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NEWS

# Grooming Generation Activist

Want to get good at creating social change? Next Up is looking for its next crop of graduates.

By Tom Sandborn, 19 Jul 2011, TheTye.ca

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A school for activists? Isn't that a little establishment?

Not according to the graduates of [Next Up](#), a West Coast-based training program for young people with a mind to shake up the status quo.

Sponsored by the [Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives](#), the [Columbia Institute Centre for Civic Governance](#), and the [Parkland Institute](#), Next Up has just completed its fourth year of training events for young activists between 18 and 32 in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton and Saskatoon.

For Karen Rooney, who recently graduated from Next Up's first year of operations in Saskatoon, connecting with like-minded youth was "incredibly useful."

"Prior to the program, I did not have any family or friend ties to the activist community and so engaging in activist work was a little daunting," she said. "The program has given me the community connections to draw upon, but also the confidence to make those connections and offer my own contributions as well."

Taylor Yee, another grad of the Saskatoon Next Up program, told the Tye about a project she had done together with Rooney -- her "first attempt at trying to make change."



At a Next Up gathering: "These people are tight." Photo by Andrea Curtis.

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The pair met with Charlie Clark, a progressive city councilor in Saskatoon. The city was in the midst of deciding whether or not to implement curbside recycling, a debate that had been ongoing for almost five years.

"At the time, we were one of the only major cities that didn't have such a program, and Karen and I decided to do something about it. Our idea was a long-weekend phone-a-thon to try and get citizens to encourage their councilors to vote in favour of this program," Yee said.



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"Next Up itself gave us the confidence to move forward with a project, rather than sit there and think, 'I could never change anything... I don't even know where to start.' Fortunately, our efforts didn't go to waste, and the councilors did end up supporting a comprehensive recycling program, and if all goes according to plan, we'll have a program by 2012," she told the Tyee.

### A for activism

Next Up held its first training sessions in Vancouver in 2006-2007, and has since expanded to Calgary, Edmonton and Saskatoon.

The program, which is offered tuition free to its young participants, involves seven months of training events, meeting once a week for an evening class, and once a month for an all day weekend event. Participants are chosen because they have already begun some form of activism in their own community, and are offered training in activist, organizing, conflict resolution and communication skills.

Operating on a shoe string budget of around \$130,000 a year and donated time from older community activists who serve as mentors and advisors, the program has already graduated over 100 trained organizers, most of whom are now engaged in leadership roles in grassroots groups and NGOs across Canada and abroad.

There are Next Up grads hard at work at the Wilderness Committee, the Pembina Institute, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition, Shark Truth (an NGO founded by Next Up grad Claudia Li), the Carnegie Community Action Project, which fights gentrification in Vancouver's Chinatown, and the Dusty Flowerpot Theatre, to name a few. Some grads are doing international social justice work in Uganda and the United States.

And they stay connected: Next Up grads meet annually for a gathering that allows them to renew their contacts with each other and their commitments to long term activism. The most recent gathering was held in June and attracted more than 60 of the program's 100 graduates.

### Next up: Tria and Carlos

Tria Donaldson first learned about Next Up when she saw a poster on the campus of B.C.'s Thompson River University, where she was studying journalism. She applied and became what she laughingly describes as the "guinea pigs" of the program's first sessions in Vancouver.

"Next Up was a remarkable opportunity," Donaldson told the Tyee. "It helped me see what was possible, and made me feel connected."

Donaldson said she saw the evidence of Next Up graduates' work in a lot of the high profile efforts to mobilize the youth vote seen across Canada in the last federal election.

"Next Up folks were involved in Lead Now and Vote Mob actions, bike rides to the polls and other vote promotion events," she said. "For two weeks, there were nightly TV news items about vote promotion, and half of them were organized by Next Up grads."

Donaldson says she got her current employment with the Wilderness Committee through her Next Up contacts and experience. Ben West, one of the committee's senior organizers, told the Tyee that he has been enormously impressed with Donaldson and the Next Up program acquired skills and perspectives she brings to her work.

