

# Airglow: Young People and Wellbeing

Jessica Ruglis and Karl-André St-Victor

## Abstract

In this dialogue, Karl-André St-Victor and Dr. Jessica Ruglis discuss the concepts of wellbeing for youth and supporting young people in being well. Karl is the Executive Director of Chalet Kent, while Jessica is an Associate Professor of Human Development at McGill University and a Board Member at Chalet Kent. They have collaborated for the past eight years, and in this commentary, they discuss supporting the wellbeing of young people through two recent community projects: *Que du Love* (Only Love), a multimedia project; and the newly founded Uptown Institute, which aims to support young adults into flourishing lives. The dialogue is facilitated by Dr. Bronwen Low, Associate Professor of Education at McGill University and a long-standing partner and former Board President of Chalet Kent. The conversation touches on aspects of education, relationship building, trust, power, change, art, home, and the future.

*Welcome to Chalet Kent ([www.chaletkent.ca](http://www.chaletkent.ca)), a youth center located in Parc Martin-Luther-King in the vibrant Côte-des-Neiges neighborhood of Montreal. Five days a week, you will find young people between the ages of 11 and 18 playing pool or ping-pong, sitting together around the TV or video gaming station as part of the e-sports team and gaming club, drawing in a manga workshop, making a video for school using the audio-visual equipment and green screen, or creating small toys or keychains in the maker space. If you descend a set of stairs, you will find the martial arts and dance room: join a capoeira class or challenge yourself to “Philo Boxe.” You might also hear light beats and vocals from next door. These are the sounds of NBS studio, a free recording studio where young people come for community “musicking,” including writing, practicing, and recording music, as well as filming videos, or just hanging out, mentored by top music producers and artists in the city.*

**Bronwen Low:** Thank you for being here today. Let’s begin with each of your definitions of wellbeing.

**Jessica Ruglis:** Wellbeing is being able to live in one’s body in a way that feels best and right and just to that person. Being able to live within your freedoms and choices and desires and commitments. Being able to live with safety and security, with connection and care, with access to housing, food, and nature. I think wellbeing is the ability to grow and change and have access to the things that you need to be well—to *feel* well—physically, emotionally, socially, mentally, spiritually, economically, occupationally, structurally, for each new iteration of the self one becomes. I think wellbeing requires also time and space, and rest. I think wellbeing is something that approaches how it is that we live to our fullest and most flourishing, and what this takes is different for everyone. There isn’t a healing *from*. There isn’t a recovered. There isn’t a healed. There is a living *with*. There is a growing with. There is a healing with. There is a making space for. Making new spaces for. And I think wellbeing is bolstered by harm reduction

and collective, community-based care. And it often requires acceptance and permission to change, in ways that reflect what one needs to be well. And so maybe wellbeing at times requires bravery, and boundaries. And great mentors along the way.

**BL:** So, Karl, is it the same thing for you?

**Karl-André St-Victor:** Yes. Basically I think it's the same. But I think also there's sometimes a difference between being a young person and how young people feel about wellbeing, and adults' perceptions of young peoples' wellbeing. I think sometimes young people may not have the vocabulary to express what they want or to talk about feelings the way that they want, or even talk about their feelings. So maybe we need to do a better job of teaching people about their feelings and how to express their needs. So yes, I think it's the same definition of wellbeing. We all want to grow, we all want freedom. We want to be safe. We want to understand what happiness means to us, as an individual. We want to contribute to our community and society. I think there are different levels, but I feel that we all want the same. I think that even when I see people whose path seems very different, at this moment in time they have to make decisions or they have to choose a path that makes sense for their immediate means. Sometimes, there is just survival. Sometimes survival is the wellbeing. But once you pass survival, I think all young people want the same wellbeing, want to flourish, but sometimes they need to first find the tools to survive. If you want to survive, you may have to take risks that from the outside you say, "Okay, it's not worth the risk," but we don't know their circumstances, we don't understand their lives, we don't walk in their shoes, we don't. So it saddens me when I see that, but I understand that it's not the same reality. We can talk about this now, but if your stomach is empty or you have different kinds of stress, you're going to talk about wellbeing differently. You just want to make it to the next state. But once you've made it to the next state, then I think we all want the same. And because we all want the same, I find that what works for us at Chalet Kent is that we don't see youth as "we want to help them," we see youth as equals. And I've always seen them as equal. And I think that's why the impact here is so great. We don't even use a lot of the words that people use in the grant-writing because I think it's wrong. I see all youth as equals every day. I do every single day. There's no difference. What I want for myself is what I want for them, what I want for them is what I want for my kids. This is zero difference. And I think that's really key. And I think everyone in the staff as a team has learned to interact in this way.

