

Theatre Street Youth Society

Street kids improve their lives

Thanks to a \$5,000 donation from VanCity to the Theatre Street Youth Society, street kids are now taking steps to improve their lives. Funding enables the society to provide a safe haven for youth at risk and street-involved youth. Through the 10-week theatre and employment readiness program, an employment counsellor and an art therapist help participants gain self-esteem, address emotional issues, develop life skills, and access job opportunities.

Says VanCity Chair Franca Zumpano, "This program encourages what VanCity values — self-reliance. And it's a community-based approach to solving the challenges that street youth unfortunately face."

Program General Manager Sherry McGarvie points to the program's several success stories such as an 18-year-old who arrived as a tough loner. Initially, he stood still and said nothing. But by the end of his art therapy, he had made a mask, cut out a wood backing for it, painted it and offered it as a gift to McGarvie. "He went from not even being able to communicate to sharing something from the depths of his soul," she says. "That was a huge success."

The eight-year-old theatre society runs the program out of shared space with the Tradeworks youth training program, located at 524 Powell Street in Vancouver. Twelve young people, aged 14 to 19, attend weekly seminars to learn résumé writing, job interview techniques, and basic computer skills to increase their employment candidacy. All of the participants from last year's program are working at least part-time, says McGarvie. And the program encourages youth who have left school to re-enrol.

The kids get breakfast and one hot meal a day with education about nutrition and food budgeting forming part of the program.

The grand finale is a public theatre production, performed and produced solely by the street kids. After attending



Society Co-ordinator Katharine Caroll with Andy Matovich, former program graduate and now a director for the society.

classes on everything from acting skills to set design, participants write and deliver their own material or perform dramatic works of other playwrights. "I believe in the power of the creative," says Society Co-ordinator Katharine Caroll. "I've seen it transform people's lives even when they didn't think it would. The youth get a chance to tell their own story, which is an important part of the healing process."

Andy Matovich, now 26, is one of the many theatrical success stories to emerge from the program. Enrolled in the program at 19, he learned acting, three types of dance, special effects, and later took a director's course. He then volunteered as assistant director for two years, worked as a volunteer coun-

sellor, and now sits on the society's board of directors. "The program had a strong impact on me," says the long-time drama lover. "They're a very supportive community and they're flexible. It was a positive experience."

With an artistic focus and rules set by the participants, not adults, the Society's program provides a different framework than most community youth activities, says Caroll.

Social workers, probation officers and teachers praise the powerful impact of the program, says Caroll. "A lot of youth have been through the system with counsellors. But our program doesn't give them the same kind of rules. They choose to be here."

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