

GREATER VANCOUVER YOUTH UNLIMITED

# ANNUAL REPORT 2022

Providing safety and  
building resilience



# 2,124 YOUTH IN DIRECT CONTACT WITH YOUTH UNLIMITED.

THAT'S THOUSANDS OF YOUTH WHO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO:

- Build a long-lasting connection with one or more caring youth workers
- Feel safe, accepted, seen and supported by both peers and healthy adults
- Tangibly feel the love of God through caring relationships
- Discover their potential



## MESSAGE FROM OUR DIRECTOR



Grade eight goggle tans in March were an annual reminder of what I didn't have.

You see, I grew up in Winnipeg and in my teens, I learned to ski at Spring Hill, a magnificent 100m long ski run serviced by the world's shortest chairlift. Each spring break, I would ski all day or at least until my fingers could no longer handle the cold.

I loved it!

Spring Hill gave me so much joy, until I was back in school listening to my friend's talk about their ski vacations in Aspen, Vail and Whistler. Their annoying goggle tans exposed my sense of lack, of the kind of family vacation I would probably never have. My love for Spring Hill went sour, and from then on, I would refer to it as Spring Ditch.

My new found sense of lack robbed me of my awareness of all that I did have: my slightly used K2 skis, my physical ability and the privilege of enjoying a week of skiing at all—even if it was on a ditch.

My story is a light-hearted example of how gratitude is easily robbed by feelings of lack. Left unchecked, a sense of lack has the potential to create a vicious cycle of desire, dissatisfaction and despair. For many youth, a caring adult like Jen (feature story) is needed to help them break free from this cycle, by helping them

embrace their lack and point them towards a deeper appreciation for what they do have, and for God's goodness in their lives. The impact is transformational.

I'm reminded of the first century story where the apostle Paul, and his sidekick Silas, after being severely beaten and thrown in jail, were heard praying and singing a heartfelt hymn to God. (Acts 16:25). Now that is some next-level gratitude.

We often remind our youth about people like you, who support their mentorship journey. Why? Because this contributes to their growing sense of gratitude in a big way. So, if this spring you find yourself on the slopes with a nice goggle tan, it's all good, just let it be a reminder of the thousands of youth who are experiencing gratitude because of you.

With immense gratitude,

Mark Koop  
Executive Director

**“ God’s love for each kid is not dependent on what they do or choose, but on who they are and what He has done for them. ”**

- Abbotsford youth worker

*Greater Vancouver Youth Unlimited acknowledges with humble respect that our work is located on the traditional unceded territory of the Coast Salish, Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, Squamish, Katzie, Kwantlen, Semiahmoo, Matsqui, Sumas and the Sto:lo First Nations.*

# YOUR IMPACT IN 2022



**838** Youth mentored



**14,611** Program hours



**16** Leadership development programs



**201** Youth in discipleship programs



**19,345** Meals served



**51** Frontline Youth Workers



“ Jesters has helped make my son who he is today. ”  
- Mission youth's parent



## URBAN YOUTH WORK: SKATEBOARDING WITHIN MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

Mike Willms was a teen in the middle of the 2000s' skateboarding boom. In grade nine, he discovered a Thrasher skateboarding magazine, bought a used board, and was hooked. As he started skating with others, he discovered a deep sense of connection within the skate community. When he became a young adult, Mike realized he wanted to work with youth. He began volunteering at a Kamloops youth group, co-created a skate component, and 40 to 60 youth showed up weekly.

The rest, as they say, is history. As Mike saw these youth experiencing what he had – a community of acceptance and support – he knew his life's work would be helping youth find this place of belonging.

Mike then moved to Chicago, completed a graduate certificate in Urban Studies and settled in Surrey, BC, where a high number of youth on the margins live. In 2010, he joined Youth Unlimited and started Skate Night, a thriving skateboard outreach program.

Now, every Wednesday night, you'll find Mike and a group of skateboarders at one of the Lower Mainland's great skate parks. You'll also find the Skate Night vehicle, a 15-passenger van, ensuring a wider range of youth will be able to attend.

