

August 9, 2017

My heartfelt thanks...

I've been thinking about this for a while, but with #YouthDay this Saturday, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to share my letter of heartfelt thanks to the Child and Youth Mental Health and Substance Use (CYMHSU) Collaborative here in British Columbia.

The Collaborative has literally changed my life.

I'm one of 295 youth and parents with lived experience of mental health and substance use issues who was engaged and encouraged to get involved in system transformation through the work of the CYMHSU Collaborative.

Personally, the work of the Collaborative gave me hope and gave my life meaning. All of the terrible things I had gone through were not for nothing. In my six years of attempting to get treatment, I ruined relationships, self-harmed and lived with crippling anxiety; my experiences are now being used for a wider purpose. That for me has been the most important outcome of this work.

As part of the Collaborative, myself and other youth have been empowered to make change from the beginning. Young people like me, who may never have had an opportunity to meet other youth with similar experiences, or similar dreams, felt connected to a dynamic, energetic network – a network of 2,950 people! The CYMHSU Collaborative supported us, trusted us, and kept us mentally well. I met the most amazing people in the world and we made lasting changes to our communities and the province as a whole. I know it will change the way people work together from now on.

Our involvement has set us apart from other committees and projects trying to improve our fragmented mental health and substance use system. As those who have firsthand experience navigating these systems, we have felt just as valued for our experiences as those of counsellors, doctors and teachers around the table. Even as the Collaborative comes to an end I can see this mentality being incorporated into other aspects of work.

Treating and valuing youth with lived experience as welcome partners to bring about change is a refreshing and positive development: no longer are we the passive recipients of services "given to us," we are right in the middle of the action, rolling up our sleeves to work together with everyone else.

In short, youth leaders have been empowered to make changes in mental health through this program. And in doing so we are helping others while healing ourselves.

So thank you to the CYMHSU Collaborative on this International Youth Day, for changing my life and for changing the life of so many youth - for giving us hope, for valuing us, and for giving us the platform to use our experiences to help others.

I know this is just the beginning.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laurie Edmundson". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Laurie Edmundson

Project Lead, CYMHSU Collaborative

Surrey-North Delta Local Action Team/Division of Family Practice