



Inspiring a new and diverse generation in uncertain times

Robert Christmas*

The sparkle in their eyes said it all. They were bright and engaged and made me feel like I had better tell them something worth hearing. I said, “I can see the potential in your eyes and your hope for the future. The only thing limiting you is your own imagination. The rest is just deciding what you want to do in life, and then put one foot in front of the other until you get there. It’s not about being smart or lucky. All it takes is tenacity; that means time and pressure.” I was talking to a group of high-school students from all across Northern Manitoba. Frontier School Division brings their students into the city for a conference each year, and I’ve had the pleasure of talking to them the last few years.

There are no high schools in many rural places, and teens have to move into larger urban centres to complete high school. The predators know it, and that is when they do their targeting and grooming. In my doctoral research, survivors of sex trafficking told me they got visits in their home communities from new friends. They would say, “Hey, next year when you come into the city for school, I’ll be your friend.” We all know how that story can end.

My talk is about how to stay safe in the city. I draw on my research into trafficking, and the police work I’ve done trying to protect at-risk youth. But in the last couple of years, I have quickly shifted from the safety talk into my real passion, the value of education and realizing your potential. As a high school drop-out who eventually made it through my Ph.D., I’ve always valued education. I love to appreciate the opportunities I’ve had and share the knowledge with young and older people alike. Knowledge is power. Many newcomers, in particular, are aware that education is the key to a better life than they had access to where they came from. But they don’t always know how to get it. We all need a push and some guidance from time to time, no matter where life’s lottery dropped us into this world. That is where us adults come in. We must help our future leaders find the way.

I am 61 years old, and people from my generation love to reminisce about the old days and how we grew up tough and had a work ethic that we don’t see anymore. But if I am honest and critical, I believe today’s generation may be more dialled in and focussed. I worked hard when I was younger, but I spun my wheels a lot. It took a while before I figured out that I needed to get back to school, and even then, I had no idea where it would lead. I worked multiple jobs while

taking evening classes, and I could afford an apartment and a car, and even a house when Barb and I got married young.

Today’s youth have more challenges ahead of them. Wage scales have increased, but the cost of living has skyrocketed, and the feeling of uncertainty about the future is arguably worse, or at least as bad as it ever was. The news is full of war; well, OK, the news has always been full of war. COVID knocked all of us onto our backsides, leaving a trail of homelessness, a street drug crisis, and seemingly reduced opportunities in its wake. For teens, it must have felt like the world was ending. New persistent threats of pervasive artificial intelligence and Internet-based predators are the new reality. But in the face of the new digital environment of uncertainty, I find today’s youth seem to be more socially aware and focussed, with a better sense of work–life balance. They just need a hand to sort through the doom and gloom that pervades the news and social media.

The truth is that there has always been war and calamity, and the social ills and economy have always transformed, ebbed, and flowed. In the larger historical context, there probably has never been more opportunity than today. Millions of our youth are not being sent to war. While COVID was bad, it had only a fraction of the impact of the Spanish flu a century ago. We are not building bunkers in our yards, fearing the fallout of a nuclear holocaust. We can understand from history that life will go on despite the current issues and social challenges. In the old days, people could decide how much news they were exposed to by turning the radio and the TV off. Nowadays, everyone has a smartphone, and the world can reach right into your pocket and affect you 24/7, 365 days a year. Youth need to understand this, and not get depressed about the fear that can come from paying too much attention to the news.

For my part, I try to pay forward for the adults who helped me out with encouragement to go back to school. I share the insights of my experiences every chance I get, every class I talk to, and in the things I write. Your contribution might be different, but just as impactful, whether it be with individuals in your life or the tone and reach of your social media. One small comment, or just showing that you care, can potentially change a young person’s life. If they are at a crossroads, a nudge could send them off on an entirely different trajectory in life.

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To cite: Christmas, R. (2023). Inspiring a new and diverse generation in uncertain times. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 8(3), 110–111. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.346>

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SG PUBLISHING Published by SG Publishing Inc. **CSKA** Official publication of the Community Safety Knowledge Alliance.

Ubuntu is a term I learned when I travelled across South Africa studying reconciliation. It means roughly, “I am because we are.” In Zulu, it also means, “humanity towards others.” I take it to mean we are all in this together. We all have a responsibility to inspire each other, and to play a part in raising and supporting young people. The spark is there, but each one of us can, and should, play a part in helping the new generation find its way.

For many of you reading this journal, supporting young people in need may already be a large part of the work to which you have dedicated your careers. This alone is exhausting work these days, and full credit goes to those who continue to take it on. How wonderful would it be if every adult found it within the scope of their own lives to reach out at every opportunity and deliver inspiration to a generation

that is needing it more and more? Sure, this could take the form of speaking to young audiences, for those with such opportunities. But it can also mean recognizing those small but significant opportunities to make a difference in the life and worldview of every young person we encounter. Each of them is trying to make sense of a frightening time in human experience coming at them in unprecedented ways. Let’s all do our part to inspire this new generation; it is our shared future.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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