Despite common belief, Mike's primary goal isn't to

teach skateboarding. "I'm often painted as a skate guy," he says. "But more accurately, I'm an urban youth worker who runs a skate club." Mike explains: "We bring together a special youth community, underserved by adults, and try to create healthy, sustained, relationships that positively impact the rest of their lives."

Many Skate Night youth grew up in adverse situations, so this skating community offers a different environment and standard of friendship. "Kids with no support networks, who would never have otherwise known each other, are now each other's best friends," explains Mike. "They're fostering healthy relationships together."

Twice a year, Skate Night youth go on bigger trips to skate hotspots in Portland or Seattle, and to Vancouver Island, to join a conglomerate of western Canadian skate clubs.

The trips are as important as the weekly mentorship. They offer lower income youth the chance to experience real, out-of-town vacations, as well as authentic, relational insight. "The skate community is naturally skeptical," Mike explains. "So when they see you navigating stressful situations, being a part of positive relationships, it speaks volumes. They learn they can trust you as you walk in faith."

“ I haven't been happy in a year, but right now I am feeling happy and that is really nice. ”

- Abbotsford youth

“ Programs are the structure, but relationships are the life-changer! ”

- Surrey youth worker

# BUILDING RESILIENCY THROUGH SPORT AND MENTORSHIP



In grade eight, Riya first realized her love of basketball. She spent countless hours in the school gym before class, shooting hoops and scrimmaging with friends. So when YU youth workers Greg and Jen invited her to watch a live basketball game in Vancouver, she jumped at the chance. This began a rich and supportive friendship as, over time, Jen helped her with her struggles with anxiety and body image issues.

“We just bonded right off the bat,” says Riya. “Jen is one of my favourite adults; she’s a very close friend to me.”

## ACQUAINTED WITH DARK PLACES

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health conditions in teens have increased 13% in the last decade. Over half of the youth GVVU works

“Jen is one of my favourite adults; she’s a very close friend to me.”

with struggle with anxiety. Studies on the issue reveal that societal and culture shifts played a key role in this uptick, as well as technology use, which blocks resilience-building in young people.

Body image is often central to these anxious struggles. This was true for Riya, now in grade 10. A strong and confident young person, she also knows what it’s like to fight an eating disorder and become acquainted with dark places.

## MENTORING FRIENDSHIP

For Riya, basketball was a coping mechanism. “With anxiety, everyone has their ways of dealing with it; for me it was basketball.”

Because Jen shared Riya’s passion for the sport and created many opportunities for youth to play, she was a natural constant in Riya’s life. Since meeting, the two have spent countless hours shooting hoops, painting pottery and exploring hidden treasures in Abbotsford—all of this has effectively built a mentoring friendship where Riya feels safe to share her struggles. This long-term, committed mentorship is central to Youth Unlimited’s purpose and mission—meeting youth where they are at, walking alongside

**“ With anxiety, everyone has their ways of dealing with it; for me it was basketball. ”**

them, and supporting them wholistically.

“I’m really comfortable around Jen,” says Riya. “We have a lot of trust built between us. She’s one of the only adults that I have deep conversations with, and I know she doesn’t judge me. She helps me reflect on whatever is going on.”

## OPENING UP

Struggling with mental health can be isolating. One evening last summer, while shooting hoops, Riya was able to open up to Jen about her battle with an eating disorder.

“We were playing and talking about my insecurities,” shares Riya. “I had an eating disorder, and got up the courage to share about that with Jen.”

During their conversation, Jen drew from her academic research where she had studied eating disorders. She helped Riya see how encouraging gratitude and appreciation for one’s body can help prevent spiraling. “I reminded her that it’s important to be thankful for health and our ability to function,” says Jen.

Riya holds this moment close to her heart, appreciative of the wisdom. “I’ve realized so much gratitude for my body,” she says.

“Through basketball I see how I can run and function and I should be proud of what my body can do. I think

**“ I was thrilled to celebrate with her and cheer her on. I’m so proud of her and how far she’s come. ”**



about that conversation often. Jen is so wise and has more life experience, it helps so much.”

