“THINGS WERE A MESS. The Vietnam War was raging, there was student unrest, we had the King and Kennedy assassinations in the U.S., then the War Measures Act here in Canada. There was a lot boiling over in society. It was a frightening time.”

This was the world view in 1970 of a young Montrealer named Buddy Boyd. Raised in Verdun and growing up in the rough-and-tumble neighbourhood of Pointe-Saint-Charles, with a family life clouded by alcoholism and domestic violence, Buddy was just 19 years old and had already faced enough personal challenges to last a lifetime. With only a Grade 6 education, he was unemployed and hanging out on the streets with other young people drawn together by drugs and a shared sense of alienation.

“I knew I didn’t want that,” Buddy says today, “but I wasn’t sure what I did want. A lot of us were like that back then. There was a feeling of hopelessness. You didn’t have a path to the next level, so you were just going to stay where you were.”

Then one day, a sign of hope appeared. Buddy was at a teenagers’ dance hosted by a local church when he stepped outside for a cigarette and saw a poster announcing something that seemed to be from another world: a program aimed at young people like him, offering a chance to make up for...
Buddy Boyd at Gibsons Recycling Depot.

Top 50
BMO was included in the Corporate Knights 2015 list of the Best 50 Corporate Citizens in Canada.

his missing school years while gaining practical workplace training – in an actual job.

It seemed too good to be true. But when Buddy saw that participants automatically qualified for six months of unemployment insurance benefits, he figured it was at least worth a shot. And so he signed up for a program that would change the course of his life: the Bank of Montreal Youth Project.

Responding to the times
As the 1960s drew to a close, the pressure for social change that had characterized the decade continued to express itself through outbursts of civic unrest, fuelled by racial tensions, economic disparities and concerns over the prolonged war in Vietnam. Against this backdrop, more progressive North American companies began to look for ways to help promote positive social change, particularly in the workplace.

Among the business leaders inspired by this idea was Arnold Hart, CEO and Chairman of the Bank of Montreal, who initiated the development of a community-based program focused specifically on the problem of youth unemployment. The result was the Bank of Montreal Youth Project, designed to help socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged youth gain the skills they needed to find steady jobs. Through a six-month program of classroom education integrated with on-the-job training, young people with less than Grade 10 education could enhance their basic reading, computational and clerical skills while learning to become better communicators and collaborators.

Launched in Montreal in 1970 under the leadership of Ivan Eaton, the Bank of Montreal Youth Project was subsequently extended to Halifax and Winnipeg as well. Guided by a hand-picked group of teacher-counsellors, the program quickly began placing more than 70% of graduates in full-time jobs – a success rate unheard of among comparable initiatives.

One of those success stories was Buddy Boyd.

Learning to connect
On day one of the program – after nearly a decade outside the school system or any other organized setting – Buddy found himself in a downtown office building with a group of equally nervous-looking kids from across the city. “I felt like a stranger in a strange land,” he recalls. “Everything felt foreign to me, because there was...
Human interest

structure. Kids who grow up in alcoholic families don’t have structure. I was scared – just being in that building was daunting. But I knew I had to stick it out, because there was just no other option.”

In addition to classes in reading, math and other fundamentals, the program also taught communications skills. The students were told that they would each be making a presentation to the class, and when the time came to pick a topic, Buddy chose one close to his heart: the environment. Then he took this budding interest a step further by founding a mini-chapter of STOP – the Society to Overcome Pollution – an advocacy group that had recently been formed by a group of activists in Montreal.

“That set me on a course to where I am today,” Buddy says, recalling how his passion for the subject matter combined with an even deeper eagerness to express his ideas and share them with others. “I didn’t need to learn the capital of Poland. I needed to learn how to communicate and interact with people.”

After successfully completing the program, Buddy was hired as a collections clerk at the Bank of Montreal. For the first time in his life, he had a regular paycheque and, more importantly, a growing belief in himself and the future. And his story was only beginning.

The multiplier effect

Launched on a modest scale, the Bank of Montreal Youth Project proved to be so successful that it was soon producing more qualified people than the bank was able to hire, and the number of prospective candidates continued to grow. To meet this demand, in 1977, with assistance from the federal government, the program expanded to include 11 other major corporate sponsors.

Now known as EPOC – for Education, Placement, Orientation and Communication – the not-for-profit organization eventually grew to include more than 50 member companies, which shared in the operating costs, helped guide the program and provided hands-on workplace training, as well as permanent placements. By 2000, about 85% of EPOC participants – who numbered several hundred per year – either found full-time employment or went on to pursue further education.

Why was the program more successful than other youth employment initiatives? According to Harriet Stairs, one of the original teacher-counsellors – who went on to a senior human resources role with the bank (see sidebar) – what distinguished the Bank of Montreal Youth Project was the amount of individual attention students received and the fact that the emphasis was not just on hard work skills, but on personal development as well: “It was really revolutionary for its time.”

