

THE MISSISSAUGA NEWS

The Dam...gives peace a chance

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Friday nights are etched in stone for Bill Crawford and company. After kicking the ball around with his two soccer-crazed daughters, ages 11 and 13, the rugged 36-year-old hops on his sporty Yamaha motorcycle and heads over to the Meadowvale West Church Centre.

There, Crawford and his 10-member team congregate with dozens of teens. They eat dinner, tell jokes and play pool, fooseball and video games. Then, they cap off the night sipping coffee at a local Tim Hortons.

But, these are not your ordinary bunch of youths. Some come from broken families. Others are runaways. Several have been shunned by their peers at school. All are plagued with problems that would make a life mired in criminality and gang activity an attractive and easy alternative.

But, "all they need is a sense of belonging, and we can steer them away from that kind of life," says Crawford, executive director of The Dam, a street youth drop-in program in Meadowvale.

In operation since 1995, The Dam offers helpful programs such as alternative education and employment skills to marginalized teens, initiatives designed to help teens stay at home, stay in school, stay at work and stay away from street gangs.

Counselling, mentoring and relationship-building are also important parts of The Dam's ministry for youth -- and they're all free for the asking by local teens.

City Councillor Pat Saito, in whose ward the Dam resides, calls the organization a, "welcome and much-needed addition to the community."

Crawford says he's seen it all in the last decade: Drug addicts, alcoholics, and gang members are familiar and welcome faces at the Dam. "I have seen some very well organized gang activity come through this place," he says.

He admits that while the Dam, which welcomes more than 200 new members annually, has helped some disaffected teens, others have continued on with their criminal ways.

The allure of the Dam lies in its simplicity. There is no dress code and no stiffs in suits and ties telling members what to do or how to act. Youths face no penalties or get into any trouble when they don't show up, and their opinion is always valued, regardless of race, creed, colour or religion.

Unlike in a street gang, the Dam is nobody's turf.

"We're not going to turn you away because you're troubled or because you've committed some crimes. We're going to work with you and try to help you," says Crawford.

"We wish we could be everywhere with these teens all the time, but we know when they're hanging out with us, they're in a good environment where people will listen to them."

Crawford remembers a gang member he identifies as Ryan who hung out at the Dam two years ago. The 16-year-old Meadowvale resident was a member of a white supremacist gang. He was the real deal, recalls Crawford, with a shaved head, black army boots and a hatred for blacks he would exude with little provocation.

"Him and his crew would beat up on blacks for the fun of it," said Crawford.

Before long, the black teens Ryan and other members of his gang were pummeling on a weekly basis turned the tables on Ryan. They began to fight back and soon Ryan was suffering the worst of the brouhahas.

"He couldn't take it anymore. He wanted to get out. He was starting to fear for his life and he realized he was hurting innocent people," said Crawford.

But, when Ryan tried to leave his gang, other members threatened him, warning him that, "if you're not going to come back, we're going to kill you."

That's when, Crawford said, the Dam took action. Dam workers spoke with the gang members as well as teens in Meadowvale's black community who still "wanted a piece" of Ryan.

"We had a guy who worked here that was black and Ryan wouldn't even look at him at first. We thought if we took him in and showed him that people cared about him, he would change his ways," recalls Crawford.



Photo by Steve Uhraney

Bill Crawford (centre), executive director of Meadowvale's The Dam youth drop-in centre, believes the best prescription for troubled teens is a little tender loving care, a sense of belonging and realistic alternatives.



Staff photo by Rob Beintema

Peel Regional Police Constable Herb Szauerzopf spends more time getting to know youths on the street than sitting behind his desk at the Meadowvale community police station.

"We made the transition out of the gang smooth for him, and it was the black worker that we had here that Ryan ended up connecting with," said Crawford.

"We knew there was an element of risk in what we were doing, but Ryan needed help."

Ryan has since found a job and moved out of Mississauga.

Still, Crawford understands the Dam is fighting a losing battle. "It's a huge mistake to think it's cool to be bad and hurt other people, but there are people out there who think like that because of their background or peer pressure or whatever, and won't change their minds," he says.

"It's those teens that are on the fence that we feel can benefit from the Dam."

In 2002, The Dam lost its space in the newly renovated Meadowvale Town Centre and is currently looking for a new home. They meet weekly at the church centre and organize the rest of their meetings at restaurants and coffee shops.

While several Peel Regional Police officers are out there trying to arrest Mississauga's 400-plus gangsters, others such as Constable Herb Szauerzopf are taking a pro-active approach.

Szauerzopf has worked out of the Meadowvale Community police station for the last five years. It's one of 11 mini stations across the city.

The Paul Bunyanesque cop doesn't go undercover or reach for his gun very often. Instead, the quick-witted veteran spends a huge chunk of his day talking to young people.

"There's a bus station right next to us, so I'll just go for a walk and talk to the kids," says Szauerzopf. "It's always good to get to know them."

Szauerzopf, or Herb as the community has come to know him, sees activity that straggles the line between nuisance and danger quite often. When he spots teenagers loitering around Meadowvale Town Centre, decked in red bandannas and baggy clothes, he has to determine whether or not they're gang members.

But Szauerzopf isn't a small man and doesn't feel intimidated. Instead, he seizes on the opportunity to get to know the teens a little better.

"As a community officer, you want to interact with them, ask them how they're doing in school and if they're involved in any extra-curricular activities," he says.

More than 25 per cent of those who visit the station are teenagers, says Szauerzopf. Some are frustrated and angry at the world, and Herb fears they may look to crime or a gang to assuage their problems.

"Some of these kids are undecided which way they want to go," he says. "It's these borderline kids that you want to reach out to and give them other, more positive options."

Szauerzopf is mindful, however, that enforcement is a huge factor in ridding Mississauga of gangs. His station, along with other neighbourhood police depots, have special "gang contact cards" residents can fill out if they know the name of an alleged gang member. That card is then sent to the police department's Intelligence Bureau for investigation.

Peel police's Neighbourhood Policing Units are visiting Mississauga's 29 high schools quite frequently this year, not only to monitor youth gang activity, but to educate students on making smart choices. Szauerzopf says officers conduct class presentations that touch on the negative and potentially-deadly consequences of gang life.

Given the massive teen population, high schools are both a recruiting zone and a breeding ground for gangs, police say.

The Mississauga-based Canadian Safe School Network (CSSN) is trying to curtail gang influences in city schools.

A national, charitable organization dedicated to reducing youth violence and making schools and communities safer, CSSN has partnered with the Toronto Argonauts of the Canadian Football League to produce the Huddle Up Program, an initiative that allows players from the team to go into high schools and talk to students about street gangs.

"Their message is simple: Gangs aren't the answer," says CSSN president Stuart Auty. "Some of these players were in street gangs when they were younger, and they'll talk about how leaving the gang made them a better



Police reporter Louie Rosella takes an in-depth look at the escalating problem of street gang activity in Mississauga and Peel. This is the last of a three-part series.

person and how it was clearly the right choice."

Auty admits it's difficult to dissuade students from joining or remaining in gangs because they offer many things that most teenagers want. They're dangerous, exciting and on the edge.

"(Gangs) are a very natural thing for kids to be drawn to," says Auty. "It's that time of their lives where they can do no wrong and nothing can hurt them. It's cool to be in a gang."

That misconception is why the Argos have been brought into the equation.

"These are successful public figures -- professional football players -- who have the life experience (of being in a gang) to talk about," says Auty. "Kids tend to gravitate to them, and they'll listen to the message."

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