

Young people in Lanark with a little help from their health centre have organized in a group to develop new leisure and learning opportunities for themselves and to overcome the alienation and prejudice of the community's adult population.

Ever since anyone in Lanark can remember, kids have been sitting on an old stone wall on the main street. There isn't much else for some youth to do. Of course there is hockey and figure skating in the winter and baseball in the summer. But for some, these are not a good fit and there are few other options.

Lanark is a small village of 800 people in Eastern Ontario where there are high rates of poverty and unemployment. There are many families who don't have the money for organized recreational activities. Family stresses leave some kids alone and without support - financial and emotional. Others have been the victims of abuse and it is not safe for them to live at home. In addition, the local high school is as much an hour's school bus drive for some, so participating in after school programs is out of the question.

"The 'bad kids' hang out at the old stone wall"

Mostly these kids hitch a ride into the village and just "hang out" on the wall. The "wall" has a bad reputation. The word around town is that the wall is where the bad kids hang out and "bad kids" are the ones responsible for the vandalism in the Village. Sometimes people get upset and there are problems. John, a young person living on his own in the Village describes the problem like this. "There is nothing to do here. Everyone is bored. Nothing for your imagination. Your imagination needs something to do or it will find something like drinking or doing drugs. We just sit and we have a lot of physical energy. Crime is a very physical thing - the running, the rush, so that's what happens. But they poured oil on the wall to keep us off. How do you think that makes us feel? The older people didn't give us a chance."

Just as individuals solve problems in different ways, so too, can communities find unique solutions to their problems. This community is trying a new way to solve the problem of vandalism on the main street. This time, instead of taking a negative approach, they are trying to build bridges and create positive change. The North Lanark County Community Health Centre is the catalyst. This is how it happened. A few years ago, the O.P.P. set up a community policing committee made up of local politicians and a few interested community members. After a store was broken into a meeting was called to discuss youth vandalism. One option on the table was to install video surveillance to monitor the main street.

The Health Promoter at the North Lanark County Community Health Centre, Liz Derragh heard about the meeting and asked if she could attend. She brought with her some local youth. At the meeting, the video camera option was quickly set aside because the cost was prohibitive. The group was at a loss for what to do next. The discussion quickly turned to complaints about the Young Offenders Act and the disintegration of society in general. Just then Willy, one of the youth at the meeting, spoke up. In a quiet voice, he said, "Part of the problem is that there is nothing for kids to do here. We're bored and sometimes we get into trouble." "Well what do you kids want anyway?" , was the skeptical response.

Off the wall

That summer, with the help of Liz, the Health Promoter at the CHC, the kids surveyed youth in the village and also in the surrounding areas. The response showed that the number one interest was skateboarding and in-line skating. "Kids have more interest in skateboarding. It's new and its growing. Its cheaper too.", John says. That's how the "Kids Off the Wall Skateboard Group" was formed. As John, who became the spokesperson for the group says, "They expected us to be responsible but they didn't give us any support. They are the adults and they should have helped us but they don't remember what it was like when they were young. They think they were perfect. The CHC gives us the support we need." Support from the CHC came in the form of free meeting space and a skilled facilitator as well as access to a computer, the Internet, a photocopier, a bank account and help with funding proposals.

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Over the winter, the kids met regularly. John says, "At the start, it was a chance to meet new people and get to know each other. It was something new instead of being on the street - at least for one night a week. Now it makes us feel responsible. We get to add our 5 cents worth. We feel like we're benefitting the community". Doug, treasurer of the group, says that he is learning public relations, advertising and organizational skills. "I think we're doing a good job. It's giving kids a good education." Transportation is a very real barrier for these youth so the facilitators drive Willy home to the "French Line", a gravel road more that 45 minutes away and then drive Doug, John and several others home to the villages of Fallbrook, Lanark and Hopetown. Many great discussions have occurred during the long car rides! To date, the group has raised nearly \$4,000.00. They have made presentations to group such as the municipal council, and the Legion and been interviewed by the local newspaper. In the interview, John is quoted as saying "We hit the ground running and we're halfway there".

Council is no longer talking in negative terms about youth, but instead, looking to these youth for leadership. There are also important "spin-offs" that happen as a result of a project like this. John left school last month but, with encouragement, he has now applied to do correspondence courses and is making a youth Homepage on the Internet site at the Community Health Centre.

Another is considering a career in healthcare and has begun a co-op placement at the local hospital. Still another, who is facing criminal charges, continues to come to the planning meetings regularly and has organized a raffle. But what does this has to do with health? John doesn't have a problem understanding the connection between the project and health. He explains, "There is physical health and there is mental health but the two have to go together. It's not just going to the doctor when you are sick - its much more than that. It's about a strong community and mental health. That's the job of the CHC."