

YOUTH WORK IN A PANDEMIC: THE UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD

In 2021, as we entered our second year of the pandemic, GYU staff were (and continue to be) incredibly resilient, nimble and flexible in the face of the constant instability of the pandemic and responses to it. Staff have navigated constant changes and event cancelling, program retooling, an increased need with less resources, and an attempt to engage youth through limited mediums—all while both youth and staff struggle with fatigue and stress.

It's been a difficult year, but for some staff members, the upside-down world has also allowed for an infusion of life and exploration in youth work and programs. As one staff member puts it:

"The amazing thing was that some of the adjustments we made actually created new ways of doing things that were better than what we'd done before. God used Covid to make our program even stronger."



In Surrey, YU youth worker Derek Dovale saw this unfold firsthand. In order to spend valuable in-person time with a youth named Mason*, they met up through walks to maintain social distancing. The pair were captivated by the diverse birds they encountered on their walks. Derek noticed how much Mason in particular enjoyed the birds, so they became more deliberate in their bird-watching, and invited others to join. Within no time, ten more youth joined the walks. Derek chuckled when he realized he'd started an "accidental bird-watching club".

Like many YU activities, this new club is so much more than birding. It offers a safe, consistent environment for connection, while supporting youth in their passions. The same is true for adaptations to YU's longstanding Young Families program.

Through this program, Youth Unlimited has been able to support both young moms and young dads to break cycles of poverty and promote healthy relationships for

over 20 years. March 2020 was the first time that support workers and young parents couldn't gather in person. So instead, the "program" was brought to the families. Young Families workers created hampers full of groceries and much-needed supplies, which were brought to moms and dads. YU staff and volunteers were able to do safety checks, as well as connect with parents (at a safe distance) and hear how the individuals were doing. The same elements of love, encouragement and support remained—they were simply brought to doorsteps.

Many young people are without adequate healthy supports, and YU youth workers have been called to fill those gaps. YU has always been known for its ability to pivot and adapt quickly, and it has been a strength in this challenging season. YU programs will continue evolving and expanding to meet new needs and challenges, but the relationships and community formed by YU youth workers won't change - they're here to stay.

**Not his real name.*

“ Young Families has been really supportive for me and my son during the pandemic. I don't drive so having groceries, diapers, and wipes delivered to our home every week really helps financially. ”
- Young Families Youth