

Talking Technology

Preparing students for high-tech jobs

By Steve Burns, Capital News contributor

For the past 10 years the Kelowna Chamber of Commerce, in partnership with School District 23, has operated the Transitions Awards Program for graduating secondary school students.

The transition awards are designed to reward students for their strong work ethic in high school and their diligence in preparing for their future.

As Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric once said: "Hard work and excellent preparation are the keys to success in anything."

The program has quite a stellar history.

In 1995 the program won a Conference Board of Canada National award for Excellence for Business Education Partnerships and continues to be a strong community based partnership program.

Over the past few years of my involvement with the Chamber, I have had the privilege of participating in this unique program.

I spend a fair amount of my time recruiting experienced professionals so interviewing students is not only very enjoyable but always eye opening—we all feel that the talent pool that our young people represent is nothing short of amazing.

I have been thoroughly impressed not only with the quality and depth of our young people but with the hard work and dedication of the chamber and the school district in helping students plan their futures.

Led by the Kelowna Chamber of Commerce president Ken Ficocelli, of BDO Dunwoody, and the CEO of the chamber, Bonnie Bates Gibbs, this program is tailor-made for high school students making an important transition to creating their future.

Of the 1,500 students graduating this year in School District 23, only 12 students demonstrated the complete set of skills to qualify for the comprehensive transition awards.



The students needed to prepare a portfolio which included a resume describing their unique personality, what volunteer activities they are involved with, what previous job experience they have had and what their career interests are.

They also had to demonstrate career research in two different career paths and prepare a financial plan outlining how they will manage their limited resources.

Interviews were set up with the 12 students, who were paired up with career experts in their primary area of interest.

The interests of students were very diverse and included a broad range of potential careers such as international lawyer, photo journalist, event planner, holistic veterinarian, neonatal specialist, x-ray technician, architect, Christian musician, youth counsellor, RCMP officer and radiation therapist.

Special thanks to the career experts who volunteered their time to provide a unique perspective to the students.

This includes Joni Metherall of Pushor Mitchell Lawyers; Steve MacNaull from the Kelowna Daily Courier; Wendy Falkowski of Marquee Events Management; Dr. Moira Drosdevich of Pawsitive Vet Care; Zeno Cescon of Interior Health; Clive McKenzie of Huber McKenzie Turik Architects; Dustin Green of the Christian music industry; Wally Lejbak of School District 23; Const. William Lee from the RCMP; and Joyce Pocha of the regional cancer clinic.

All of the participants agreed that all 12 students had done an excellent job of researching their careers and preparing for their futures. In fact, many of us felt that we were not as prepared as these students are at their age.

Each student was provided with an interview with a four-person panel made up of Bonnie, myself, Nikki Csek of Dot Com Media Inc. and the career expert.

Students were asked difficult questions, which not only tested their ability to think quickly but also the extent of their career preparation. From the feedback received from the students, having the career experts present was invaluable as they provided very useful insight and guidance to the students into what it was like to work in the specific career area. The panel had a very difficult decision in choosing the top three students.

First place, a \$1,000 award, was won by Erin Chmiel of Okanagan Secondary School who will be focusing on tourism and event management.

Erin even had a business plan prepared for the business that she wants to launch when she is complete her education.

Second place, a \$500 award, was won by Stephanie Mahannah, of Mount Boucherie Secondary School who will be focusing on becoming a veterinarian with a holistic medicine approach.

Dr. Moira Drosdevich, of Pawsitive Vet Care, was encouraging to Stephanie as she operates a holistic veterinary practice in Kelowna.

Third place, a \$250 award, was won by Heather Gloster of Okanagan Secondary School who will in the Netherlands for a year on a Rotary Exchange Program. Heather wants to teach drama and provide counseling to youth in a school.

The transition program is an example of how a true partnership program should work. From the Chamber to career experts to Marilyn Block and Brenda Graziano and the many teachers and counselors at School District 23, this program could not happen without everyone working together.

The impact of this program is best summed up by a letter that the Chamber received this week from one of the students, Stephanie Mahannah: "Thank you very much for awarding me with the Transitions Award. I am very grateful for the financial assistance and feel honoured that you would chose to invest your money in my education. I appreciate your generosity and value the opportunity to attend university in the fall." Sincerely, Stephanie Mahannah.

WOW – Stephanie's letter really hits home. I am sure that our business community and the volunteers that make this program a success will agree: making a difference in the lives of our students is what this program is all about.

[Short story](#)