

**Parliament Hill Panelist:
for the Era 21 Networking Breakfast for Young Canadians**

Presentation by Bettina Choo

**Parliamentary Restaurant, Parliament Hill
Ottawa**

May 8, 2008

Good morning everyone! Before I begin, I'd like to thank Senator Poy, the JDEC and the Asian Heritage Month Society for inviting me here today. It is really an honour to have the opportunity. Next I'd like to congratulate you all for being here. Not only were you chosen by your school, but you were also motivated enough to get up this early.

Hi I'm Bettina, and 7 years ago, I could have been one of you. I absolutely loved my time at Nepean, and honestly, still miss it. High school was great, but it wasn't an easy time, at least for me. Subconsciously, I had to figure out what kind of person I wanted to be. I had to decide what I wanted to do with my life. And somehow, I had to get a bit more independence from my overachieving, somewhat-controlling but very well-meaning immigrant parents. I'm sure you guys can relate. Being told to stay home and study even though you already do well in school. No dating. No make up. Oh, and your parents might not believe in dishwashing machines either.

Anyhow, those overachieving and well-meaning parents pretty much made me exactly who I am today, for better or for worse. You probably noticed that my father's the president of asian heritage month society, mom's vice-president and is also here. As a kid my brother and I watched them organize many events for the PEI multicultural council, and Dad was an active member of Rotary international for years. Mom decided to do a second degree in sociology so that I was subjected to daily lectures on social injustice growing up. Now, I've conclude that they had 3 goals for me: they wanted me to be active in the community, they wanted me to be a doctor, and they wanted me to be the first female visible-minority prime minister of Canada. To this day I still can't convince them that third goal's not going to happen. Anyhow, in grade 12, they finally convinced me to join Nepean's Kiwanis Circle K community service club. My other option was joining the debating team to work on my public speaking, and well, when would I need that?

Once I got to the club meeting I got what I expected. The reason no one heard of the club, except for dad who actually read the Nepean High school

agenda, was that they were a very small club of mostly people who happened to eat lunch in the resource room, where the meetings were held, and they really didn't do much as a club. I decided I better make the most of this experience and somehow ended up running a Canadian tire money drive to buy Christmas gifts for children at a women's shelter. I think at that point I realized how much I like to organize things. There's something about watching the pieces of a puzzle come together. After a major earthquake in India that year, I proposed to the club that we hold a spaghetti dinner to raise money for the relief efforts. Although no one was willing to help organize, they all wanted to help at the event itself. That was good enough for me. I didn't really know how I was going to plan this thing, but I'd figure it out. In the end it wasn't difficult, but it was a lot of work. It involved asking a lot of questions and sitting down and thinking about what needed to be done. At the event, and I know this sounds arrogant, I remember looking out at the crowded gym and thinking wow, everyone's here because of me. I guess I felt empowered and realized that it only takes one individual to initiate things. The next fall, we spent a lot of time recruiting, and it was much easier now that students knew of the club and what we did. We got a number of particularly motivated members who ended up initiating their own events like a 30-hr famine for world vision that raised \$7000 and involved a significant portion of the school.

At university, I joined the U of O Circle K Club, which is the university version of Key Club and Kiwanis. In high school I had spent a good portion of my day in the music room, but I decided to give up the flute and piano thinking I'd be busy with school. One day I realized there were a lot of other students like me. I proposed at a club meeting that we should bring volunteers to teach piano at inner city elementary schools. We'd have the kids practice in a practice room on keyboards with headphones. The club loved the idea, so I contacted York Street, an inner city school near U of O. The principal, Jennifer Offord, was so excited I had to remind her that this was all very hypothetical. David Rubinoff, a teacher, was already giving guitar and piano lessons and offered to coordinate the program at the school. When I contacted Yamaha about donating keyboards, they told me about Richard Dube who founded an identical program called Heart of the City in Western Canada 10 years ago. I contacted him, the Ottawa program became a branch, and the rest is history.

I couldn't believe how much support I received. Community members, Yamaha, Steve's Music, the Leading Note, Alfred's music publishing, and coincidentally the superintendent Peter Gamwell, who is here today, all helped us get started by donating keyboards and piano books. There were so many university students who wanted to participate that I finally decided to ask our club advisor what she thought of starting the program up at a second school. "No". "I'm sorry?" Her subsequent reply has stuck with me. "No, it's bad

business sense. You don't go starting up a second business unless you know things are going well with the first one. What if the volunteers drop out? You don't need to expand, Bettina, this is a learning experience for you." A learning experience. I didn't know what to say. I was shocked. I felt like she thought of me as a kid. I couldn't blame her, after all, we WERE a bunch of kids. But, I had been to the school. I had seen the students practice and heard about how much fun the volunteers were having. Discouraged and frustrated, I asked the club for their opinion. They trusted my judgment and so I went. At the end of the first school year, we held our recital and invited the Kiwanians who by the way, are truly a wonderful group of people that I still keep in touch with. Anyhow, they were extremely impressed and finally realized what a team of young people were capable of. That summer, they helped us apply for a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, which later provided the program with \$25,000.

