

Inner-city youth now accredited coaches

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CLARK KIM

More than 120 inner-city youth across Toronto earned their nationally recognized coaching certification Tuesday, May 13 after successfully completing a high-level accreditation program.

The Toronto Sports Leadership Program has allowed students living in at-risk neighbourhoods to take the necessary training at no cost and subsequently find well-paying jobs.

"We needed good employment for youth," said Mini Alakkatusery, manager of programs with Toronto Community Foundation, an organization that aims to connect philanthropy to community needs.

Discussions with community leaders on how to engage young people began in the fall of 2005 after experiencing the so-called Summer of the Gun when youth violence seemed to be escalating.

Youth unemployment was also high at the time, Alakkatusery said.

Recreational jobs with the city and the YMCA were available, but there wasn't enough qualified kids to fill those positions.

That's where the foundation came in, partnering up with community and youth agencies, and providing the initial \$100,000 to start the intense coach training institute in January 2006.

It offered free training in basketball, soccer, aquatics and skiing to those living in at-risk neighbourhoods.

"We had 100 kids already lined up and ready to sign up," said Alakkatusery, noting students accepted into the program were recommended by their teachers and principals that saw leadership potential in them but who could not otherwise afford the training.

Since the program's inception, more than 300 students from 29 Toronto high schools have become certified coaches with many landing jobs as lifeguards, referees and instructors, which all pay more than the minimum wage.

"We gave them a goal that was high and they exceeded it," said Alakkatusery, adding the United Way has also matched the \$100,000 to keep the program going, which is now heading into its third year this September.

Eric Nelson, who graduated from Cedarbrae Collegiate Institute in Scarborough, participated in the first year of the Toronto Sports Leadership Program after his gym teacher recommended him.

Nelson is currently in his first year at Centennial College studying human resources and working part-time as a soccer instructor with the city's park and recreations department.

"It's amazing how it's (the program) grown," he said. "It's amazing how many people are still reaping the benefits."

Tali Eshkol, Laura Caputo and John Ng had been taking a subsidized ski program at Earl Bales in North York and were recommended to take the free training and leadership course.

They all passed and received their coaching accreditation for skiing.

"It taught us a lot of teaching skills," said Tali, who attends Earl Haig Secondary School. "Now we can teach anywhere in Canada."