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New police interpretive centre aimed at youth crime prevention opens

Gavin Young / Calgary Herald

Julie Webster's eyes widened with delightful surprise as she stepped into the forensics centre, her T-shirt turning a neon pink hue as it glowed in the darkened room under a black light.

But there was no time to waste. The almost 12-year-old had a crime to solve: who robbed the Happy Mart convenience store?

"It's kind of tricky, I've learned," she said. "There are eight suspects and you have to try and figure out the one. So far, they all have similar fingerprints and footprints."

Webster was among a group of Grade 6 students from Falconridge School touring the new YouthLink Calgary Police Interpretive Centre on Thursday, tasked with sifting through photos of fingerprints, shoe impressions and bullet casings in search of a robbery suspect. Standing not far away were interpretive workers and police officers to lend a helping hand.



Grade 6 students try solving a crime in the forensics section of the newly opened YouthLink Calgary Police Interpretive Centre in northeast Calgary on Thursday September 24, 2015.

The centre, housed at the Calgary Police Service's Westwinds headquarters, officially opens to the public on Oct. 2. However, school groups are already visiting. Students get an opportunity to learn about police programs, investigative work and issues that many kids face today, such as bullying, drugs and online safety.

Offering kids a behind-the-scenes look at police work hopefully gives them tools to help them stay away from crime, said Tara Robinson, executive director of the YouthLink Calgary Police Interpretive Centre.

“We want to give them information to make those decisions that will keep them on the right path throughout life in some of the pressing issues they might have as they grow older and go through teen years,” Robinson said Thursday during a sneak-peek of the centre, as builders worked on finishing touches in the lobby.

“The other part is lifting the veil on the Calgary Police Service ... It’s really important for us to show that police officers are here to help, they’re not to be feared, and it doesn’t matter what situation kids are in.”



Grade 6 students tour the newly-opened YouthLink Calgary Police Interpretive Centre in northeast Calgary on Thursday, September 24, 2015. Gavin Young / Calgary Herald

YouthLink has been operating in the city for 20 years, but several years ago made plans to move from its downtown facility to a bigger building in hopes of expanding its reach from 10,000 kids per year to more than 25,000 kids per year.

The \$8-million, 26,000 square-foot facility boasts 55 interactive stations including wall-to-wall media screens, audio players, a multi-touch media wall and tablets. A photo booth shows visitors what their face would look like if they were hooked on meth.

There are three crime labs, six education areas, as well as displays featuring police vehicles, historic police tools, and old newspaper clippings about major crimes in the city. A life-size model of a HAWCS helicopter hangs overhead.

Visitors learn about patrol officers, as well as specialized sections within the service, including the public safety unit, HAWC helicopter operators, tactical teams and undercover officers. But arguably, the star of the show is the canine unit, Robinson said.

And classmates Hira Nadeem, 11, and Marrium Butt, 10, agreed.

“We’re learning about Baro,” said Hira as she jotted down notes about the German Shepherd, whose specialty is sniffing out drugs.

“We’re finding more information (about him),” said Marrium, although she admitted her favourite part of the facility was “the

helicopter centre.”



Grade 6 students try out the HAWCS simulator at the Calgary Police Interpretive Centre in northeast Calgary on Thursday September 24, 2015. Gavin Young / Calgary Herald

Shan Darwesh, 11, said he was most excited about a scavenger hunt that took him through all the exhibits, although he was also happy to learn about how police officers make arrests, the weapons used by tactical officers, and when canine units and HAWC helicopters are deployed.

“There are so many digital things,” he added.

The goal is to get as many Grade 6 classes into the centre as possible, said Robinson, adding it's an age when students are still listening and absorbing information but starting to face some pressures and challenges that intensify in their teen years.

The centre touches on some pretty serious issues during these school visits, including gangs, and an entire area is dedicated to shining a spotlight on the dangers of the gang life. There is a wall of photos of gang members who have been jailed or killed, and kids can watch a video interview with Michael Roberto, once a prominent member of the FOB gang, who is now behind bars.

An ongoing war between the FOB gang and its rivals, the FK (FOB Killers), is responsible for at least 25 homicides in the Calgary area between 2002 and 2009.





The newly-opened YouthLink Calgary Police Interpretive Centre in northeast Calgary on Thursday, September 24, 2015. Gavin Young / Calgary Herald

“Kids are exposed to a lot of different stuff today. We can’t sugar-coat things. We need to be able to inform these kids of what’s out there, the most pressing issues of their time, and teach what they’re going to be faced with and how to deal with them,” Robinson said.

The centre will be open to school groups Monday to Thursday, and open to the public on Friday and Saturday. The school visits are already booked solid and there’s a growing waiting list.

“We can’t find any other centre in Canada or in North America where school kids arrive on buses at police headquarters to learn about how to stay away from crime and how to be safe. There are some things parents and teachers are scared to talk about,” Robinson said.

“We know there’s a need there. We know the kids have a thirst to learn, and the teachers, too.”

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Tara Robinson, Executive Director of YouthLink Calgary Police Interpretive Centre, stands in the newly opened YouthLink Calgary Police Interpretive Centre in northeast Calgary on Thursday September 24, 2015. Gavin Young / Calgary Herald



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