And I think when this happened, we built a different type of trust with youth and because they have that trust, it's easier now for us to be able to be there for them in ways that are more demanding, but which reflect real trust and relationship building. They can say exactly what's going on and what they mean. They build that trust and it's difficult in the outside world to create that. Sometimes, as an example, when you grow up as a Black person, you learn to live your life with a shield. So no matter where you go, you can never be yourself. Sometimes it becomes heavy to know that you always have to have a shield, techniques for survival. I see when the youth are together and they're having fun and they don't have that shield among themselves in this space, but when they step out of that circle, they have to have it.

I think that wellbeing is also not having to have an issue every single day of your life because you will be attacked by or discriminated against or judged by the school, by society, by whatever. And it's

unfortunate, but I think that wellbeing is having a space like a shield. Maybe the safety is to know that you don't have to be protect yourself all the time.

**JR:** And so how do you work with young people with that complexity of structural dispossession and racism, and its embodied costs? How does the work of the organization, in service of flourishing and wellbeing, hold that real form of surviving racism, and the emotional sadness, along with underneath that one needs to also carry a complex life full of joy and beauty and possibility? How does the organization tend to the reality that some people's lives are structurally more difficult than others, yet young people are all striving for the same direction of flourishing and wellbeing? If we hold also that power is a distinction between young people's and adults' definitions of wellbeing, where for example a young person may want to choose a college major, or use a different gender pronoun, but lives and/or attends school or community where they cannot. And that's not to say that that power doesn't enforce asymmetries in adult health just the same, but that idea of how do you deal with that sort of nested and situated responsibility of allowing young people to claim their power and the full complexities of life, while also realizing that there are forces of power structuring the lives of some young people differently than others. And it is these forces that are instrumental to their wellbeing.

**KSV:** We've learned to be vulnerable with young people with time, and I think it's difficult often in society for people to be vulnerable. As you said, it's maybe that power is important and maybe you seem less powerful if you're vulnerable. I think the youth realize in our vulnerability that we're also just human, and we have our weaknesses and our fears and our insecurities, and if we show them the human aspect of who we are, I think maybe what you're describing as the gap won't be as big because we're closer to them than they think that we are. And I think it's just accepting that we grow with the aspect of being vulnerable in a space with them because we all go through our moments in life the same way that they do, and maybe we have a little bit more wisdom, and we share it, but that's it. I think from the time that we as a staff made a conscious decision to be more present, it made us a stronger organization by far. And also once that happened, I think we have more honesty and more vulnerability and openness from the youth.

**BL:** What does making that decision collectively to be more vulnerable, to be more open, with the youth look like? How could someone put that into practice in another space?

**KSV:** Well, sometimes we play a game, for example, and we ask questions in the game. And then everyone in the team, and you, answers the same question; and they begin to see different aspects of the same question. We would ask them, for example, what moments are the proudest in your life? And then we all talk about it. Or, what makes you sad? If we answer the question and they answer the question, then it's a dialogue around the same question. And I think it's really important as well. Just a few days ago, we were asking, "If you were to relive a moment in your life, what would it be?" And then it was interesting because you go back into a happy place, and then you relive it, and then you explain it and why you would relive it. But because we also answer the same questions, I think it allows them to know us better and to see that our lives sometimes are very different but very similar at the same time. So I think it's just being able to have a conversation and then answer the questions as honestly as we can. And sometimes we have questions too. And then real change is possible, in this space of honest and trusting and safe dialogue.

**JR:** You mentioned earlier that a lot of working with youth is really helping them to understand their emotions and their feelings. And I'm wondering, when you think about emotions that are really guiding young people's visions of their lives, what they're grappling to try to claim as their own emotional realities, is there a word or two or three that really come into your mind for the emotions that they're really working on trying to lead with, to heal their hearts with, to make sense of, to guide their own sense of a life ahead?