## STEPS TO HEALING AND HEALTH

Since then, the two have faithfully taken small steps leading towards health and healing. “Together we made sure she had proper meals,” explained Jen. “When we started down this road, Riya would message me, excited to show me what she was eating that day. I was thrilled to celebrate with her and cheer her on. I’m so proud of her and how far she’s come.”

Riya is one of hundreds of youth, richly invested in by GYU staff. Each relationship is unique, meeting youth where they are at. Jen’s youth work is focused on providing opportunities for youth through sport; encouraging resilience, and celebrating their strength and courage, regardless of game success.

Across Greater Vancouver and the Lower Mainland youth workers offers varied areas of diverse engagement, but all with the same purpose: to coming alongside youth, supporting wholistic transformation and flourishing. Thank you for making that possible!





### THROUGH YOUR LENS: HOW CREATIVE LIFE HELPS YOUTH SEE THEIR POTENTIAL

Last July, Genevieve Walker beamed as she watched the creative works of her eight youth be explored and appreciated by visitors to their photography exhibition. Entitled “Through Your Lens”, the exhibition was showcased both at Regent College’s Dal Schindell Gallery, and Matchstick Coffee. The event was part of Creative Life, a Vancouver-based program at Youth Unlimited where Genevieve was interning.

faith community in the environment she’d been longing for.

Through her studies, Genevieve met the Creative Life team and became an intern, applying her past career and current studies. “My life felt like a number of loose threads braided in different areas,” she says. “Coming to Regent and Creative Life, it felt like God was weaving the different areas together.”

The exhibition was part of that braid, culminating from months of hard work and dedication of the youth, and led by Genevieve. They took part in workshops, test shots, vision-casting, and learned about the art of photography.

“The youth are coming from complex backgrounds, and we get to be creative and make things together,” she says. “We meet them where they’re at, and get to invest in them beyond just the point of crisis.”

The exhibition focused on themes of isolation and connection between humans, their communities, and the natural world. It was ultimately, a greater story of the connection experienced in the Creative Life community.

It was a thriving success. The pieces were well-received, some purchased by patrons, and the youth got to share with attendees about the inspiration behind their works. This profound experience has helped the youth grow in self-confidence, experience and delight.

Genevieve’s internship ended in May, introducing her to the next chapter: official employment at GVVU. On staff since September, she is now balancing her love for youth with her studies. “I’m running towards what God’s purpose is for me,” she says. “And it’s so worth it.”



Five years prior, on the opposite side of the world, Genevieve could not have predicted where her life would take her. A social worker with the Australian Government, Genevieve found her work rewarding, but she was also burning out. The nature of the work was consistent crisis mode, with little chance for relational consistency. Genevieve needed out.

It wasn’t long before she found herself in Vancouver, BC, to attend Regent College. There, in a rejuvenating master’s program, Genevieve studied the intersection of art and theology and was surrounded by a close-knit



# FOOD HAMPERS AT CHRISTMAS AND ALL-YEAR LONG

Since the beginning of the pandemic, as Youth Unlimited pivoted to adapt to physical restrictions, food hampers played a larger role in helping youth and families survive through a myriad of hardships—both at Christmas and throughout the year.

In 2022, we attempted to expand the piloted Christmas hamper project. The success of the program expansion is thanks to generous partnership with businesses, churches and of course, caring individuals. These people stepped up at the midnight hour to ensure that all the enlisted families across the Fraser Valley and Metro Vancouver had a robust hamper at Christmas.

“Because of the hamper we were given we had one of the best Christmases,” said one hamper recipient. “It gave me strength to endure what was to come.”

In Surrey, the hamper program has been active throughout the year, thanks to Young Families, a YU program that has been providing holistic care to young moms for over 20 years. Thanks to a partnership with Cloverdale Community Kitchen (CCK), Young Families staff were empowered to provide bi-weekly hampers to these moms, filled with food, essentials and sometimes a gift.



on the margins to supply a pantry with necessities. This has led some moms to make the dreadful choice between skipping meals or keeping the heat off in winter.

This year, our goal is to provide more food and supplies to try to meet the need.

