quickly becomes a friend, reaches out.

Since I took action in the Senate, a lot of people have asked me; what can we do to make change most effectively? I'm pretty new to grassroots political activism, so while I don't have all the answers, I too would like to know ASAP. Think of this book as a conversation to help us answer this question. I've asked some of the coolest and most effective movement builders I know to share some of the things they have learnt through their experiences. I think they'll inspire you as much as they've inspired me.

But if you want to make change for real, do it. For me, I find the best way to learn how to make change is to *get active*. My hope is that you'll read a few articles in this book, see what interests you most, then get involved in your community. There is lots of great organizing going on. Consider contacting some of the people who contributed articles to this book. Their contact info is at the end of their articles. Or start your own thing. But if you *do* start your own thing, be sure to get plugged in with other activist communities. It really helps to build this kind of community of support in order for us to be as effective as possible. And once you are plugged into one community, you will soon see how you are plugged into a much larger, vibrant network of activists across Canada and around the world.

For me it was really intimidating at first. I didn't know the right words to say. People said words that I didn't know. "What is anti-o?"

I thought to myself. It reminded me of Cheerios and I pictured a cereal box full of Anti-os. This book also helps to break down some of these terms and barriers you might face when first getting involved. But once I knew the basics, and met a few close friends, I was good to go and now the activist community feels like home.

A lot of people have given up and say there is nothing we can do. This is crap. There are tonnes of ways to be part of the resistance and re-creation of a society we believe in. There's a place for each of us, and a need for each of us.

**For those of you who are more experienced activists,** get ready for some rich conversation! The authors grapple with some of the most pressing questions and challenges facing our movements. A few themes that are explored throughout the book are: how can we de-colonize our movements; how can we move beyond tokenism; what does it mean to act in solidarity; how do movements intersect; and the pros and cons of playing the youth card.

**For those of you who are lefty Baby Boomers (or older):** don't worry — the future is in good hands as you'll see with this book of mostly youth-led activism. There may be times in this book where you'll read about a young activist grappling with a challenge you once experienced and overcame. We need you by our side. You have so much experience for us to learn from. And thanks to all those who are taking the time to share what they've learnt, to be mentors and guides for us! We need movement mamas and papas. But really — age aside — we also need friends who happen to be different ages, with different experience and skills so that we can plan upcoming actions and collaborate.

But we also need you to give us the space to take the lead sometimes, and we need you to support us when we do. This means moving beyond youth tokenism — inviting a couple of us to your events, or plugging one of us on a panel, for example. We need to be part of every step of the process. We also need you to support our events, to give us a chance to design and lead them.

This book is for people all ages. While the book may be targeted somewhat at youth — the spirit of youth is inside us all. More than anything else, this book is for anyone who is asking what the hell is going on and wants to be part of authentically shifting power back to us, the people, to turn things around. This book looks at how we can be most effective.

### What is this book?

This book celebrates youth and community-led activism in Canada. What does this mean? What is activism? To me it means being active to make social change. This book features grassroots activism in Canada including supporting anti-racist and anti-imperial struggles, working in an anti-oppression framework, campaigning to defend the public interest, climate justice struggles at home, and creating change outside of institutional venues.

The book will look at the personal stories of young activists and organizers in Canada. They will talk about how they are using activism and organizing to bring about change in whatever issue they are working on. These issues intersect, and include climate justice (Audrey Yank, Cameron Fenton and Amara Possian), Indigenous Sovereignty (Natasha Latter, Ben Powless, Norman Matchewan and Martin Lukacs), Education and Indigenous young women, (Roxanne Dubois and Katie Arnup), Anti-poverty and anti-criminalization (Winnipeg activists, Harsha Walia, Michael Wheeler), anti-war, anti-violence and anti-racism (Derrick O'Keefe, Families of Sisters in Spirit), women and LGBTQ (Kaley Kennedy and the *F Word Collective*), social media (Sean Devlin, Gen Why Media), and system change for economic and democratic justice (Sarah Rotz and Aidan Lockhart). The book shows the concrete work youth are doing, as well as highlighting challenges they face, lessons learned, ways forward, and bold visions for the future.

### Why am I co-editing this book?

You might have seen the photo of the Senate Page holding up the Stop Harper sign that disrupted the Speech from the Throne. That was me! I shifted paths. I was planning on a career as a politician. But I decided to change directions and jump into the hotbed of grassroots activism, and I'm anxious to share what it's been like for me and what I've learnt.

As a Page in the Senate, I saw how people in power were not representing our interests as young people. I saw our government expand the tar sands and fuel climate change with its billions of dollars to an already rich oil industry. It's our future they are gambling with, selling it to the highest bidder. I saw how climate change bills were rejected, and choices made to cater to corporate interests rather than ours, spending money to fuel climate

change, rather than on want and need, like alleviating our massive debt loads and providing education for all of us. Politicians operate on four-year election cycles, and are often not acting on behalf of our long-term well-being. I realized that it is not by taking power in a system made to maintain the status quo that I'd make the most impact, but by taking part in building the movement we need to shift power back to all of us for a safe, democratic, and equitable present and future.