**KSV:** It's been emotional. I think purpose is important. We work a lot on the sense of purpose and what it means as a group. Also as, and for, individuals. Sometimes people talk about wanting to make money. But that's not a purpose. I think, just what kind of purpose? I think it's key, and it takes time to understand the purpose, and that finding this is at the heart of what one wants to do, the life that will sustain one's soul beyond the money one desires. This is wellbeing: being able to know one's purpose, to explore it, to find and figure it out.

I also think your purpose will change with time. When you're 17, it'll be different. The years and wisdom of your life will be different than when you're 25, 40. It's going to change, but you will know how to think about defining the purpose, and how to go about planning for and achieving it. And I think that's something that we spend a lot of time on, really, is the purpose. Because with the purpose, it's really the discussion around who do you want to be versus what you want to do. I found that when we ask youth, "What you want to do?" sometimes they don't know what you want to do. But if you know who you want to be, I think it's the first step for us. I find, definitely one of the first steps we do with young people is to help them figure out, *Who do you want to be?*

And it's in line with the purpose; but going back to your question, the words, I think it's not a feeling or emotion, but I find that [young people] are generous with who they are. They give a lot of themselves with the goal of trying to go further. I think it's difficult to open yourself up because it's not that obvious [either to do so or how to do so] and it's not really a feeling. But I think generosity is really important. I think generosity describes the vision of their futures.

I think with that comes a lot of insecurity, and it's just making sure that it's normal to have those insecurities. And I think in the system sometimes if a young person talks with a school counsellor, they need to have an answer. But sometimes we don't have an answer. So to give young people the space to think about the answer they want to give. But it's really difficult to find the words or the feelings because I think it could be very broad, depending on what they're going through at that time. But I would say for sure *generosity*.

**JR:** When I hear generosity, so much of what I think of is that the ability to become and be infinitely generous requires a steady sense of love underneath that. Love in all forms; and where, as ever, love requires dignity and justice. To me, generosity that fractals requires some supreme guiding sense of unconditional love and empathy. Like the ability to sustain generosity with yourself and others requires some guidance by a love ethic teaching us to stay open to possibility—in ourselves and in everyone everywhere—always. Thank you for that.

I think something else that is also a gift that Chalet Kent does, and that also is in chemistry with my teachings and work in youth development and wellbeing, is you really front and center an idea that resists what can be really oppressive for young people at this point in their life, which is the idea that *becoming* is a constantly changing thing. In your lifetime, you will be many yous. And instead of a sole weighted impetus on the logic that this choice needs to be the best or most perfect or what will lead to forever, the mindset is instead on the idea that this is the choice for now, with the fullest sense of where and who we are at this time. College is not now or never. It may be never, but it could equally be later. Another time, another place, another part of what might be required to achieve a new purpose. But we're always changing and becoming different things. We're always multiple selves at once. That idea that a life is going to be many lives is really a sage sense of wisdom. And the other thing I think the organization does is really interrupt in this idea that feels tight to young people at this time, and I suppose in an era of supercapitalism and climate disaster, but this idea that time *can be* slowed. The temporal reality is that it may be fast but does not have to be; it is not now or never. That the only way to go through life is in some sort of non-linear sense of time. We want to accumulate growth and transformation and wellbeing as we continually heal from life's horrors and the illnesses and injuries that befall us all, so we are always moving to a new space of flourishing. But within this, there are some days and years that are shit, where our best might be awful; and we must live through these too. These are not lost or unproductive years. They are the years required for joy. I think what the organization really holds about being well is that there's a now, and then there's the next now, and then there's the next now.

This is what we hope for Uptown Institute [[www.uptowninstitute.ca](http://www.uptowninstitute.ca)]: a community home that people will return to find and be themselves over and over again. And this leads me back to trust. How do you build trust? How do we know when trust is breached? What does it take to trust somebody, knowing that trust and perfection are not equivalent, what does it mean to be trusting and to develop trust in a real way?

**KSV:** I think we trust them from the beginning. I think that they're going to come here, they're going to enter the space because we offer something that they appreciate and the trust is there. I think it's more for them to trust us and that's when it's a matter of "it takes time." We just have to be present as much as we can and be willing to interact and to see. We need to see them as individuals, and I think it's really for us to do the work, to be trusted more than for us to trust them. For sure.

