

~ A True Keener ~

A First Foray on the Campaign Trail with Aislinn Youth: Environment and Engagement

It's a New Year and what do you think some of our youth got up to just before Christmas? Some might presume, "UTNG" (up to no good)! I am not so sure about that! For some, like 24 year Colleen Staples, a cottager on Three Mile Lake in Almaguin Township and current resident of Kitchener, Ontario, she spent several days on the by-election trail in late November canvassing for Aislinn Clancy, the Green Party of Ontario's newly minted MPP for Kitchener Centre and newly appointed Deputy Leader of the Green Party of Ontario.

Aislinn, a strong candidate, won handily through hard work (went door to door twice to every neighbourhood in the riding) and sheer determination alongside her dedicated team of volunteers which included a large contingent of young people who are referred to as the "Young Greens." These youth from all across our province were deeply ensconced in this by-election and Colleen, a newbie to canvassing, unobtrusively managed to plunk herself right into the middle of all the action and excitement!

Colleen grew up in the rolling hills of the small town of Erin Ontario, nestled by a forest beside a river, where she witnessed her world up close in its natural habitat. Full disclosure, I witnessed Colleen grow up. As an intense and quiet little girl she would be out there picking up litter, writing nature stories (more like novellas), advocating for the animals, gardening, drawing, singing and promoting either vegetarianism, veganism, the underdog... A veritable "true nature child." Fast forward, in early November of 2023, Colleen graduated from Queen's University with an M.A. in Gender and Politics where she completed her major research paper reviewing federal government environmental policies using an intersectional lens to show how vulnerable populations are affected by climate change. I was so proud to hear of her convocation in early November, and also energized when I heard that she was asking "now what?"

As a Member at Large with the Parry Sound Muskoka Constituency Association, I was compelled to let Colleen know about the Clancy campaign. At first Colleen was apprehensive, as she hadn't worked for a political party before and she wanted to check out the NDP candidate first. She did her research, sent out an inquiry to the Greens, heard back right away and landed at campaign Headquarters. "The people were so nice, welcoming, collegial and there was lots of food," chuckled Colleen. Lucky for Ms. Staples, on her first night canvassing, she and Aislinn ventured out into the neighbourhood together, just the two of them. She had Aislinn all to herself! What a glimpse into the spirit of deep listening, friendliness, open, honest and inclusive conversations. Colleen was particularly touched by how Aislinn greeted people in their own languages of origin. A new citizen explained how proud he was to see his name on the voter's list. And in the spirit of activism, Colleen and Aislinn reassured a worried 95 year old woman that they would make sure she gets to the polling station. Sustainable housing and jobs were some of the biggest concerns of residents according to Colleen. It was a successful adventure with Aislinn. "I was really impressed with how human and not super partisan Aislinn was," applauded Colleen. This was Colleen's first foray into political and environmental activism. I am glad I nudged Colleen (or Keener as we used to call her) onto this trail. There are so many keeners out there in Ontario! So much more to come from our keeners in Parry Sound Muskoka!