

# ACTIVIST TEACHES THE FINE ART OF MOTIVATING YOUTH

Friday, September 28, 2007

By Chris Oke

Special to the News

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**Iona Dougherty...** "Young people really respect honesty, they know when someone isn't being real with them."

Think today's youth are apathetic?

Well then, you haven't met Iona Dougherty.

The 27-year-old was recently named "One of five women changing the world" by Canadian Dimensions Magazine.

She is a youth activist, holds workshops, and is the spokesperson for a national organization, which she co-founded.

She also dances, manages punk bands and creates award-winning choreography.

All this, and she still finds time to visit friends and family in the Yukon.

Dougherty is the cofounder of Apathy is Boring, a group that uses art, media and technology to get youth involved in the democratic process.

"But we don't feel like young people should have to do all the work," she said.

"We also teach adults in government and non-governmental organizations how to better engage the youth."

While visiting home, Dougherty thought it would be a good chance to pass some of this knowledge on to Whitehorse's adult community.

Along with the Yukon Volunteer Bureau,

Dougherty put on The Youth Friendly Workshop: How to Engage Youth in Your Work.

"The response was shocking," she said.

"I thought there'd be, like, 10 people, but it sold out in a couple days."

Dougherty's best advice for adults?

"We tell people to not try to be cool — you can really do cool wrong."

Instead, adults should try to be genuine and real.

"Young people really respect honesty; they know when someone isn't being real with them."

She also demystified branding, marketing and how to do outreach in the age of mass media.

Technology, such as Facebook, is a great way to keep in touch with youth — if adults can figure out how to use it.

The workshop, which Dougherty does across Canada, was a huge success in the North.

"The e-mails just keep coming," she said.

"There was tons of interest from Dawson as well; we might try to do one up there later on."

Dougherty uses her own organization, Apathy is Boring, to demonstrate how to appeal to youth.

The group has branched into its own line of clothing and produces T-shirts, hoodies and limited edition "Be the Cause" panties.

All the money raised goes directly to the organization, which has five full-time employees on its payroll.

Dougherty and two friends began Apathy is Boring just before the 2004 election.

There was a lot of focus on voter turnout that year, but among young people the numbers are typically low,

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she said.

Currently, only 36 per cent of people in Canada under the age of 25 vote.

"There are clear reasons for this," said Dougherty.

"Young people feel disconnected and there is a lack of trust in the government."

Many campaigns that were being run to get out the vote were only focused on youth that were already involved.

"We wanted to appeal to the rest," said Dougherty.

The first six months of the campaign

were extremely successful, with plenty of media coverage and interest from Canadian youth.

Ilona appeared on newscasts, television shows and Muchmusic, and a CBC Make Some Noise segment focused on Apathy is Boring.

So the group decided to build an organization based on that principle.

"We just try to speak the language of young people," she said.

"We didn't expect it to become an organization, but now we have five staff and interns every summer."

Also, 40 Canadian artists signed up to

support the project.

Big names like Raine Maida, Buck 65, and Sarah McLaughlin have joined the cause, as well as many emerging artists.

In that respect, it's similar to Rock the Vote in the US.

"But we don't take a stand on any of the issues," she said. "We just want to connect with and engage youth."

"We try to create a dialogue, not try to force-feed people."

The story of Canada's disenfranchised youth is much the same when it comes to volunteer work.

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People in their early 20s are the least likely to volunteer.

In her workshops, Dougherty asks governments and managers of youth programs many questions.

Why would youth want to be involved in your organization?

Why would youth care?

What do you offer them?

It's not just about reaching youth with a hip new promotional video with the latest rap song.

Organizations need to reassess the way

they appeal to youth and reap the many benefits of having them participate.

Dougherty participated from a very early age.

As soon as she was old enough to hold her own protest sign, she began demonstrating along with her activist parents.

At the age of 14, she was the chair of the Canadian Environmental Network Youth Caucus.

She also served on the National Youth Roundtable on the Environment, Sierra Youth Coalition Executive Committee and Sierra Club of Canada Board of Directors.

And at the age of 17, she was a Canadian delegate to the United Nations.

Dougherty attended Concordia in Montreal where she studied the seemingly contradictory mix of contemporary dance and policy studies.

Apathy is Boring is a similar mixture of these two loves: A love for activism and involvement with non-government organizations, as well as her love of the arts.

She still lives in Montreal, but enjoys coming home to the Yukon once or twice a year.

It is, after all, where she learned that democracy and volunteering don't have to be boring.

"You get to test things out here more than in the south; the Yukon offers all types of opportunities," she said.

"You just have to take advantage of them."