

The Conversation Piece Podcast: Samantha Reusch from The Walrus Talks Well Being



Advertisement: I'm Hannah Sung. I'm a journalist, but I'm also just a regular person with feelings. And I sometimes feel overwhelmed with the big topics: climate change, how to raise a family without messing it all up, and, oh yeah, this pandemic. But being overwhelmed is not going to help us, and getting perspective will. Subscribe to my newsletter, "At the End of the Day," for a people-first perspective on the news. Go to endoftheday.ca.

HOST: It's impossible to miss the common thread in the images of protest on all our screens these days. People have reached their limit. They are sad. They are angry. And despite a global pandemic, they are gathering in protest. Criticism will always follow protest, and much of the criticism is aimed at the so-called youth. Every generation seems to take issue with the young, forgetting their own journeys, and more importantly, closing their ears and minds to people who think speak and act differently than us. This is The Conversation Piece. Please listen to the words of Samantha Reusch, from The Walrus Talks Wellbeing.

Samantha Reusch: Hi. Millennials and Gen Z together we're the largest and most diverse generation in Canadian history. If you've read any of the many think pieces written about us, you've probably heard the news, we're ruining everything. Cable television, plastic straws, video stores, and yes, even democracy. Internationally, the prevailing dialogue around democracy seems to be fixated on signals of declining health. Periods that have previously been characterized by an increase in citizen apathy and political cynicism are giving way to trends that some fear are beginning to undermine the system as a whole. Stemming from and encouraged by declining voter turnout and civic engagement. We see these trends reaching a critical level among, and you've probably already guessed, millennials. We're simply opting out. In a system where we are the ones to give our elected representatives, their legitimacy. Imagine what democracy looks like in 10, 20 or 30 years when young people are expected to make up the majority of the voter base and are required to take over as our civic and community leaders.

I'm here, however, to tell you that like most things, the seeds of the solution are contained somewhere in the problem. I'm a millennial. I grew up watching the transition from encyclopedias to Wikipedia, from chain letters to viral memes. I'm old enough to have had my own cable subscription before swapping it out for Netflix, but I'm young enough to have never had to balance my own checkbook. I've been told a lot of stories about myself, but mostly what I've heard and understood is that I don't belong in spaces like this. They're not mine. I'm a guest, the exception, but not the rule. But there are many of us who believe it doesn't have to be that way.

Current research in the field of youth cognitive development at the University of Waterloo reveals the potential for an alternate narrative. Young people between the ages of 15 and 25 are actually hardwired for innovation. They're naturally curious and more inclined to take risks than their older counterparts. Given the right combination of tools, resources, and support young people are not only capable of developing creative solutions to longstanding problems, but are more inclined to act on those ideas, given the opportunity. Believe it or not a certain disregard for the way things have always been done can truly be a catalyst for large scale cultural shifts, propel new ways forward and force ultimately the broad adoption of those principles into new norms, practices, and loss. Narratives and ideas that change forever the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

Canadians, do little to tap into this potential at a decision making level, however, particularly when it comes to democracy. Factors like lack of connections or the required experience, as well as the diverse lived realities of our young people create a variety of barriers to institutional and civic spaces. In our highest ideals the cornerstone of our democracy has to be the sharing and distribution of power.

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Democracy needs to be dynamic, not fixed. As Canadians, we must recognize that our democracy like all Western democracies was founded to deliberately and systematically exclude and erase certain voices. If you ask most of the youth that we talk to, what democracy looks like, there are few of them that would answer that it looks like them. Sadly, you don't have to look very far to understand that that's a feature of the system, not a bug. In fact, ask them directly why they don't participate, the answer is often as simple as the fact that they have never been invited to.

So, what would happen if we did? At Apathy is Boring our mission is to educate and support our peers to be active and contributing citizens. We bring together groups of youth 18 to 30, across the country through our RISE Program and invite them to design solutions, to the problems that they see in their community.

We invite them to share their perspectives, their ideas, their expertise, and ask them to engage their friends and their communities in that process. The result, we're shifting the narrative on what youth engagement can look like for the young people that we work with. And it's contagious, young people engaging each other in the practice of democracy. There are more of us than you think and we're just getting started. Programs like RISE provide an instructional, look at how our public spaces could function. We need to be asking how those with access can create spaces in which they use their power to make room for different voices, different perspectives, and new conversations.

In our work, we often ask ourselves, who's not in the room? The power in continuously asking that question is that we are able to intentionally build better rooms. Rooms that reflect better the society we live in and the multitude of voices within it.

Opportunities like RISE are uncommon and don't reach the vast majority of young people in our country. Particularly those who live in our most remote and marginalized communities. We too rarely make spaces where youth are meaningfully engaged as thought leaders or feel empowered to bring their perspectives and lived experiences to the forefront. Even rarer still are those meaningful experiences in which we can have a real impact on the issues that concern us.

As civic leaders. It's up to you to change this, to recognize and affirm that young people are not simply emerging citizens, but actual citizens who are at a valuable and transitional stage of life where their capacity for innovation can contribute to new previously unimagined to our collective problems. Engaging young people in the process of innovation, especially when supported by those with the experience and power to bring those ideas to life benefits, everyone equally. It safeguards the future of our democracy as well as our industries, our neighborhoods, our institutions, and it makes us all better.

Moving forward, we need to be asking ourselves how can we reimagine democracy together as an open and ongoing dialogue. One that is inclusive and seeks out new voices with diverse lived experiences, innovative ideas and at all stages of life. One that enables young people, not just to see themselves reflected in the process, but meaningfully engaged by it. Our democracy only works if we all work for it. So, I want to ask you today, who's not in the room and what are you going to do about it? Thank you.

HOST: Samantha Reusch is an impact manager at Apathy is Boring, and she's just one of the over 800 fantastic speakers who have walked the stage at The Walrus Talks. Wish you had been there? Wish granted. Our YouTube channel is the place to find of all The Walrus Talks. And we're coming to a city

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