

ON CAMPUS

It's Here and It's Near:

Youth, Students Should Be More Aware of Poverty Issues on PEI: Gallant

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A&E Editor



Student Union President Ryan Gallant says we, as youth and students, should better inform ourselves about poverty issues here on Prince Edward Island. He said while poverty does not occur in the same forms as we witness from the media, it is a problem here — and it may be closer than you realize.

“As youth and as students, I think we should be more aware of the issue of poverty. We often associate poverty with third world and war-torn countries, which is also an incredibly important issue as members of an industrialized nation, but we must not forget that it exists here on P.E.I. as well.”

And it's a reality that some UPEI student may be all-too familiar with, he said.

“I think poverty is something that we don't commonly associate with UPEI or our small island, but it is certainly there. Student poverty does not just mean sitting on the side of the road panhandling, students may have less money for food, or rent, or heat and therefore suffer in a variety of ways.”

Shaun Coady, student union executive vice-president echoed Gallant's comments about student poverty being a big provincial issue, but he said it isn't the easiest topic to address.

“In my opinion, student poverty is a reality for many students here at UPEI. I think it is something that we should all be greatly concerned with, although it is a very difficult issue to address.”

But that's not stopping him from doing it.

Coady and Gallant were both on hand at the Poverty Walking Tour which took place in mid October, addressing the issue of student poverty to participants. During a speech at UPEI, Gallant stated student poverty is part of a “vicious cycle” that it is too easy to become a part of. He explained Tuesday that when young Islanders cannot afford university or college, they stand the chance of bypassing opportunities that could result from post-secondary education.

“Basically what I was getting at in terms of a vicious cycle is that in many cases, a university education opens the door for better jobs, better income, and just a better life in general. Speaking from the vantage point of a child who came from a relatively low-income family, I was saying that too often, people can simply not pay for school, and therefore miss out on that opportunity to improve their economic position, thus continuing that cycle for another generation, many times living just on or below the poverty line.”

However, this doesn't mean students aren't seeing their fair share of destitution, says Gallant. According to a 1995 study, two-thirds of single

Canadians between the ages of 18-24 were living below the poverty line — and that was 10 years ago. Between 1991 and 2001, tuition increased by 126 percent.

“You need only to look at the constant calls for food donations to The Campus Cupboard in the Chaplaincy Centre to be aware of that issue. The other issue is the fact that some students have to drop out of school because of a lack of money — 29 percent (of students) who drop out cite financial reasons — and therefore, coming back to my first point, miss out on that better pay, better job, etc.”

But before they get to the better pay, better job, etc., most students must rack up a huge debt load, added Coady.

“At graduation, the average debt load for all students is over \$22,000. The other reality is that more than half of all graduates are leaving the institution with some form of government-owed debt. These numbers are extremely high, and have doubled since the early 1990's.”

So what's the solution? Gallant points the finger at government to do something about the situation... but

citizens also must play a part in making politicians aware of what is happening in regards to poverty in their communities.

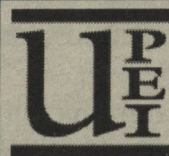
“Without a concerted effort by government, it is going to become increasingly difficult to attain a degree on the post-secondary level, and much of this can be attributed to a lack of governmental funding over the last 10 to 15 years,” he explained.

“As long as government programs are inadequately heeding the needs of the impoverished here in our midst, it should be an issue on the forefront of our minds. There is no reason why poverty cannot be eradicated in the modern world... It just takes a strong voice to make it a political and social issue.”

Coady shares the feeling that the onus is on taxpayers to make politicians more aware of the issue, but he gives more credit to government when it comes to providing funding.

“I think it is, in some cases, our responsibility to continually put pressure on both provincial and federal governments to continue to focus time and money towards reducing debt loads of students. I must commend them on their recent focus on PSE (post-secondary education) at the federal level, but again it is up to the students to help “dictate” where those funds ultimately end up,” he commented.

“I think (poverty) is something that will continue to affect our population, but that, with proper commitment, we can greatly reduce the suffering and provide much needed support.”



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-Program Presentation 6:30-7:00 pm -Displays -Refreshments

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