

## Presenting: "The Outer Limits" – Linking Toronto With Kolkata – And Changing Lives (Part I)

Human transformation and progress towards a more positive enlightened way of living have long been topics that fascinate me. Many of the articles on this website focus on the personal transitions that so many of us go through. But not only do we as individuals go through transitions and change, but communities and cities also undergo transformations.

Following my trip to Mexico last year it became clearer for me than ever that my chosen home town Toronto is definitely one of the best places to live in, and I wanted to start an initiative to celebrate Toronto, a city that is often underappreciated and whose uniqueness and significance is overlooked by its own residents. For some reasons, we seem to collectively suffer from some sort of strange persistent inferiority complex here, wondering whether we are indeed a world class city or not.

Toronto: Are we a world-class city or not?

Well, I for one am a strong proponent of Toronto. As an immigrant woman and female entrepreneur I have personally seen the opportunities that this city can provide to people from all over the world, and my Celebrate Toronto initiative will encompass an extensive article series, photo exhibitions and neighbourhood portraits that will culminate in a big fundraising event later this year for the following project:

The "Outer Limits: International Youth Project" is a highly innovative program that was conceived by Kevin Lee and his staff at the Scadding Court Community Centre to help young people at a crossroads. In future years it will become a full-fledged anti-gang / anti-gun intervention program and will be carried out in partnership with Toronto Community Housing and India's Durbar Mahila Sammanaya Committee near Kolkata. This Indian organization is a well-established non-profit agency that works toward a secure social existence and better life for sex workers and their families. Over the last few years the team at Scadding Court has raised close to \$100,000 to build a residential school to provide training and educational opportunities for this group of children who represent one of the most marginalized and stigmatized segments of Indian society.

The most innovative part of this program is that the Outer Limits program will select youth from various low-income neighbourhoods in Toronto, take them out of their usual environments to teach English to the children in Kolkata. Located on a different continent in a vastly different environment from their own, the Toronto youth will have an opportunity to reevaluate their own lives in this new context, become involved in community service and undergo life-changing learning experiences. The ultimate goal of this program is to create a new generation of community leaders who will go back into their own neighbourhoods and plant the seeds of positive change throughout different marginalized areas all across Toronto. The Outer Limits: an international program with tangible local benefits.

The first group of four Toronto youth is scheduled to go to India on their international assignment on January 16 and they are planning to stay until April 12. For the last few weeks they have been receiving training on how to teach English as a Second Language, how to deal with culture shock and how to interact with the local children in India. They have also attended training for the creation of photo and video documentaries; and the group will be publishing their experiences on a blog throughout their entire stay in India. Last Thursday I made the trek to Scadding Court to catch a glimpse of the group's training program, their preparation and their emotions as they prepare for this trip of a lifetime.

When I visited the group was set up in a big classroom and studying how to use video equipment. I did not want to interrupt them so I pulled aside one of the staff people to find out further information about the program. I ended up talking to Sarah Mair, a social work coop student from Ryerson University who is currently spending some time at Scadding Court helping with the Outer Limits project. She filled me in a little on some of the training that had already taken place: the program participants have been receiving training on how to teach English as a Second Language, how to speak basic Bengali, even how to cook Bengali cuisine. The participants have also been spending time learning photography and videography techniques in order to learn how to document their amazing experiences in India.

As I spent time talking with Sarah I realized that she is an interesting individual in her own right. As the daughter of Jamaican immigrants she has lived in different parts of Toronto, and as a person of colour she has had her own experiences with Toronto's ethnic diversity. Sarah commented that she has had various key experiences growing up when she has witnessed or been at the receiving end of racial slurs. Sarah explained that especially during high school students tend to quite naturally segregate along racial and ethnic lines. She expressed that young people of colour often do not receive the same opportunities and found that her situation improved when she started attending a black-focussed school. An after school black-focussed program helped her develop a sense of pride and identity as a person of colour. Sarah added that persons of colour are often alienated by a Euro-centric curriculum, and towards the end of her high school years she noticed considerable tension among students of different backgrounds.

Based on her own experiences, Sarah has decided to make her own contributions to improving this situation, and through a career in social work she is planning to help marginalized individuals and people of colour. But she plans to go even further and move into the field of policy making and down

the road might even consider politics, in order to make an active contribution towards creating more respect and tolerance for people of all backgrounds. She added that during a recent visit to a Toronto-area mall, a friend from Ohio commented on the astounding ethnic diversity in Toronto, a society unlike any other. In her and her friend's opinion even New York City does not compare to the ethnic diversity that you see right here in Toronto.

Sarah feels very strongly about her desire to become involved in anti-racism and anti-oppression work. She wonders what makes us so silent and hesitant to bring about change, and plans to raise awareness for these issues. She mentioned that there are still many institutional problems with racism and it's going to be a long road ahead yet to eradicate it, but fortunately there are many agencies in Toronto whose work is dedicated towards this cause and we are making progress.

Sarah's passion impressed me, particularly when she explained that she has a severe hearing disability and during her childhood doctors had told her that she would never be able to talk. She added that due to her hearing disability, so many people have helped her in the past, and now she wants to become active to give back to the community.

### About the Author

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