Paying it forward

For Buddy, the program’s blend of academic fundamentals and practical experience provided exactly the springboard he needed. Moving on from the bank to a shipping company, he worked his way up from driving trucks to a manager’s position with responsibility for several provinces. Next he took Outdoor Education at Dawson College. He then ran Breeze Records in Vancouver for seven years before starting...
Harriet Inspired

A young HR staffer asked to select Youth Project candidates, Harriet Stairs went on to become a senior BMO executive and now chairs a not-for-profit focused on addiction.

When program founder Ivan Eaton needed help selecting appropriate candidates for the new Bank of Montreal Youth Project, he turned to Harriet Stairs, a McGill University grad who had recently joined the bank as an employment officer. Harriet interviewed potential participants, assessing both aptitude and attitude, to select those who would benefit most from employment training. And in the process, she became so committed to the program’s goals that she took on a full-time role as a teacher-counsellor for the next four years.

“It was life-changing to work with these students,” Harriet recalls today. “They were young and fun, even though we were doing serious work. I learned so much.” In a long career with the bank that culminated in her role as Executive Vice-President, Human Resources, Harriet constantly sought ways to connect employee initiatives with deeper social values. She played a key role in helping BMO achieve recognition for the advancement of women in management roles, which led to a landmark award from the U.S.-based Catalyst in 1994.

“Education is absolutely the key,” says Harriet, who now chairs the Ontario board of Portage, a not-for-profit that helps people with problems related to substance abuse. “If you can turn smart people on to a better direction, the world opens up for them.”

a portable sawmill company, followed by a waste disposal company in 2001. And finally, in 2003, Buddy was able to make his lifelong concern for the environment the focal point of his entrepreneurial drive – by launching Gibsons Recycling Depot with his partner Barb Hetherington.

Today, Gibsons Recycling is the largest privately owned, non-subsidized waste diversion and resource recovery business in British Columbia, employing a staff of 17 in the small port community of Gibsons (where CBC’s The Beachcombers was filmed) on the province’s Sunshine Coast. Committed to the principles of Zero Waste, Buddy and his team focus on intercepting discarded items before they reach incinerators or landfills. The company developed one of the first non-thermal resource recovery facilities in B.C. and has been an innovative leader in handling hard-to-recycle products, such as child car seats. The depot also has a machine that compresses polystyrene foam into resin that can be used to make other plastic products, such as crown mouldings. And its curbside recycling and organic food scrap collection service was the first in North America to use electric vehicles.

Active in the global Zero Waste International Alliance, Buddy was invited in 2010 to address an international conference in Brazil. He also shares his insights

Gibsons Recycling Depot is committed to the principles of Zero Waste.
and experience closer to home as a consultant and teacher – and as an inspiring mentor to his own employees. “I’ve come full circle, from learning in the Youth Project to being the teacher.”

At 65, Buddy reflects often on the unique program that helped him find his way from the tough streets of Pointe-Saint-Charles: “I’ve done many wonderful things in my life that I could never have done if it weren’t for the Bank of Montreal Youth Project. Those teachers gave – they cared. I learned how to push through challenges and find confidence. And now I find myself in a position, in our small community, to try and pay it forward. I’m fortunate to be working in collaboration with tremendously talented people – from First Nations leaders and businesspeople to environmental groups and community leaders – looking at ways we can solve some of our environmental issues while building better communities.”

Buddy brings the same sense of mission to building his own business: “The program that helped save my life is present today in our operation. We hire a lot of people who’ve fallen through the cracks, and offer them a hand up. We teach them skills and how to communicate, so when they leave here they can go out into the world and do better.”

“Compassion is certainly a factor, but it is only part of the mix. Our motives are firmly rooted in concern for the healthy development of the total society in which we operate and the knowledge that our own long-run corporate interest will be served if we participate fully in the search for solutions to some of the more difficult problems facing society in our time.”


Our Story Continues…

The Bank of Montreal Youth Project, after a remarkable four decades, has now run its course. (Its multi-sponsor version, EPOC, was phased out during the recent global recession.)

But the innovative spirit that made the program a landmark for its time – and the valuable lessons learned by the people who ran it – are reflected today in a wide range of bank initiatives aimed at fostering social and economic well-being. Here are just a few of our recent programs aimed at increasing opportunities for youth:

• BMO is founding funder of The Learning Partnership’s Entrepreneurial Adventure program. The program brings volunteer business mentors together with teachers and students at all grade levels in projects designed to increase young people’s understanding of business and inspire future entrepreneurs. The year-long program culminates in the annual BMO National Student Innovation Awards and Showcase. The businesses run by the students have raised more than $2.9 million for Canadian charities over the past 20 years.

• BMO has developed a number of programs, in partnership with Indspire, in support of Aboriginal youth achievement. The Ron Jamieson Aboriginal Scholarship and Internship Program, named for BMO’s former Head of Aboriginal Banking, provides young people with scholarships and the opportunity to compete for summer internships that can lead to permanent jobs on graduation. The internships combine structured training with on-the-job coaching and mentoring from other BMO employees of indigenous descent.