

## Dreams and aspirations of Polish youth

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Over the past few years, I have been involved in many aspects of the Polish community and more particularly the Polish youth of Melbourne. In this time I have shared my views, listened to other views, attended and organised a number of forums, and I have had a fair amount of exposure to Polish events and groups. In this essay, I would like to share what I have learnt, share the common views of a number of Polish youth and finally express some of my own opinions. Thus, I would like to start a discussion on the youth, the future of the Polish community; our dreams and aspirations.

The youth generally lean towards the ideal of ‘live your dreams’ – to be young is to dream and to have aspirations. Due to the hard work and sacrifices of our forefathers, we have much more freedom to pursue our dreams. When talking about dreams and aspirations, I find it necessary to divide it into two groups, namely personal and community. By discussing these individually, then examining how one affects the other we may get a more rounded picture. At a forum a number of years ago entitled ‘Youth – Future and Fantasy’ we discussed our dreams, and over time in my discussions with a number of people I have been able to compile a list.

Our personal dreams are, what many people dream of:

- Financial security/wealth  
Many of us have experienced financial struggle, and many of us have seen our parents work extremely hard striving for better lives.
- Good education and careers  
This point is reflective of the first one. Our parents have worked hard, and sacrificed a lot to enable us to pursue further education, and aspire to the careers of our dreams. Also, very often youth like to pursue knowledge.
- Travel  
Many of us have seen the world through the media, but now we want to experience it for ourselves. We are particularly drawn to visit Poland, visit relatives there and experience first-hand the country of our forefathers.
- Family  
Some of us dream of settling down and starting a family.
- Good times, good friends.  
In the end, it seems that all we really want is to enjoy our lives in the company of good friends.

On the other hand, we discussed what our dreams are as a Polish community in Australia:

- Greater links with Poland – Communication  
We want to share our lives, ideas, thoughts with Poland, with Polish youth. We want to feel a part of Poland, even if we are in a country very far away. This we hope to achieve through tools such as the internet, telecommunication, and – money-permitting – travel to Poland.

- To be more ‘out there’  
By this we mean to be more of a presence in the Australian community – we want to share our culture with Australia.
- Stronger links with local Polish youth - Unity  
Somehow bring together the youth of Polish background living in Melbourne. Share our ideas, reflect on our traditions and have a good time.
- Greater access between Polish youth and facilities  
Part of the problem of getting together with other Polish youth has been choice of venue. We discussed that we would like greater access to venues and facilities – even perhaps a venue that can be predominantly ‘ours’.

Looking at these lists we can see that they are strongly linked – for instance very often Polish Saturday school has helped Polish-Australian youth (even if only in a small way) in their overall education and careers, and good times and good friends can very often be traced back to our involvement in the Polish community. Also themes of unity among the Polish youth of Melbourne is a common dream that is brought up very often.

To realise some of these dreams, a number of us, with help from the Polish Community Council of Victoria (PCCV) and funding from the Blum Foundation, started a Polish youth organisation named ‘Polestar’. Our mission statement was simple, ‘to encourage cultural awareness and provide an establishment for the social benefit Polish youth in Victoria’ (see website: [www.polestar-oz.org](http://www.polestar-oz.org)). Over the last few years we have organised some excellent social and cultural events such as Polana camps, forums, and co-organisation of the Polish high school re-union in 2002. But where are we headed now? Some of the problems we have encountered are conflicts in personalities, lack of commitment, lack of time, a feeling that we can’t make a difference. One of the main problems with a youth organisation like ‘Polestar’ is vision – because we are a somewhat abstract, superficial organisation – in other words, what really are we here for? There are other youth-orientated organisations that actually have more substantial, physical outcomes – such as dance ensembles, where the goal is to perform at concerts and events, in the meantime providing a strong social environment. This is much the same with the scouts and soccer teams. On the other hand, there is another example – a group called ‘Polacy w Melbourne’ (‘Poles in Melbourne’ - [www.polmelb.net](http://www.polmelb.net)) whose goal is a purely social network with a website and chatroom, where Polish-Australian youth can share their lives and ideas in a candid environment. This group appears to be highly successful socially among a network of friends.

Over the past few years the forums we, as an organisation have run, have helped us to better understand ourselves. We held a forum on ‘Generation X’ where we asked ‘who belongs to this generation?’ and discussed some of the similarities and differences between this generation and future (Generation Y) and past (Baby Boomers) generations. Last year we held a forum on ‘The Language Barrier’ and were able to discuss our proficiency in Polish, some of the problems we have speaking it, and how we use it. However, while some of us enjoy having a say, learning, discussing and debating, others will look at a forum and say ‘I don’t really care, what is it going to do for me?’ Thus, it is always difficult to motivate youth with something in which they don’t see any substantial physical outcomes.

To a degree I think the youth have lost some sense of pride in the community, our dreams and goals, unfortunately are, becoming more self-centred, but why is this? Firstly, I don't think this is a problem facing only the youth but other age groups as well, based on the fact that we are becoming more and more of a consumer society, we are preoccupied with our work, then, after our families and friends we have very little time for anything else. Secondly, some of us have come across people or organisations that have not been supportive, or organisations where we have seen or felt little progress or appreciation, so instead of striving for a common good we turn our attention to our personal lives, where we have control and our hard work is rewarded.

Youth and community has always been an issue, and it is becoming more of one. Compared to our forefathers who migrated, many of us are proficient in English, we have our own social networks, and are fully self-sufficient in Australian society. A community nurtures and provides, however, to what degree is it a necessity for young people? It is not a necessity yet, many of us are drawn to it for varying reasons but mainly because of the sense of kinship we feel among other Poles of our age.

At this point, being a Polish-Australian youth myself, I would like to speak of my dreams and aspirations. On a personal level, I dream of what most Polish youth dream of – a good education, an enjoyable career, financial security, and a fulfilling life with family and friends. As far as the Polish community is concerned, I would like to see a stronger sense of unity, friendship and service. I would like to see the Polish-Australian youth embrace their Polish heritage as well as build a better Australia, and a better Polish community in Australia. I am very proud of my Polish heritage, but I am also very proud to be part of Australia, and grateful to Australia for giving me what I have. I would like to see more Polish youth showing a greater sense of pride in being Polish, more depth in understanding the history, culture and language of Poland. I aspire to be a better Australian, a better Pole and to contribute positively to these communities.

In conclusion, I think that to understand the young people of Polish heritage in Australia we have to reach out more, keep on discovering what it is that the youth want and need, provide opportunities for expression and re-think the way we perceive the community. To reach this end, I believe that we need a number of youth, a number of more senior-members of the Polish community, to discuss, debate and keep on building – no matter how slowly – a greater sense of community among the Polish-Australian youth of Melbourne and around the world. If anybody has any initiatives, ideas or suggestions, I would be very glad to hear them. Finally, how can I describe the Polish youth of Melbourne? I think we are a group of dreamers, we aspire to meet our dreams and we work hard at attaining them.