The Heart of the City Piano Program really was the perfect project for me. Mom had instilled in me an interest in social justice, I loved working with kids, and I love piano. The point I'd like to get through to you today, is that there is something out there for you too. It's all about being proactive in finding the perfect cause. If you can find a way to become involved in the community that fits your interests, you will as much out of it as the people you are helping. Volunteering can open up all kinds of opportunities, it can help put your life in perspective, and it will allow you to meet many people who share your interests.

One of the most memorable experiences I have gotten out of volunteering is my time up north this summer. As part of the Community Health Alliance Program, an optional component of our medical curriculum, I was to volunteer with the Cree Board of Health and Social Services. I had the flexibility of being to choose my own project and I proposed organizing a science and health summer camp. The Cree Board of Health liked the idea and even agreed to hire me and another medical student to run it that summer. We went to Waskaganish, a town of 1800 on the southern edge of James Bay. During my month there, I fell in love with the Cree people and their land. Imagine watching the sunset on a pristine beach that stretches out endlessly but is only occupied by the few people in your company. Imagine waking up on a Saturday morning to stand on a rock at the water's edge, playing the flute, and hearing only the lapping of waves as an accompaniment. The people of Waskaganish had the same characteristics as their environment. They were welcoming, friendly and had a certain sense of peace to them. They don't rush through their day like we do down south and value family and community. While the brownies in Ottawa would pretend I was a stranger at the grocery store, the Cree kids at the camp would stop playing to say hi. Their parents would slow their car and open the window to greet us. People were always

happy and willing to help no matter what the favour we asked of them. The chief and his minister of tourism took us fishing, a family demonstrated traditional cooking in a teepee and we attended a Cree wedding as the whole community is invited. We had the opportunity to try foods like goose, bear, and moose, in addition to *authentic* beaver tail.

Community service can not only open doors to opportunities but it can also help you appreciate the opportunities you have, putting your own life in perspective. I don't know if many of you have spoken to the homeless population, but many of them are actually nice people who just happen to suffer from psychiatric illnesses such as schizophrenia and substance abuse that make living a normal life difficult. Others simply were born into very bad circumstances. At the native friendship center I once interviewed a client as an assignment for school. He was my age, very friendly and bright. I learned that he had been taken away from his alcoholic mother as a child and put into a series of foster homes. At 18, he graduated from the foster home system and without anywhere else to go, he lived on the street. Now, 4 years later, he was very proud that he was going to be moving into an apartment with his friend. It was such in stark contrast to our class, who for the most part had no concept of financial hardship. We grew up in loving families with professional parents who expected us to excel as of day one. It made me fully realize how much we take for granted. Somehow, a few percentage points different on a test seemed trivial compared to the problems other people have to face.

One of the greatest things about volunteering in something you're passionate about, is that you meet plenty of people who share your passion. When Richard Dube, the teacher who founded the piano program in western Canada, offered to come to Ottawa for a weekend to help me set the program up, I was a little nervous because I wasn't sure how I was going to make conversation with someone twice my age for two whole days. Yet, once he arrived, I couldn't believe how well we got along. We both love to spend time with kids, have a passion for music, and take on way too much for our own good. In many ways, I felt that he understood me better than anyone else. Aside from Richard, there have been so many wonderful people that I have had the privilege to meet and get to know over the years. From the university student volunteers, the teachers at the school, the Girl Guide leaders to the Kiwanians, I wonder if I have a skewed view of humanity from the large number of great people I've worked with.

There are so many fantastic reasons to volunteer – the experience, the perspective, and the people among many others. Some people volunteer to consciously work on their resume. I personally think this is a bad way to look at it simply because it makes volunteering seem like work. If you regard

community service as a means of pursuing your interests to help others, your resume will build itself. For example, if you want to go to medical school you don't necessarily have to spend many years volunteering in a hospital. Just spend enough time to know that you might like to work there in the future. Instead, pursue your interests. If you like to read, why not read with kids who are having difficulty? If you like designing websites, why not offer to design one for small non-profit organizations? If you like to work with your hands, why not help out with habitat for humanity? Volunteerottawa.ca is filled with hundreds, if not thousands, of ways one can contribute.

Giving back to the community isn't about returning a favour to society, as the phrase makes it sound. Instead, it is by doing community service that you will get the most out of the community. Volunteering isn't about giving away your time. It's about having the dream job you always wanted, with little competition for the position.