After the action in the Senate, a lot of people came up to me and said they were happy to see a young person act because youth in Canada are so apathetic. But we are not just about our Macbooks and caramel lattes! The youth I've met across Canada are engaged, motivated, pissed off, and fearless. More than that, I believe they're at the forefront of a really important transformation of our country. I'd like to introduce you to a few of them and their work with this book.

Certainly, many young people in Canada are not engaged. Why aren't youth even voting? Why aren't youth taking the streets in the same numbers of the 60s and 70s? It's easy to get the wrong impression — that we're apathetic. But young people in Canada care deeply. The problem is, we are trapped in a structure that bars us from meaningful engagement. Young people don't have time to fight the system; they are too busy working two jobs to pay for tuition, or working a corporate job they don't want but need to take to get out of the thousands of dollars of debt they have accumulated. The system works in the interests of existing institutions, like corporations and governments and the military. This book looks at how young people are challenging these structural barriers, like the student federation's campaign to drop the debt and achieve education for all, and the Occupy movement working to re-think and change the system.

The other problem is that *we don't know how to make change*. But where society is failing to show us how to be agents for social change, young people are finding and often making ways to learn to be effective activists, whether through trainings or real life experiments.

Many youth are engaged, but not necessarily in movements for political change — often because we don't know about them. Instead we are encouraged to do charity or development work. For example, there are many opportunities for young people to go

to a “developing” country to “help the poor”. The mainstream celebrates these philanthropic projects. Why? Because it fits in very well with the neo-liberal agenda to erode the state and privatize our services, leaving essential services up to NGOs and companies. What’s the problem with privatization? Basic services often become inaccessible to people who aren’t rich, white, men.

At its core, the development model of social change is the notion: ‘Give a man to fish and he will eat for a day, teach a man to fish and he will feed himself for a lifetime’. The people of Fort Chip, know how to fish — they’ve been doing it for years, and it’s patronizing to suggest that a bunch of development people would teach them. The problem is that the people in Fort Chip, for example, now fear fishing because of us! — their water is being poisoned with the Tar Sands. Therefore, the solution is not just one of development — it’s of justice. This is why several articles in this book examine projects that move beyond charity to working for political change.

The book is almost an ode to grassroots organizing. It is grassroots organizing, people-powered strategies led by the directly impacted communities, that has been responsible for groundbreaking changes in history, from Civil Rights to the women’s movement. It took me a while to discover it — the real thing — and I’m excited about it and want to share. Mostly because I believe it is what we need most in this country and in the world if we want to be serious about our goals like ending poverty and stopping climate change. Also, we need you. Also it’s a kick-ass time! So, after reading this book, I hope someday you’ll join us — and the world will live as one. (Yes, that is from John Lennon’s *Imagine*).

Historically, youth have been at the forefront of change. Take for example the four young students who staged the first sit-ins in the Southern U.S. to end racial segregation of lunch counters. The student non-violent coordinating committee played an integral role in the Civil Rights movement. And youth continue to be at the forefront of movements across the world, from the millions of students in Chile staging occupations for free and fair education, to the April 6<sup>th</sup> movement in Egypt that led the mobilizations in Tahrir Square which eventually overthrew a dictator.

As we will see in the following pages, people in Canada are part of this incredible movement that is sweeping the globe. We are living at an unprecedented moment in history — from



Occupy/de-Occupy to the protests against the Keystone XL and Enbridge pipelines. Our time has come to shake things up.

*The most important verse is the one they wrote down in  
Montgomery Alabama  
they said we are not afraid  
and the young people taught everybody else a lesson  
all the older people that had learned how to compromise  
and learned how to take it easy and be polite and get  
along and leave things as they were.  
The young people taught us all a lesson  
we are not afraid  
we are not afraid  
we are not afraid  
today!  
Oh deep in my heart  
I do believe  
we shall overcome someday*

– Pete Seeger singing *We Shall Overcome*, one of my favorite 60s anti-war songs

\* \* \*

**Brigette DePape** is a 22-year old writer and emerging community organizer. She is known for her silent protest in the Parliament of Canada, when shortly after Harper's majority government was formed and as a Page in the Senate, she disrupted the throne speech with a 'Stop Harper' sign.

She's written opinion pieces for *Tyee*, *the Monitor*, *the Media Co-op*, as well as poetry and plays, which she's performed at *Fringe Festivals*, as well as *TEDx*. She's currently organizing for social change with the *Canadian Youth Climate Coalition (CYCC)*, *Occupy/de-occupy*, and labor and community groups.

Coming from the suburbs in Winnipeg, she first glimpsed vast social inequality while volunteering with her sister at a community center in the downtown's inner city, home to widespread poverty, and has been involved in activism ever since.