

Love for drug-addicted daughter drives non-profit

Children of the Street Society awarded Vancouver Sun Children's Fund \$500,000 legacy grant to expand and tour drug and alcohol education program

Mary Frances Hill

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In a tight-knit, roller-coaster relationship with an addict, it's not uncommon to plunge into a period of tense, pregnant silence, when all communication is lost.

Then comes hope: a bright phase when the addict seems to grasp for recovery, and the future looks dramatically more promising, until that loaded dynamic swings back again, reversing to what Diane Sowden calls a "downslide."

Sowden and her 28-year-old daughter, who was recruited 14 years ago into drug addiction, and then prostitution, are stuck on this downslide right now.

"We're at a disconnect," Sowden said Thursday, sitting in the Coquitlam office of the Children of the Street Society, an organization she formed to help parents stymied by the obstacles of getting their kids off drugs and out of the paths of predators, and mobilize young people to be alert to the dangers of street life.

"She was doing really, really well, and now . . . she's not doing so well.

"When she was able to exit that life, she'd do well and she'd relapse. Those are the times she'd disconnect again because she felt she'd let everyone down and she'd be embarrassed."

They may be physically distant, but the dialogue between mother and daughter continues: as Sowden sat listening Thursday to her young employees as they recapped their week of work visiting schools and giving workshops, her daughter's story echoes through everything they say.

This year, Sowden and staff have something to celebrate.

In May, the federal Tackling Violent Crime Act raised the sexual age of consent from 14 to 16 -- an issue for which the society has lobbied strenuously since it was founded in 1995.

This week, the Children of the Street Society was awarded with the Vancouver Sun Children's Fund's first ever one-time legacy grant of \$500,000.

The Vancouver Sun Children's Fund, a non-profit charity, has raised \$9.5 million from readers since 1981, disbursing a total of \$6 million to 835 B.C. children's charities.

With these resources, Sowden's organization can plan to emphasize their newly developed drug and alcohol education program, expand it to schools across the province and fund the travels of their young educators even more.

By the time Sowden launched the Children of the Street Society, she'd been through a horrendous trial of her own.

Fourteen years ago, when her daughter was 14, and courted by a much older pimp, Sowden did what any parent would: She took to the streets herself, vowing to find her daughter and bring her home to the structure and rules that would keep her safe.

The young girl's drug experimentation had turned to full-on substance abuse. She was smoking crack cocaine and she'd already served her first of many jail terms. At 14, she was left pregnant by her 27-year-old pimp.

When the girl was forced by her pimp to recruit other girls, Sowden began to circulate her daughter's photograph to schools and many communities.

To her surprise, the legal system worked against her.

Her daughter's name and criminal information couldn't be revealed to the community, as she was a juvenile offender. But since, at 14, she'd reached what was then the legal age of sexual consent, she was allowed to be with the pimp who had recruited her into drugs and prostitution in the first place.

There was nowhere to turn.

She said today, her adult daughter resents how she was treated, as social workers and social service providers pitted mother against daughter and assumed that her involvement in the sex trade was a choice, rather than a subjugation forced upon her by recruiters, pimps and a severe drug addiction.

"She told me that at that time that the only thing that would have helped her is if there was intervention against her will" -- a move that was prohibited by law.

"Diane Sowden went to government, she went to whoever would listen, and she was not about to drop it because it became difficult," said Noreen Waters, a former Vancouver police detective who worked on child pornography laws and raising the age of sexual consent before retiring in 2003. Waters worked with Sowden on various committees over 13 years.

"She wasn't a person who, when the going got rough, was going to back down, Waters said."

The new sexual age of consent may not make her job easier -- only a revolutionary education of johns and sexual predators could do that -- but it could alter it dramatically.

Sowden said the new legislation gives Children of the Street Society more fodder for their workshops, as they educate men in their 20s, men in John Schools, in detention centres and students across the province that it's illegal to have sex with someone under the age of 16.

"We had so many American predators targeting 14-year-old girls because it was illegal in their state, but it was free rein for them in Canada, she said, noting that it's through sites like Craigslist, internet messaging, Facebook and other networking portals that young people fall into the hands of sexual predators.

"Now, they can't target the 14- or 15-year-old-kids in Canada, any more than they would in their own state."

Sowden, who has other children besides the daughter she lost to the streets, is now raising two of her daughter's five children.

"The fact that I'm raising my two grandchildren, who are struggling because of the lifestyle of their mother, makes it more passionate for me to do my work."

It could start with a text message, a lonely plea for companionship or an invitation to a party.

On Thursday morning the young educators of the Children of the Street Society met to recap their experiences giving workshops. The room immediately filled with energy as they discussed how they educate kids on how not to give too much of themselves away on Facebook and via webcam. The group brainstormed how to change the scripts of the monologues they present to late-elementary and secondary students across the province, as part of the workshop Taking Care of Ourselves & Taking Care of Others, or TCO2.

Over the last school year, TCO2 ran 406 workshops for 18,500 people in 28 communities, and in the last year, the society doubled the number of young people it sends out to schools.

Their monologues depict some of the more typical and realistic ways young people could be exploited and lured into the sex trade.

Trang Doan, 26, enacts the story of a girl who slips from teenage experimental party mode to blatant prostitution: "I went from penthouses to the backs of cars . . . I knew any night could be my last."

Darryl McAskill, 24, tells the story of a boy who quit school, used meth for the energy to hold down two jobs and ended up on the street, only to be recruited.

In a monologue practice, Megan Frankham, 26, acts the part of a tomboyish soccer star lured into the world of "erotic playmates" by a friend who promoted herself on Craigslist, only to end up a drug-addicted teen mom.

Frankham's scenario was especially chilling, as it mirrored recent real life events. In May, police found five girls in the care of the Ministry for Children and Family Development to be selling sex on the Craigslist website.

Meetings like this happen every day, but on Thursday, it was news of the "cold text," an anonymous message, similar to spam that arrives in a cellphone inbox, that popped out of the conversation.

Just this week, during a workshop at a local school, a student had piped up and held out his cell phone. He had received a cold text message that very moment.

"It read, 'Hey, I can't tell you who I am yet, but I'm lonely, and let's meet up,' " said COS facilitator Meghan Toal. It sounds innocent enough, but these "cold texts" are used as bait for sexual predators.

Sowden, herself, presents a separate program called It Can Happen to Anybody, which 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.

In many ways, Diane Sowden became the person she so desperately needed 14 years ago.

"I wish someone had spoken to my daughter when she was in Grade 6 or 7. There wasn't a lot of knowledge about recruitment in the sex trade when my daughter was being targeted. No one understood, and I was a paranoid parent.' "

Today, at least, she and her staff can find comfort in the changes they've seen since the organization began.

"Only in 1999 was it recognized in law that a sexually exploited child needed protection and that he or she was not the criminal," she said.

"When I started out the phrase 'sexual exploitation' wasn't even being used. These children were seen as prostitutes. They were just bad kids and there was no understanding of how the recruitment happens."

In the last year, the Children of the Street Society trained hotel employees to recognize and report when rooms are being used for prostitution and is a leader in the push to educate people about an expected increase in demand for prostitutes during the 2010 Olympics.

Building on the awareness that it's not a minor's choice to enter the sex trade, Sowden and her allies will push for legislation that would allow police officers to take action without the minor having to make a complaint.

"If a police officer or social worker goes into a trick pad or on the street and picks up a kid that they know is being sexually abused, even if that person won't make a statement, they can make recommendations for the Crown to lay charges," she said.

"That's what we'd like. But we're just not there yet."

mfill@vancouver.sun.com

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