

DEOF/OCC Winter 2023 Completion Report

For this winter's youth program we collaborated with [Calgary Immigrants Women's Association](#) (CIWA). Here, CIWA combined a few of their youth programs together so we would have a larger group to work with. This group was older, ranging in ages 13 - 16 years old. Most of these youth had not been to the mountains, or had any experience in the outdoors, so everything was new to them!

The group:

17 youth

3 CIWA staff

7 OCC young adult leaders

3 OCC staff (including Kate)

The OCC focused on 5 topics to work with the girls on through various games, discussions, and experiential learning activities.:

1. Layering, and how to dress for the outdoors
2. Animal safety (usually people's big concern when they are new to the wilderness!)
3. 10 Essentials
4. Safety as a group responsibility, what are the risks
5. Leave no trace principles

The OCC group planned and facilitated a number of ice breaker games that were dual purpose - one purpose was to teach an outdoor skill in a fun way, and the other was to get to know the youth, and to help them get to know each other. This group of youth did not all know each other before this outdoor program, so it was a great opportunity to help them make new friends.

A lot of time was spent with these youth to teach them how to prepare to go outside in the winter. The OCC group taught the girls about what clothes are best to wear, how layering works, and why they would want to wear specific clothes. They played a "fashion show" game to help solidify the information taught.

The OCC group tried their best to collect information about what gear to round up for the girls in order for them to be safe and warm when they did go to the mountains. The OCC group rounded up an obscene amount of gear from thrift stores, friends, and their own personal gear in order to ensure that when we took CIWA to the mountains they would be warm and dry.

The girls were introduced to the 10 essentials with a game to get them thinking. They were asked what item they would bring if they were stranded on a deserted island, and

asked to find a partner to discuss it with. They were then told a story about a massive storm coming in, and asked to work with their partner to use the items they had brought to formulate a safety plan. After a sharing circle the OCC crew introduced them to the 10 essentials. Gear shame is a real thing, especially for folks coming from low-income families, so we were extra careful to give examples of different types of gear and clothes that are inexpensive or where they could be purchased used, or for a better deal.

We as professionals know that safety is the foundation to a positive outdoor experience. The Field Leaders course teaches leaders how to identify, assess, and mitigate the risk of being outside to an acceptable level. The CIWA girls were first asked what they thought they could do to stay safe outside, and they came up with answers such as “stay as a group” or “don’t let bears eat you”. This led into a discussion about looking for risks and hazards, and that safety is a group responsibility, and that we have to look out for each other. They were taught to question situations that made them feel uneasy, and what to do about it. Oftentimes accidents could have been avoided by being able to create a safe space for folks to feel like they can speak up.

Like most of what CIWA was learning, leave no trace was new to them. Stay on trail, and why. Campfires - where and when can you have them, and what must happen afterwards. One comical moment was when we were at Ribbon Creek, and the girls were discovering bear proof garbage bins, and couldn’t figure out how to use them! It turned into a great learning opportunity to talk about wildlife practices, and what can happen if we don’t take precautions.

A secondary leave no trace comical experience happened when the girls had to use the “bathroom”. They put it off for as long as they could, but eventually they had to learn how to tree pee. This gave us the opportunity to teach about how to discard waste properly, and where to go. The experience involved a lot of shrieking and laughing - and was some of the girls favorite part about the mountain day.

The mountain day at Ribbon Creek was a big adventure for the girls, meeting at the Genesis Centre in NE Calgary. The OCC led an equipment check, and spoke to each girl to make sure they had everything they needed. This was also a learning opportunity for the OCC crew to see what last minute logistics needed to be done behind the scenes to make sure our risk management plan was followed (updating last minute changes to trip plans, and communicating them to the trip plan holder).

At the debrief at the end of the day the girls were so happy that they were able to take part in the experience. They said that their favorite parts were the mountain views and the games. The biggest thing they learned was how to dress to be warm outside in winter.

At the end of the debrief, one of the girls asked us how she could come here (ribbon creek) again with her family, and how much it costs. She, and many of the others, did not know that anyone could come here and enjoy it. This reminded us all of that lack of access and information about these types of outdoor activities to immigrants, and how important it is for people like us to share it.

OCC Takeaways: As new outdoor leaders, the OCC participants were learning just as much, or more than the CIWA youth during this experience.

1) Group Management

Learning how to deal with different personalities in a group comes with time and experience. Group management in the outdoors is really crucial for participants to have a safe day. It takes strategy to move the group (especially a large one) through outdoor experiences smoothly. Using your “outdoor voice” to get folks attention, and be clear on instruction.

2) Meeting a group where they are at

As program planner or guide, we put a lot of work into a planned program or may have a goal ourselves that we want the group to achieve. It is a fine balance finding the sweet spot where you can push a group outside of their comfort zone to achieve something new while creating a day that is enjoyable and meaningful for them. Maybe an Instagram photo or taking tic toc videos isn't your thing, but for the youth, it is an amazing gateway wilderness experience. Flexibility and adaptability is always key!

Like they learnt in the Field Leader course, find a motivation for the day that works for you, as well as is participant centered.

3) Risk Management & Paperwork

This is the side you did not see from the outside. Taking youth out takes a lot of planning and prep to make sure all your legal bases are covered. There are risk management plans, trip plans, medical/emergency contact information to collect. There are already barriers to taking youth outdoors, so making sure your programs are SAFE above all else is important.