

Street-smart kids train to train social workers



Joe Fiorito
Metro Diary

Carmeta said she'd had a good weekend; she finished her book review and she was proud of it. Rosa Alba got her social insurance number and that made her very happy. Brian said the week was normal for him.

The kids are teens, and they are all veterans of foster care; or they have lived in group homes; or, in some instances, they have brushed up against the law.

They have been recruited to take part in an innovative social services training program because they are smart, and they are survivors, and because they

have intimate, inside knowledge of how the social services system works — or in some cases does not work — to meet the needs of kids.

Once they finish their training, they will be qualified to teach social workers what life is like from the point of view of the kids in the system.

Wolfgang Vachon is the creator of C2Y, the Connect To Youth programme. He is tall, slim, intense and observant. He used to be an executive trainer in the corporate world: his clients included investment bankers, credit card execs, and potato-chip company big shots.

It is more fun training kids.

He said, "I'd been doing social work with young people for a while, and some of them would just walk in and read me amazingly well — they knew right away how to get what they wanted."

"I realized that young people in

the system have a particular skill: they can suss out what they need to know pretty quickly, in order to survive." And so he thought, why not train some of the kids to train social workers?

After they had talked about their week, the new recruits did some warm-up exercises: They formed a circle; on impulse someone would jump into the middle of the circle and make a noise; and then the others, loudly and all at once, would repeat the noise; and so it was "whoop!" "WHOOP!" all around the circle.

It's not quite as goofy as it sounds.

The exercise loosened the kids up, and helped them to shake off their inhibitions; all part of the training.

There are 72 hours of classes scheduled; eventually, they will learn a bit of theatre. They will develop some in-your-face characters — the lippy kid, the

aggressive kid, the wounded kid — and they will use these characters to construct some true-to-life dramatic sketches.

They will then perform these sketches for social workers in a professional development setting, and get the social workers to react as if they were on the job.

The kids will also give constructive feedback to the adults, which you just know has to be a refreshing reversal of roles. They will work with corrections officials, youth workers, group home staff, and so on. There is, as far as I know, no other program like this in Canada.

After the warm-ups, the kids acted out their impressions of what makes the ideal family, and they had a group discussion.

Carmeta said, "The ideal family is having my baby's father there, and us being close to her." Carmeta is 16; she and her baby's father are living in a group

home, and they are very much in love, and she is doing well in school; the couple has the support of her family and, perhaps, of his.

Brian said, "Families in Canada are more open. Here, you can tell your mom you don't like her. In Uganda, if you say that, you will spend the night outside." He implied, with a grimace, that you might also get thumped.

A young woman named Dima said, "To be a success, that's what my family taught me. Being bad at school; that, to them, is the worst. It's not about personal relationships at home. But I think if you're not comfortable at home, you can't be comfortable outside."

How did the kids find out about the training, and why did they sign up? Rosa Alba said, "Someone in my group home told me. She said I would enjoy it because I am outspoken." She is all of that. She lives in a group

home because she was arrested recently; another girl accused Rosa Alba of making a death threat. The charge was dropped.

A young woman named Rosimay said, "I heard about this at the information centre in Parkdale. I'm in foster care. It's working out. I have no complaints." Why is she in foster care? "My parents split up when I was 13. My dad, I have no news about. After they split up, my mom went back to Angola." How does she feel about that? "I've talked to my mom on the phone, but we don't talk about our issues." It is issues such as these, and how the kids are handling them, that will make them good instructors.

On Wednesday: to a group home with the first graduates of the training program.

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When teachers become pupils



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Ishaan, Peter and James looked at their scripts and decided to perform four scenes: the one about the kid in the group home who thinks everyone is a racist; the one in which two kids fight over the TV remote, although the fight has nothing to do with the remote; the one about the kid who'd rather smoke a little dope than take his Ritalin — "I've done this in real life," said James with a wry smile; and finally, the skit about the kid accused of stealing from his counsellor.

The three young men are not actors, but they are, in a sense, travelling players. They are the first grads of a program called Connect To Youth, or C2Y. They have been trained to show social workers what life is like from the point of view of a kid in the system.

Their virtue as trainers — in addition to wit, spirit and relentless energy — is that they have each had brushes with the law, or they have bumped up against social workers, or they are living in group homes themselves.

Their audience was captive: a handful of counsellors in a group home on Logan Ave. who had set aside an afternoon for professional development.

The home is a residence for kids on probation, or who are otherwise in the care of the youth justice system.

And if the counsellors were unsure about what kind of training they might get from the three teens, the warm-up exercise was a shocker.

The counsellors sat on couches or in armchairs in the living room. They were asked to come up with a sentence or a phrase — perhaps something they remembered from their own childhoods — that a kid might find hurtful.

I'm sure you have heard, or perhaps have used, the answers they came up with: "How can you be so stupid?" "I'll give you something to complain about." "Change your attitude."

Are you wincing yet?

The game had one rule. The counsellors were only allowed to say the phrases they'd picked, and nothing more.

And then Peter went to work, confronting them in turn, listening to each phrase and firing back blisteringly quick, razor-slick non sequiturs as he made his way around the room: "Shut up!" "I'll show you!" "You don't know what the hell you're talk-

After the performance, one worker had tears in her eyes as she clapped her hands. She was not alone in this

ing about!"

He darted forward and back again as if he were playing ping-pong on half a dozen tables at once, returning every serve with verbal smashes until the whole room was exhausted. Then he stopped and stepped back.

A silence held until the counsellors broke into spontaneous applause.

The performance had been so intense that one of the workers had tears in her eyes as she clapped her hands. She was not

alone in this.

And then the young trainers led a discussion about what happens when words and attitudes get in the way of real communication.

All four skits went pretty much the same way, although the most amusing, and perhaps the most difficult, was the one in which James played the kid who'd rather smoke dope than take Ritalin.

And it wasn't actually funny, not if you know a kid who can't focus and won't listen and who zips from one thing to another like a drop of water on a hot griddle.

The counsellor who volunteered to take part in the skit was both thoughtful and hip. He guided the kid gently but firmly back on track whenever the conversation drifted too far off topic. Eventually James, as an actor, could do nothing more than agree to take his meds.

As part of the session, James gave the counsellor some sophisticated feedback: "You really listened. You did a good job paying attention, pushing away the things that didn't matter.

You looked comfortable. Your eye contact was good. You asked me to look at you. You commented very well. You used language I could understand."

"Ebonics," said the counsellor.

"Ha, ha," said the others. At the end of the day, Ishaan, James and Peter presented themselves as a kind of panel; they answered questions, mainly about why kids join gangs, and how kids who are in gangs can be steered clear of trouble, and so on.

The questions were apt. There are photos of former residents on the wall of the living room. Any of the counsellors can tell you which of the kids have died as a result of violence, just as they are eager to tell you which kids turned out better than they expected.

I won't presume to speak for the counsellors. I didn't read the evaluations they filled out when the afternoon was over. All I can tell you is they were excited and exhausted.

That's what happens when you learn.

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