



## Building a virtual bridge with a camera

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Of all the problems faced by urban Canada, none is more painful than that of its kids.

Their failures are our failures, and today it seems there are more of those than ever. Evidence is everywhere around us. Just take a look at the recently released Falconer report, which documents the ongoing decline of the Toronto school board.

Of course, every generation looks at its children and wonders where it went wrong. As the late Paul Lynde asked in the *Bye Bye Birdie* song, "*Kids*," "Why can't they be like we were, perfect in every way?"

Indeed. Not that our parents would have agreed, or their parents before them. But so it goes.

As Corrado Paina, executive director of the Italian Chamber of Commerce in Toronto, points out, the issue is universal.

"All cities have young people who are marginalized," he argues. "They feel they are allowed the crumbs of the rich, but not invited to sit at the table."

Though Paina would be first to admit there's no easy answer to the question, he has organized a program he hopes will be a small step in the right direction.

Starting with the fact that Toronto and Milan are twin cities, Paina has put together something he calls, *The Mobile City*. The idea is to engage youth at risk in both cities through the power of image-making and the media.

"Cellphones with camera are everywhere," Paina says. "They allow more and more people – especially youth – to share experiences. ... Through the use of digital photography and other digital technology, the project will act as a bridge between the two cities, the two nations and the two different cultures."

Kids are asked to submit between three and five images, with text, which will later be judged by an international jury. Winning pictures will be included in an exhibition and published in a book. Winning photographers will visit the other city for a week and receive equipment from sponsors.

The photographs are up to the individual, but Paina suggests that one way or another the subject will be the city. That can mean many different things, which is exactly what he's looking for.

"The intention is to create self-confidence and reconciliation with the environment," Paina explains. "We want these kids to challenge themselves. We are all aware that this is a tiny step, but it's a way to reach out to these kids and make them reach out."

The contest is open to people aged 16 to 22. Ten winners from each city will be chosen, and Paina expects that the interaction between them will itself be a big part of the experience.

"During this exchange," he says, "winners from Milan and Toronto will be able to get together not just virtually but physically. They will also be able to work with tutors who will help improve and expand their photographic skills."

If Paina is right, the exercise will serve a number of purposes. In addition to empowering young people, he insists, it will offer a glimpse into how they view the city. And by city, he doesn't mean just the downtown core, but the whole city. As poverty gets pushed out of the inner city, this is important to keep in mind. In fact, the marginalized neighbourhoods where participants live tend more and more to be suburban.

Work can be submitted until April or May when the juries will convene. An exhibition and book should appear towards the end of the year.

For information, call the Italian Chamber of Commerce of Toronto at 416-789-7169.

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