

Daughter's descent into heroin got mom on move

Diane Sowden created Children of the Street Society to mobilize youth.

Gillian Shaw, Vancouver Sun

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VANCOUVER - Diane Sowden's daughter was 13 years old when she first started experimenting with drugs and alcohol.

She ended up in the hospital with alcohol poisoning, but that was only the start.

At 14, the happy-go-lucky kid from a close-knit and loving family was smoking crack cocaine and had already served her first jail term. And she was pregnant.



Megan Frankham speaks to students at Johnston Heights secondary in Surrey.

Mark Van Manen, Vancouver Sun

Once out of jail, she escalated to smoking and injecting heroin and selling her body on the streets of the Downtown Eastside to fuel her addiction and the insatiable financial appetite of the pimp who befriended her as a much-older boyfriend.

Now 27, she has had five children, four born drug-addicted and facing a lifetime of paying for their mother's lifestyle.

Diane Sowden couldn't save her own daughter, but her story led Sowden to create a powerful and effective organization, the Children of the Street Society, which has mobilized youth to take on the challenge of educating pre-teens and teens about the realities of sexual exploitation.

Now the society wants to launch a similar program to help educate young people about drugs and alcohol, an education that so far has been left to a hodgepodge of pamphlets, advertisements and well-meaning adults preaching to turned-off teens.



The society program, Taking Care of Ourselves & Taking Care of Others, or TCO2, is delivered by youth, for youth. Through skits and straight talk they address the risks, what to look for, the consequences, and how things can go sideways fast.

Over the last school year, TCO2 ran 406 workshops for 18,500 people in 28 communities. Even though the organization has doubled the number of youth facilitators this year, from three to six, it can't meet the huge demand.

Members have touched the lives of teens, parents and educators throughout B.C.

A separate program -- It Can Happen to Anybody -- offers workshops to professional and parent groups, educators, social services agencies and medical professionals concerned with the sexual exploitation of children. Last year, 90 of these workshops attracted 2,352 participants.

"I talk about those issues but it is on a very low scale compared to what we could reach with the TCO2 group," said Sowden. "In the past we have always had adults, teachers and other authority figures going in and talking to youth. The difference between that and what we are doing is this is youth talking to youth.

"Kids feel these are young people who know what is happening. They are not that much older. They know what the high school scenes are, they speak the same language." "We also know from research that every dollar you spend on prevention saves \$13 on intervention and treatment. It is well-spent money."

The society has conducted a drug education pilot program -- paid for by the provincial government -- that was demonstrated in a number of schools. The organization is seeking funds to take it provincewide. The pilot project did 85 workshops and was presented to more than 4,000 youth in the Tri-City area.

"That was over a two-month period, that was how many bookings we got in just two months," said Sowden. "We actually went over our funding trying to meet the needs of people who were phoning us.

"We still get calls from teachers where we did the pilot project asking if we can come in and do more drug and alcohol education."

Sowden knows first-hand that the information and messages young people get can make a difference.

Unfortunately, as she struggled to deal with her daughter's increasingly wild behaviour, her child dismissed her as being overprotective, an attitude reinforced, often unwittingly, by adults in positions of authority around her. "She always thought I was being overprotective," said Sowden. "People in authority around her would say to her, it was her choice. She'd think, 'if they say it is my choice, it can't be that bad.'

"Now she is really bitter about the service providers who told her that," Sowden says of her daughter's years in and out of youth care and the courts.

" 'It's your choice' isn't a message delivered by the 20-something youth workers who fan out across the province talking to teens. They know what they're talking about because it wasn't so long ago they were in the same situations, the same high school parties and get-togethers, facing the same pressure as the young people they are talking to.

"I really think if you talk to students about this issue and tell them the true real stories, maybe the first time they are at a party and someone offers them drugs, they will think about it," said Sowden.

We met TCO2 's Ryan Turk, 21; Janice Kwan, 23, and Megan Frankham, 25, at a school recently, where they were teaching the students warning signs that a sex recruiter is operating -- a problem not limited to inner-city schools or disadvantaged areas.

- Age difference: Do they know of any situations where an older guy is dating a girl who is 13 or 14? At that, a hand goes up in the back of the class.

- Gifts: Recruiters who are trying to win over impressionable young teens -- both girls and boys -- spend lots of money on them.

- A cellphone: It's common for a recruiter to give their target a cellphone that his or her parents don't know about. Isolating their potential sex workers from family and friends is important to the recruiter and they'll keep their victims up talking all night because that's the working schedule they'll be on.

- Reputation: If you know someone who is reputed to be trouble, stay away.

"The reason I'm here is because education and letting youth know what is going on out there helps them," said Kwan. "There is the assumption that good kids don't get into this, but they do."

The TCO2 workers hand out their e-mail addresses and tell the young people about their Facebook site, where they are free to make contact and get answers or bring their problems without fear of judgment or censure. In the two weeks it has been up, it already has 123 members.

"We know we are saving lives," said Frankham.

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On the Web: Children of the Street Society: www.childrenofthestreet.com On Facebook: search for TCO2 and you'll find TCO2 - Taking Care of Ourselves and Taking Care of Others

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