

Solve accessibility concerns in Newfoundland and Labrador, conference told

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The #RisingYouthpreneurNL conference, connecting youth with disabilities to entrepreneurship experts, was established and organized by Mandy Penney. - Juanita Mercer

#RisingYouthpreneurNL connects youth with disabilities to entrepreneurial experts

Mandy Penney is small in stature and speaks softly, but don't be fooled — she's commanding.

During a coffee break at the #RisingYouthpreneurNL conference connecting youth with disabilities to entrepreneurial experts — an event created and organized by Penney — she discussed passionately how she hopes to make businesses more accessible.

As a training support facilitator with InclusionNL, Penney helps business owners become more inclusive and accessible to patrons.

"...if you have a disability, you're often seen as being incapable, depending on systems and supports, and not being able to do certain work, given the stigma about people with disabilities. So, if you create that job and create that environment, you're taking away a lot of dependency and creating control in your own life." — Mandy Penney

Now, she's thought of another way to ensure businesses are accessible — by encouraging more people with disabilities to start their own enterprises.

"Instead of training them on how to be accessible, they'd already be half disability-conscious because they have disabilities themselves," she said.

Penney applied for and received a #RisingYouth community service grant to make her conference idea a reality.

Over the past few months, she's become a familiar face around Memorial University's Centre for Entrepreneurship, where the weekend conference was held.

That's because she has a few of her own business ideas brewing, and has been meeting with people at the Centre who help budding entrepreneurs get started.

"One of the reasons I'm interested in business is because if you have a disability, you're often seen as being incapable, depending on systems and supports, and not being able to do certain work, given the stigma about people with disabilities. So, if you create that job and create that environment, you're taking away a lot of dependency and creating control in your own life."

Penney designed the two-day conference for young people between 15 and 35 who have disabilities. Participants learned about funding and mentorship opportunities, and the skills needed to start a business.

There were a wide range of presenters, including the Genesis Centre, Futurpreneur, Paul Power of Power Productions, Newfoundland and Labrador Organization of Women Entrepreneurs, and the Community Business Development Corporation, among others.

Participant Ryan Cooper is a student at College of the North Atlantic. He said he planned to do some networking at the conference, and see what opportunities were available to him for a business idea he's been working on for a couple of years.

Stephanie Evans was another participant. She said she's applying to study social work at Memorial University and aspires to start a related business.

"I think this is going to help me out," she said.



St. John's resident Stephanie Evans plans to pursue a social work degree and start a related business. "I think this (conference) is going to help me out," she said.

While the main goal of the conference was to connect young aspiring entrepreneurs with disabilities to experts in the field, Penney said there's another reason why it was important for her:

"It gets people thinking about the disability community, and the capacity of them in business."

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