

Finding time for troubled kids

Andrew Bacchus and Brian Henry know there are no quick solutions for at-risk youth

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According to Woody Allen, 80% of success is just showing up.

That might also be said of what it takes to turn the lives of troubled youth around.

I listened last week to the stories of two black men who went from sitting in the clink for their own criminal behaviour, to working with youth living in some of this city's poorest, most crime-infested neighbourhoods.

While politicians, parents and many of the rest of us shake our heads, look for fast solutions and wonder what it's going to take to end this spasm of lethal youth violence, what Andrew Bacchus and Brian Henry talk about can't be legislated. But it takes time. It takes massive amounts of showing up.

"It's about building relationships with kids ... Kids see through people," the 33-year-old Bacchus tells his audience of 260 teachers, principals, youth workers and school board staff gathered for a conference organized by the Canadian Safe Schools Network.

Ironically, the hall where the conference is held is just blocks away from where a school stabbing happened the day before. Some say it was over a pair of gloves.

Bacchus is project coordinator for Breaking the Cycle, what he calls a "youth leadership program," though also described as a "gang exit" program.

The 28-week, federally-funded program takes youth from their teens to mid-20s, often already involved in the criminal justice system, and gives them training in anger management, conflict resolution, leadership, presentation skills, even CPR.

The "graduates" become program ambassadors and take the messages to other youth at risk. Participants only get the training if they show commitment and program workers think they are suitable.

Bacchus jokes, but not really, that city youth outreach workers typically work between 9 and 5: "The kids we're trying to reach out to are asleep during that time."

The program doesn't work if the kids don't believe the adults they're dealing with really care, says Bacchus. Too often troubled youth are viewed as "throwaways."

One "throwaway" was about to be kicked out of school. Bacchus persuaded the school to keep him while Bacchus mentored him. That was eight years ago. Now the young man is buying a house and getting his plumber's papers.

Brian Henry has been slogging it out for the last three years in Scarborough's Malvern community and knows when the kids he works with are sleeping because he will call them to wake them up for school.

Henry coordinates ROSE (Real Opportunities for Success in Education), an alternative education intervention program done in cooperation with the Toronto Catholic school board for kids having trouble staying in school and at risk of gang influence.

His days start early and may not end until the wee hours. He lives where his clients do and they know where to find him if they need him.

"What you see in most of these communities is not families," says Henry. "They are survival units."

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS

Bacchus believes some of the kids he works with have seen such horrors that they are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder -- found among war vets -- and need professional help for it.

Likewise, Henry says a major part of his work is teaching kids to unlearn the behaviour patterns that have developed as a reaction to what they've seen: "Their sense of justice has been so skewed."

They know some call their approach "hug a thug." But it's clear these men aren't afraid to give their kids a kick in the rear end when it's called for.

"Without relationships, without trust, there's no change," agrees Stu Auty, head of the Canadian Safe Schools Network.

Troubled kids who manage to turn their lives around often "are the kids touched by the one on one care of these small programs. There's no question that that's true."

Caring, just showing up, don't have much headline-potential as an anti-violence strategy.

But then you probably haven't seen "Former at-risk teen gets plumber papers" on the front page either.

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