



## **A sense of belonging, an essential element for communities living in harmony**

*"Peace is more than just the absence of violence and conflict. Peace is the presence of conditions such as fairness, inclusion, empathy, security, and respect for diversity. Peace is also the ongoing work of building and rebuilding these conditions."*

Official Peace Declaration, World Alliance of YMCAs, 1981

Within the context of the celebration of the International Day of Peace on September 21<sup>st</sup>, we cannot ignore the fact that social isolation and loneliness are becoming increasing concerns for our society. Several recent studies underline this fact. The lack of meaningful relationships with others and the absence of a genuine sense of belonging are detrimental to the health and wellbeing of individuals. Did you know that the British government has created a Ministry of Loneliness to tackle the problem?

Experiencing a sense of belonging means being part of a community composed of people of all ages, who have lived a wide variety of experiences. It means feeling appreciated for who we are, participating in common activities, it means becoming stronger and more confident and contributing to a healthier community, now and for the future. It's about finding a place where everyone feels safe, welcomed and accepted, where the meaning of family goes far beyond the immediate walls of the home.

We are all social beings; we all need strong, solid bonds. Feeling that you belong to something larger than yourself has an extremely positive effect upon your outlook. When communities are made up of those who feel included and who trust each other, everyone benefits. Neighbourhoods are safer. People invest more time and money into their community. Social inclusion improves. Each person becomes more resilient and capable of dealing with emergencies within the community. Strong social bonds are also essential to the wellbeing of young people. Establishing meaningful relationships, within this critical period of their development is fundamental as they transition to adulthood.

The YMCA is exactly the kind of place where these bonds can be forged. I hear again and again how this place has become a second home for so many. It is true for thousands of young people, adults and families who come to the YMCA every day. We are focused upon bringing people together. I think it's important to provide each member of our community with the space and time they need to connect with each other, to be themselves, to integrate and to extend a helping hand in turn.

For 30 years, the YMCA Peace Medals have promoted community spirit and peace-making. Since 1987, more than 125 people and groups from across Quebec have received a medal. These peacemakers are helping to build a strong and healthy community by fostering a sense of belonging, promoting empathy and embracing pluralism. Once again, on October 10, citizens who contribute to building more harmonious communities will be honoured at the annual Peace Medals Gala Dinner.



As a society, we need to celebrate this sense of belonging. We must appreciate the richness of diversity and promote the importance of engaging with a wide array of people. More than anything, at the YMCA, we believe in creating communities where everyone has a place. We invite you to join us in creating communities where each person is free to be themselves and reach their full potential in order that Quebec can remain a safe and welcoming home for generations to come.

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