If the basics can be met, staff have a dream to introduce a postpartum basket for young moms. These baskets would act as a pseudo community, providing food and assistance to new, young moms similar to what’s often received from family, friends, or a church community.

Young Families is dedicated to nourishing the vulnerable families of Greater Vancouver and wrapping the girls in a locality full of Christ-like love and acceptance that promotes healthy and flourishing lifestyles.

**“ I’m scared to lose all the supports I’ve worked hard to get; but, I have two constants in my life when I age out: Lori and Amanda [youth workers]. ”**

- Vancouver youth



With 2022’s rise in inflation however, donations to the CCK, and thus to YU, have slowed, while the need continues to increase.

“It would be so wonderful to have lower barriers for accessing necessities,” say Becca Penner, Young Families program staff. With inflation hitting hard in 2022, it has become virtually impossible for families



## CELEBRATING 15 YEARS OF GLOBAL OPPORTUNITY: THE ELEVATION PROJECT

The Elevation Project reached a significant milestone in 2022—15 years of partnership between GYU and YFC Rwanda. That’s 15 years of friendship, collaboration and support for the next generation of Canadian and Rwandan youth.

Birthered out of a joint vision to provide Canadian and Rwandan youth with a holistic approach to care and education, the Elevation Project has two main features: a sponsorship program for Rwandan students, and an 18-month leadership development experience for BC youth.

In 2007, YFC Rwanda opened Kigali Christian School (KCS), bringing quality Christian education to young Rwandans from all walks of life. Twenty percent of the student population is sponsored, providing life-changing opportunities to children without access to adequate education. GYU successfully launched and maintained the fundraising side of the partnership, thanks to generous Canadians.

Since its inception, over 300 sponsored students have graduated, becoming lawyers, engineers, teachers and other critical professions within Rwanda.

Back in Canada, youth also facing barriers to flourishing, were offered a different kind of opportunity—the Elevation Experience. This 18-month, cross-cultural experience, provides youth with leadership development training, mentorship, and a multi-week trip to Rwanda.

This life-changing opportunity gives vulnerable youth a global perspective, with the chance to experience a wider perspective, to bond with their Rwandan counterparts and to grow in all areas of their life.

The Elevation Project is a strong bridge connecting the two vibrant countries. KCS is now a multi-campus school, serving 1,800 K-12 students, over 250 of whom are sponsored. The next cohort of Elevation Experience participants will be making their way to Kigali this Summer.

## NURTURING CONFIDENCE IN THE KITCHEN

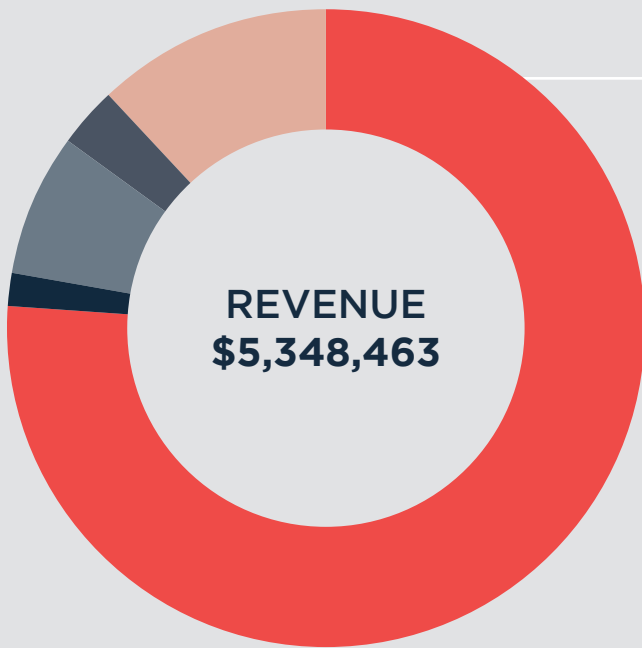
Last year marked an exciting new program launch for youth struggling with food insecurity or disordered eating. Having already run a robust breakfast program serving 500 youth in three highschools for the past decade, the Maple Ridge team saw the needs and opportunity to provide further and lasting nutritional support. Lifeskills is a 10-week, after-school cooking class piloted at Garibaldi Secondary School by YU Area Director, Maureen Floris, and the school’s chef. Designed to grow confidence in the kitchen for graduating kids with food and nutrition-related concerns, the class teaches youth how to read recipes, cook a variety of food, and create dishes of their own. At the end of the 10 weeks, the teens receive a recipe book featuring their unique creations.

