

VOICES & VIEWS

By empowering teenage girls, Candice Lys and Nancy MacNeill are revolutionizing the way sex ed is taught in the North

The Confidence Builders

BY KATHERINE LAIDLAW
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANGELA GZOWSKI

CANDICE LYS STILL remembers her first sex-ed class—largely due to the screaming woman on-screen. Sitting in a Grade 8 schoolroom in Fort Smith, N.W.T., Lys watched as her middle-aged male teacher put diagrams of genitalia on the overhead projector, then wheeled over a television, popped in a birthing video and left the room, labour shrieks trailing him out the door. The students learned nothing about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or how to engage in healthy relationships. “His lack of training was

straight out of a teen movie,” says Lys. “I felt like we could do better.”

The 32-year-old has been doing a whole lot more than a bit better, travelling across the Northwest Territories to empower girls through an arts-based program called Fostering Open eXpression among Youth, or FOXY. Groundwork for the organization began when Lys was in her mid-20s and completing her master’s degree in health promotion. During that time, Lys became friends with Yellowknife-based Nancy MacNeill, now 31, who had been volunteering in crisis ➤➤

When FOXY was in its early days, founders Nancy MacNeill (left) and Candice Lys (right) joked about winning \$1 million to support the organization. Last December, that dream came true.



intervention and would become her partner in FOXY.


In the Northwest Territories, rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections far surpass those in the rest of the country. For girls 15 to 19 years old, according to a 2012 study, the territory reported 103.7 pregnancies per 1,000 females. The national average was 38.2. And other studies indicated that some STI rates were seven times higher than those in the rest of Canada. "The system needed a dose of reality," MacNeill says. Others agreed: last December, FOXY was awarded the \$1-million Arctic Inspiration Prize, a privately funded grant that's been dubbed the "Nobel of the North."

The first official FOXY workshop took place in March 2012 in Hay River. Three years in, the group runs one or two nine-day peer-leader retreats annually, where 25 teens and 10 adult facilitators sequester themselves in a lodge to write songs, shoot videos and do traditional beadwork. Throughout, they discuss love, relationships, sexuality, health, violence and everything in between (and the students earn course credits).

During the school year, the FOXY team visits classrooms to run workshops, which include role-playing scenarios co-written by the group's network of trained peer leaders—girls aged 13 to 19—based on their experiences. One example: a 15-year-

old receives a Facebook message from a guy in his early 20s inviting her to hang out. She arrives and he's drunk. What next? "The girls usually decide the best thing for her would be to call up her friends and invite them over. It's a safety net, and it's realistic," Lys says.

Jessie Shaw, a gangly, pink-haired 19-year-old, says FOXY became a lifeline when she first got involved three years ago. She broke up with her much older boyfriend and began to regain the confidence she'd lost during that relationship. "FOXY changed me as a person," she says. Now she's a peer leader and has witnessed similar transformations in other girls. One, a tough 15-year-old from Inuvik, was bullying classmates for what she deemed promiscuous behaviour. When she attended FOXY's retreat, Shaw says, something clicked. "By the end of it, she was calling people out for slut shaming."

Since FOXY's inception, Lys and MacNeill have reached more than 500 young women from 25 of the territory's 33 communities. With the organization's bank account now \$1 million flusher, the pair intends to further research the long-term effects FOXY has on its participants, bring the workshops to Nunavut and the Yukon, and start a parallel program for boys—providing all teens across the North with the tools to make empowering choices. 

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