"I really like the way Next Up recognizes the linkages between environmental and social justice issues," West said, "and Tria really gets that crucial point. I am really impressed with her. She has good analysis, and she's a great communicator, full of overwhelming energy and compassion."

Carlos Carvalho is a young trade union activist who just finished the Next Up training in Vancouver. Already an eight year veteran of union work at 28, Carvalho is on the executive of his CUPE local and works as a charge hand in construction for the city of Surrey. He told the Tyee that one of the things that impressed him about the cohort of young people who went through training with him was their diversity of backgrounds and perspectives.

"Next Up found a way to grab kids from so many walks of life," he said. "We all learned the importance of networking with other activists. We're ready now to take it to the next level and learn from each others' experiences."

Carvalho said he hopes many other young activist from unions and civil society groups will take advantage of the Next Up experience.

"I really enjoyed Next Up. From the first meeting, I felt I was in the right place," he added.

#### **'A life commitment': CCPA's Klein**

Seth Klein, of the CCPA's B.C. office and co-founder of Next Up with former youth activist and environmental educator Kevin Millsip, emphasizes that Next Up is the right place for young activists who have already made a commitment and demonstrated willingness to work for progressive change. (Full disclosure. I have known both Millsip and Klein since the days when the now-venerable pair were eligible to be called youth activists themselves.)

"You can't get into Next Up on a vague hunch you'd like to be an organizer," Klein told the Tyee. "You have to already have put some time and energy in on justice and environmental issues. This is a program for people who are asking themselves what it looks like to make a life commitment to this work. Next Up provides them with mentoring and coaching and an opportunity to network with others who share their commitment. They can organize and call each other out to their various actions."

Next Up co-founder Millsip said that the body he and Klein invented together is a necessary addition to progressive life in Canada. He told the Tyee that right-wing think tanks like the Fraser Institute have been very successful in recent years in recruiting and training young conservatives to promote the values of the political right.

He said he hopes that Next Up can compete successfully with those efforts and help create a new generation of progressive leaders and organizers. Testimony from program grads suggests that has begun to happen.

Vancouver grad Claudia Li told the Tyee that Next Up changed her life.

"When I started Next Up, I thought recycling and hybrid cars would save the world. It took what was my hobby and turned it into a lifestyle and career choice. It gave me a sense of community, challenged me intellectually, and brought out my inner activist," Li said.

Andrea Curtis, who was a participant in the first Next Up sessions in Vancouver and now serves as B.C. co-coordinator for the program, emphasized the importance of the network among graduates.

"The grads have created affinity groups and support each other in their work for social change. These people are tight," she said.

Curtis says she expects that Next Up is going to provide many of the mayors and CEOs and other leadership figures for Canada in the decades to come.

For Taylor Yee in Saskatoon, the networking was the most important element of her Next Up experience.

"I have only extreme respect for the people I've met through the program; they are just amazing," she said. "I've learned a lot from them, and they give me hope that this world can change for the better." 🙌

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*Birch*  
5 days ago

### *A Great Idea*

These are the kinds of social initiatives for young people that have the opportunity to make a long-term difference!

**Suggest as offensive**

Young people in our culture are vastly underrated with regard to their idealism and energy. It's well time that progressive organizers began tapping into this source to improve all our social well-being, as well as to provide a counter to the neocon drivel (like Dragon's Den, The Apprentice, and their ilk) that is used so much to separate and isolate us.

*KWD*  
4 days ago

### *hybrid cars?*

I can understand the importance of "recycling" in trying to save what's left of our planet, but "hybrid cars"?

**Suggest as offensive**

Hopefully Next Up will inform Claudia Li that hybrid cars don't just magically appear, they are a product that requires the use of much energy, and good deal of that production energy comes from burning fossil fuels.

Not only that, hybrid cars, like CFLs and LEDs, do little more than provide the illusion that society is actually using fewer resources and polluting less. This allows most folks, including environmentalists to carry on believing they can have their earth and eat it too, all the while over-looking the fact that the middle class lifestyle they've come to enjoy demands continuing economic and population growth, which means greater and greater resource use.

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