

Focus Foundation programs a big help for troubled youths

Youth Futures, Whytecliff steer students to high-school graduation

BY VIVIAN LUK, VANCOUVER SUN SEPTEMBER 21, 2010



Nicole Dash (left) and Marc Elliott have graduated from high school and are continuing their education at post-secondary institutions -- thanks to Youth Futures and Whytecliff Agile Learning Centre programs.

Photograph by: Steve Bosch, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Sun

When Nicole Dash's father died four years ago, the grief was too much for the 16-year-old to bear. She bounced from foster home to foster home, dropped out of school, and used heroin, speed and cocaine to cope with her father's death.

But a near-death experience made Dash realize she needed to get her life back on track. To do that, she had to get clean and finish high school.

"I just thought, 'I'm not going to be one of those people who don't graduate,'" said Dash, now 20. "I don't care how hard it is, I don't care if nobody believes me. That just makes me want to do it even more."

Through a social worker's referral, Dash enrolled in Youth Futures and Whytecliff Agile Learning Centre, two learning programs implemented by the Focus Foundation of B.C., a non-profit organization. While student enrolment fluctuates, about 160 students were enrolled in the two programs, which are based in Langley and Burnaby, last year.

The programs, chairman Gary Powroznik explained, are designed to help those who otherwise wouldn't make it through high school. Nearly 20 per cent of B. C youth enrolled in high school each year, he said, won't graduate. A majority of those students are struggling with mental health issues, backgrounds of abuse and trauma, drug or alcohol addiction, learning disabilities, criminal records and family problems. Many will fail or drop out of high school because they feel their needs are not being met by the mainstream education system.

"A lot of them are heading for difficult, destructive lives," Powroznik said. "They'll end up in criminal activity across the spectrum, heavy use of social services, and a lot of health problems."

But the proper support can transform these youth into productive members of society, he said.

"We look at individual learning styles, attention spans and issues because we all come with baggage," he said. "We ignore all those labels; we take you as you are, and figure out how to make you productive and how to motivate you."

The two programs had an operating budget of \$2.4 million for 2009 and largely have been funded by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Children and Family Development. However, the latter - which provides 54 per cent of the money needed for the programs to operate -- is not renewing its annual funding contract on Oct. 1, said Jocelyn MacDougall, manager of communications and fundraising.

While the education ministry's funding remains, Focus B. C had to: reduce the number of students it accepted, as well as the number of programs; lay off 30 per cent of program staff; and deficit finance for an interim period while it launches a private sector fund raising program and searches for other public funding sources.

The focus, however, remains the same. Youth Futures, a day program for youth aged 14 to 19, concentrates on fostering healthy relationships, developing social skills and building trust. Students also learn basic life skills, such as how to open a bank account or how to write a resume.

"A lot of these youth have broken-down relationships within the community," MacDougall said. "They've had troubled beginnings, and many of them experience trauma and anger, so we try to

teach them how to give back to the community, make positive choices, and just provide them with normalizing youth experiences."

For example, teachers and youth workers will take students camping or whale-watching during the summer, take them to museums and cultural events, and throw them birthday parties. The school will also celebrate Christmas, Thanksgiving and Easter as a family.

"[For our youth], Christmas is often a time when families get together and drink too much and fight," MacDougall said. "All of those bad emotions come to the surface, so we bring a happy alternative through the school family so they can feel a normal sense of celebration of joy and fun."

After spending nine to 12 months at Youth Futures, students can transition to Whytecliff, a continuing academic program for those who want to finish high school courses. Whytecliff teachers develop an individual education plan for each student, who can take as much time as needed to complete courses. Staff also cater to each student's independent needs and learning styles, and work on a one-on-one basis with them.

"It all comes down to the youth," said math and science teacher Rachelle Chartrand. "Some kids don't want you to ask them how they're doing, others want you to check up on them every once in a while. If they're having a bad day because of issues at home, and they're unable to focus at school, we don't make them sit and do the school work when they're not retaining anything. They're missing that lesson anyway because their mind is somewhere else."

Marc Elliott, 19, dropped out of high school four years ago because of a confrontation with a teacher. He said his high school experience was "pretty crappy" because teachers never took additional time to teach him specific things about a subject.

"At Whytecliff, [teachers] take the time to explain to me, instead of writing on the board, and saying, 'Here's what you have to do, here are the pages you have to work on, now get to it,'" he said. "If I didn't get it after that, they'd take more time to physically explain to me."

"If there's a day when you're doing a certain amount of work, but you can't do it any more and you have to stop, you won't fail because of it," Dash said. "You'll still pass, but on your own time. Everyone's different, and the staff knows that, and they cater to that."

In the last two years, about 88 per cent of Focus B. C's students in their Grade 12 year graduated from high school, McDougall said.

Both Dash and Elliott have recently received their high school diplomas -- something neither of them ever thought would be possible without the help of staff at Youth Futures and Whytecliff. Dash is now enrolled at Eton College, where she will train to become a flight attendant. Elliott will be studying animation at the Art Institute.

"On my graduation day I bawled my eyes out," Dash said. "My dad always regretted not graduating from high school. I knew he was there that day."

"Everyone I've known who has attended Whytecliff has been successful or turned their lives around," Elliott said. "When you come in, you can be that kid who doesn't want anything to do with anybody, who has had this rough past -- I've seen kids come in with worse backgrounds than me, coming out

of jails, gangs, and ... life-threatening situations -- and have people tell you that a lot of this wasn't your fault. We're here for you even if you don't want us to be."

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