At some point things might happen and the trust might be breached, but we give them chances. We have guidelines and we have procedures and training, but when it happens, it's key to give them many chances. We all have chances. That's why we are here, it's because we have chances, obviously, and I think it should be the same for everyone. So, we try to build the trust with that. And also to give them a space to express themselves. Self-expression, I think, is important. And we create ways that young people can express themselves when and where they feel comfortable. Sometimes it happens after hours by text message. So, we definitely work a lot with them to be able to be present in time and spaces that work for their convenience. And also, when this happens, we have to know when to separate ourselves from the situations because otherwise it becomes overwhelming. So we have to know, "Okay, we can do that," but we can't do it all the time. Because it's too much. But we explain to them that there's a boundary

with what we do in our private life. I believe they respect it and us. But really the trust for us is, really, I find that it's really for young people to trust adults and we have to do the work to be trusted.

**JR:** So do you think the relational practice of trust building requires some ability to cultivate a consciousness towards self-reflection and accountability, to be able to hear feedback, and a responsibility to try to engage with it?

**KSV:** Do we self-reflect for ourself? Or do we self-reflect to serve them better? I'm not really sure. Every child is going to be different. And it's just the way that you decide what you're willing to do. And not just hear but really listen fully and act on what you say you're going to do. And it's important, too. And I think for the trust to go ahead, we keep our promises, and that's really important to keep. We keep our promises and that's where we can be different from their experiences in society or school. So we definitely try our best to keep our promises, and that's something that when I think about what we're building, what we're going to give to this generation, I think it's a sense of keeping the promise and having a word. There can be feelings of emptiness in society with social media. But I think that if you're more grounded, it can take you far. We really focus on: if you keep your word the way that we're trying to keep our words, that's a part of trust and purpose.

**BL:** What is your vision for the Uptown Institute? Could you try to encapsulate it for a new audience.

**JR:** I think the vision is a space that young people find as a home that supports them to get where they want to go in a holistic sense of what that means for their mind, knowledge, skills, and for their heart and body, their sense of self and community, and their purpose. So that it's a space that doesn't pretend to front-load what a life is, what success is, but rather it helps meet people where they're at. I also have a separate goal of trying to think about creating a comprehensive community-based mental health clinic. I think what I would just add to that is, I'm also imagining a space where dreaming is multifaceted for all the parts of a person; for the larger parts of a pathway.

**KSV:** I mean, I think all of it was said. I would only add that it's important to have a space for people where they can dream, and to have the tools to be able to dream and the network to support future dreams. I think my privilege in life is really to be able to have the chance to dream. So I'd like to pass that on, though maybe sometimes it's not realistic, but it's just nice to be able to dream. Dreaming is a part of wellbeing. And it's rare for young people I find to have the capacity to dream because sometimes they're just too pragmatic. And I respect that too. I know that youth need to get a job, need to work. But hopefully we can create that environment for youth to be able to have this space to be able to reflect, and dream, and that these capacities will not only help with the parts of life that have to do with work, but with life on the weekend and life skills for the future.

**BL:** Karl, could you describe what Que du Love [[www.instagram.com/quedulovemtl](http://www.instagram.com/quedulovemtl)] was for you and staff and youth?

**KSV:** Well, I don't know what it was for everyone. I can tell you about the project. We were approached by a public health funding agency to create a project to talk about how to prevent violence that's committed by young people. And I wasn't very comfortable to talk about the violence because I thought

that if we talk about violence, it becomes a trigger itself. Just the work can be a symbol of untruth, of misrepresentation, of false stories that are the violence themselves. And also, violence is a language. It's a language and an answer to something. It's more complex than that. And I thought that if we changed that to something different, if we talked about what love means to young people and all their experiences there and all they would like to experience with love. I think it's very different because I think we show a different facet of who young people are. Except instead of talking about violence we talk about love.

And also, I find that it was like that verb that nobody knew how to conjugate. And I think that if we take this time to listen to youth and to their stories—and we couldn't share most of the stories that we heard because it was too deep and it was a lot of them—that can change things. For many of the youth in Que du Love, this was the first time they could talk about their lives. And I think that it's really, really deep, and what it means for me, I think it was important for me to be able to change the perception of young people. Obviously, [the funding agency] came to me with violence because perhaps they think everyone is violent. There's a problem with violence, yet I don't think youth are the cause of it. But for me it was important to see the young people in a different light, to hear them, to feature them in such beautiful light. They were so proud of the process and had such a sense of pride. It's rare to see that as well. To see their photographs in such big format, with so many people who attended the exhibition, and their families who came to see them, their sense of pride was key.

