

## SCHOOL VIOLENCE

**Stabbing at C.W. Jefferys highlights at-risk youth****Those who work with troubled teens say alienation is a key factor that drives young people to violence**TIMOTHY APPEBY  
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The stabbing of a 16-year-old student this week in north Toronto's C.W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute - the same high school where another pupil was shot to death in a hallway last year - revives urgent questions about why some teenagers become prone to criminal violence.

Talk to teachers and community workers, and the list of villains is long: poverty, dead-end job prospects, access to drugs and weapons, gangsta rap, a torrent of negative media messages.

But of all the factors that send a teen off the rails, professionals say, the most insidious may be the thing that isn't there at all: structure, a stable home life, a sense of belonging.

"Teachers see some of these kids more than their parents do," says Brian Henry, a reformed hoodlum steeped in violence and prison life who now works with at-risk youths on some of Toronto's toughest streets. "What we see in some of these neighbourhoods are not families so much as survival units."

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One way or another kids will find something to belong to says Bill Byrd, long-time safety administrator for the Toronto District School Board.

"Kids need to be connected to someone, and if they're not connected in a positive way more often than not they either find a negative way or they retreat, like the computer geeks we see hidden away," he says. The stabbing victim at C. W. Jefferys ended up at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, where he was listed in serious condition but was expected to recover.

The theme of violence was front and centre at the Canadian Safe School Network's recent annual conference, which heard powerful, back-to-back presentations from Mr. Henry and Andrew Bacchus, another ex-thug who now offers vulnerable young people a large dose of hope.

Their core message?

"Being genuine, telling the kids how it is and being passionate about it because they can see right through all the bullshit," said Mr. Bacchus, 33, who helps run Breaking the Cycle, a gang-exit program.

Mr. Bacchus travels and lectures widely and says that what's true in Toronto applies everywhere else: "Once you're able to build a rapport with a young person, the sky's the limit."

And that's especially the case for educators, said Mr. Henry, 32, who four years ago founded Hoodline, a Scarborough-focused program that in partnership with the Toronto Catholic District School Board targets youths who have quit school or are likely to.

Both men carry considerable baggage.

Born in Toronto's Jane-Finch district with a tattoo on his shoulder to prove it, Mr. Bacchus was arrested nine times for drugs, weapons and theft, and spent two years behind bars. There's an upside to his résumé, he says.

"I've been doing this work for about 10 years and it's no secret that I do have my own past, and that gives me currency in terms of working with the kids."

Mr. Henry also spent years trying to dodge police, chiefly for crimes involving assault, and he, too, spent a couple of miserable years in jail, where "what you see is dead dreams."

His troubles date back to a horrendous childhood in Guyana, his birthplace, where he says his father was hanged and where he witnessed his first murder at age 8.

Violence begets violence, he says. "There's an evolutionary cycle that takes people from being victims to perpetrators, people for whom there's been no justice in their life. So stand up for these kids, because no one else is standing up for them."

Both men acknowledge skepticism that what Mr. Bacchus jokingly calls "this hug-a-thug stuff" is proof of genuine change.

"Some cops don't really trust either of these guys," says a police officer who knows both Mr. Bacchus and Mr. Henry.

But plenty of other people do.

Mr. Bacchus's anti-gang work is federally funded by Service Canada, while Hoodlinc and its Real Opportunities for Success in Education program get money from assorted private and public groups.

"I think both of these people care deeply," Mr. Byrd says. "The problem for a person who is a reformed criminal is that now people expect them to be walking saints."

Mr. Henry's career hit a bump in May when police with a search warrant smashed down his apartment door in the belief there was a gun on the premises. No gun was found, but Mr. Henry was charged with possession of marijuana and suspended from his job until the drug charge was dropped.

Toronto Police Chief William Blair perceives a rise in violent behaviour among some teens, as does Stu Auty, president of the safe school network, a national not-for-profit, registered charitable organization launched in 1997.

"We're talking about kids who've learned their values by about the age of 7, that's why we believe in early action," Mr. Auty says.

"We've got weapons now that we've never had before; a weapon gets used semi-regularly. It's a sad thing but it's real and it's not just in Toronto, it's across Canada, and the word travels instantly."

Mr. Bacchus's program encompasses a 28-week course that teaches gang members - society's "throwaways" he calls them - the rudiments of a useful life: anger management, conflict resolution, communication skills, reconnecting with family, exploring job possibilities.

It currently has about 25 people enrolled and over the past four years has produced about 180 "graduates," many referred by courts. The annual cost is about \$15,000 per student.

But Mr. Bacchus sees failure, too. One instance involves a young father of two, paralyzed from the neck down after his past caught up with him and he was shot nine times.

"In the last year," he says, "I've been to about five funerals."

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