According to the school chef, the teens already eagerly await the program’s relaunch this year. One participant shared on her first day how she “didn’t even know how to boil water,” and by the end of the 10-week course, she was cooking meals for her family. Not only does the program



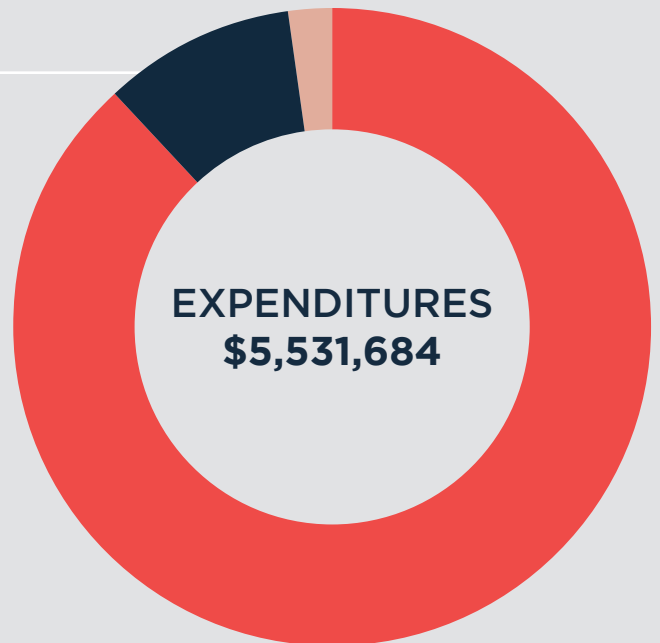
provide much needed skills for flourishing in nutritional health, but the confidence built when led to try new things translates to other areas of the youth’s lives where they can build on past success.

# 2022 FINANCIALS



● Donation Income:	\$4,084,876
● Program Revenue:	\$81,482
● Grants:	\$389,404
● Gift In Kind:	\$161,815
● Other:	\$630,886

● Programs:	\$4,884,475
● Administration:	\$528,299
● Fundraising + Donor Relations:	\$118,910



“ On our beach day, we had no major crisis, no arguments or hurt feelings, only a good day in nature. Experiences like this can mean so much to our youth. ”

- Surrey youth worker

# 2022 MILESTONES



- Post-pandemic, GYU returned to full, year-round programming, including trips and large events.
- YUnite Outside hosted its biggest year yet, with 241 sleepers, raising nearly \$270,000.
- The Elevation Project celebrates 15 years of partnership in Rwanda.
- In 2022, staff reported how staff care is no longer a weakness but is now a core competency. Staff expressed that this genuine care was demonstrated in both physical and mental health. Healthy employees who feel cared for by the organization translates into long term sustainable care for youth.

- Ten new staff started in 2022.
- Years of ministry milestones for long-time youth workers:
  - Barry McLeod: 40 years
  - Cecil Rast: 35 years
  - Graham Goertzen: 30 years
  - Doug McKellan: 25 years
  - Tombert Chen: 20 years
- Cityfest returned, post-pandemic, hosting 5,000 people at the Shipyards.
- GYU ran a successful Christmas hamper program, supporting 130 people from 40 households.
- The 2022 Golf Tournament raised \$120,000.

## CONNECT WITH US

### SOCIAL MEDIA



### NEWSLETTER

Sign up at [youthunlimited.com](https://youthunlimited.com)

## PARTNER WITH YU

There are many ways you can help Youth Unlimited in walking alongside vulnerable youth across Greater Vancouver and the Fraser Valley.

## DONATE | PRAY | VOLUNTEER

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