

Youth council aims to instill leadership

Teen leader hones passion for civic affairs in mayor's program

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Sheliza Kassam's voice is buzzing with excitement, as she discusses a subject that is very close to her heart — civic action. Her passion and gusto for it comes through in her colorful descriptions of taking on a role as a leader in our city. She speaks with the type of wisdom and confidence that has the ability to move people to action.

Kassam is a shining example of what it takes to be an active and influential member of a community, but she is not your typical city council member.

"I think it's really important for people to have a say in their city," Kassam says.

"They're looking at a wide variety of ideas and suggestions to make Calgary a better place to live in, and I think that's really the essential goal."

Kassam can't vote and can't legally drive a car — or even rent one for that matter. This dynamic young lady is only 15 years old, but that isn't stopping her from taking a leading position in the shaping of our city.

Kassam is a proud member of The Mayor's Youth Council, which is celebrating its 20th year as a program in Calgary. Each year the council is made up of a diverse group of about 20 youth from all corners of the city, between the ages of 13 and 18.

The program is a partnership between Youth Central and The City of Calgary. The wide variety of youth in the program are chosen in early fall of each year and are divided into various subcommittees.

These subcommittees attempt to help build a better quality of life for both youth and adults in Calgary. They are responsible for a range of services, which include blogging about youth issues, meeting with the mayor to create initiatives, advising several citywide organizations and developing youth friendly spaces in our city.

The program was started in 1992. Since then they have started initiatives such as "mayor for a day" and have conducted several audits of the city on the availability of youth friendly spaces.

Ros Doi, initiatives manager at Youth Central, says there are a wide range of youth they are looking for when choosing the council — not just the academically inclined.

"We're trying to get a really good scope of different youth involved in our program," Doi says. "It's really



Photo: Allison Drinnan/Calgary Journal

Sheliza Kassam, 15, says her experience with the Mayor Youth Council has enabled her to make a difference for the City of Calgary.

important — especially for the Mayor's Youth Council — to have a lot of different perspectives."

That diversity is easy to find in a city that is growing as much as Calgary has in the last decade.

Marlene Kingsmith — program co-ordinator of the Child and Youth Care Counsellor Diploma Program at Mount Royal University — explains that in a city that is growing so rapidly, programs that target youth are crucial to their development.

According to Kingsmith, there are several negative influences that can easily sway youth as they are growing up.

She adds that if the youth of our city are involved in something like the Mayor's Youth Council, their needs are being met in a positive way.

Kingsmith says: "It's important for all youth to be

involved in something, period; but especially something that is going to build their confidence and make them really aware of the importance of being a part of the community — being part of a solution — as opposed to not being involved in a positive way."

The idea of the youth being an integral part of the community is found at the very roots of the council. Al Duerr, who was mayor at the time the program was created, made a point of visiting schools once a week during his time as mayor.

He wanted to hear from Calgary's youth about what was important to them and what they wanted to see in their city. Although the students could not vote for him, he says he felt very strongly that it was his duty to engage directly with these citizens and hear what they had to say about their city.

Child Friendly Calgary, now known as Youth Central, approached him about taking this initiative and turning it into something more formal. Duerr says he loved the idea, and the council was formed.

"It went beyond just meeting with the kids. It became a vehicle for a whole other array of initiatives," recalls Duerr. "It was an opportunity for them to engage in civic affairs, community related activities and gain a better perspective for what citizenship was all about."

Kassam not only feels that she has made a difference for The City of Calgary through her participation in the council, but she knows that her involvement will have a lasting impact on her personally and professionally.

With a flair for math and physics, Kassam says that she would

like to be an optometrist one day and perhaps go into business, as well.

Whatever Kassam chooses to do, she is sure that the leadership skills she has gained from the program will be a major asset and that she will continue to use them to better her city throughout her life.

"Just being able to — as a youth — feel that you're in an adult position, and to take on that initiative, I think that has a lot to do with how you grow up as a person," Kassam says.

"I definitely feel that when I grow up, and when I'm pursuing my degree, that I will take these skills and have the confidence to feel that I can make a difference no matter what."