**BL:** Do you want to say something about the basketball and sneaker exhibition, Airglow, that accompanied Que du Love?

**KSV:** We were lucky enough to have two floors at the Maison de la Culture de Côte-des-Neiges for the exhibitions (May 6–June 4, 2023). It was important to do something that was very different on the two floors, and sneaker and basketball culture is big in today's generation. Airglow was just a way to showcase youth culture differently, and try to create a beautiful exhibit around what it was as a way to bring the joy of youth, too. And I think it's something that just brought joy to the community, and that was important to just bring joy with an exhibit. And they were honest, and they brought joy, and we were happy, and the team was very... I think the commitment was different because we know we're doing something for the right reason. It wasn't just about the grind. It was, "We're doing something." It featured a number of artists and artwork from the personal collections of the community; including my son, Tristan St-Victor, who made a series of short films for the exhibition.

**JR:** It was something very, very special. It was sublime.

**KSV:** And I think that made a difference for us as well. It's good to have the means to do it, but we knew we're doing something that was very different than just a project. And I don't know how many hours of archives that we have; but it's really, really, really a touching project, [with some] unbelievable stories because we would never think of those stories. Even if we've seen movies on something, we never think it happens or it's happening every day. And also to be able to hear what youth want out of life. Nobody asks them what they want out of life. It's good. It's good to be able to have those conversations. Hopefully we can have, I think there's enough material to do many more exhibits. I think we could have one exhibition just about what youth want out of life. We talked about this. I think it's important. And we have a lot of

beautiful poetry, a lot of valuable material. But I think that the most touching part of the exhibition is this: there was a box of messages that we put at the exhibit and we received, I don't know, hundreds of messages that people wrote and they were all very, very touching. So that was nice. Only love.

**JR:** And what are the things young people want for their lives?

**KSV:** I think uniqueness. They want to live a life. They don't want to be pressured into a model. I think they really want to be able to embrace their individuality and uniqueness, and I think that's important. They want to be seen for who they are, think they are, and they want to understand what happiness means to them. They want freedom, freedom of expression, and happiness.

**JR:** In my own teaching, I always remind students that to know something doesn't tell us anything about its inverse. So is there anything young people do not want for their lives?

**KSV:** They don't want confrontation. They don't want violence. They see stupid stuff happening all around the world and very incompetent people. So they don't want that for sure. They don't want to see their parents struggle. They want equanimity.

**BL:** We'll end this discussion with words Jessica wrote for the Airglow exhibition (2023), and which reflect the ways in which these two collaborate best. This piece is based upon the work and vision of the youth, artists, staff, curator, and communities collaborating on Que du Love and Airglow.

## Airglow

Airglow is a measure of the Earth's luminosity: The brightness of the sky.  
With airglow, the night sky is never fully dark. There is always luminescence.  
Airglow is caused by the emission of light from different processes in the planetary atmosphere, and appears everywhere surrounding Earth.  
Though its view is brightest when one looks just above the horizon.  
Airglow commonly appears as blue, but can also be seen as a spectrum.

Young people in Côte-des-Neiges are a measure of our communities' luminosity:  
We are the brightness of life.  
Youth are always glowing, vibrating: And all people are made of stardust.  
The possibilities for connection, transformation and flourishing are caused by different processes, relations and commitments in neighborhoods and cities.  
Youth fashion and basketball and sneakers are our airglow.  
Contemporary urban culture shows up everywhere all the time, surrounding everything.  
Youth culture is brightest just above the horizon.  
Like airglow, youth culture is both universally inclusive and infinitely diverse.  
We vibrate blue, but are a spectrum too.

Welcome to AIRGLOW.

We invite you to live luminously: With your light forever visible.

(Jessica Ruglis, 2023)





Photo and artwork: DRJR/Jessica Ruglis (2023)

**Karl-André St-Victor**'s journey to becoming a civic innovator embodies a life driven by purpose and a commitment to social change. Motivated by a deep passion for social justice, he champions the voices of marginalized communities and advocates for societal advancement. Through dedicated mentorship and educational initiatives, Karl-André empowers youth, nurturing in them resilience and leadership skills. Known for empathy and unwavering dedication, he inspires positive action and promotes inclusivity. Karl-André's path reflects a belief in individual empowerment, seeing people for who they are, and a mission to cultivate a more equitable world, driven by compassion and impactful contributions to society. For Karl-André, the act of sharing a meal accompanied by good music is the best way to create profound connections with others.

