

[FEATURE: Taking the bus, taking time to talk and listen](#)

By Lara Gerrits
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As the doors of the Reach-Out bus swish open, a cool, crisp breeze slowly infiltrates the warm, muggy air inside.

Outside, a cold nip leaves fingers tingling and breath visible — but that doesn't seem to stop the kids who trickle out from PoCo's Hyde Away youth centre, trudging through fallen leaves as they make their way to

the lights of the bus on a dark road. Some of the older youth are bundled in oversized hoodies but the younger ones — 11- and 12-year-olds — are wearing nothing more than t-shirts and jeans.

Already aboard are driver Starla Kingston, 30, an experienced outreach worker, and Kyle Berdusco, 23, relatively new to working with youth. Berdusco, donning baggy sweatpants and Chuck Taylor-like sneakers, fits in with the pair of teenage boys sharing a cigarette outside the bus' door.

Kingston, although more than 10 years older than most of the kids on and around



the bus, wears a baggy black hoodie and a pair of jeans that take years off her age. She spends most of her time aboard the bus, propped up on its high, black driver's seat, where young people looking for conversation seem to congregate.

Welcome to Project Reach-Out.

ALL ABOARD

The mobile drop-in centre, the first of its kind locally, aims to connect outreach workers with hard-to-reach youth to reduce alienation, isolation, violence, vandalism and substance use and abuse. This fall, it is out on Tri-City streets every Friday and Saturday from 7 p.m. to midnight, stopping at locations where young people tend to congregate.

Kids can sit and talk with one of the onboard outreach workers about problems they may be experiencing or just life in general; they can get information or resources about substance abuse, get free condoms and information about other forms of birth control; or just hang out with friends and draw on the windows with provided markers, listen to music and have a snack.

It's not only a safe place for kids to go after local youth centres such as the Hyde Away close at 10 p.m. so they don't wander the streets but, also, a service that offers a unique kind of support system.

"We are their friends and, through that, we talk to them about how they live in the world," says Jerome Bouvier, the program's founder.

Services that are supposedly designed for kids don't meet their needs but the needs of the adults who are hired to deliver them, he says. There's not a lot of resources available to youth after 5 p.m. and, even if there were, as they are designed today, they wouldn't work.

"Kids don't say, 'Well, I think I'm going to go over there and get drug counselling,'" he says.

What's needed is a new approach, one where young people can be supported and loved so that when it comes to making decisions, hopefully they make appropriate ones.

"Love them up. Love them up and hopefully from that they will make choices that are healthy," he says.

Bouvier put the retired shuttle bus on the road about two years ago after he returned to the area from California, where he co-ordinated a similar program to help people in the spread-out county of Montecito.

There are some differences between the two programs.

The U.S. one thrived on more than \$700,000 a year while Project Reach-Out has trouble finding enough money to keep it on the road long-term, never mind more than two nights a week. Three outreach workers are currently employed by PoCoMo

Youth Services Society to operate the bus; one of them spends five to 10 hours a week doing follow-up with the youth they've contacted on their nights out.

It's not enough, Bouvier says. Ideally, he would like to see the bus operating at least three nights a week and outreach workers given the option of spending more time doing follow-up with some of the youth they meet.

"[Youth] need to know that adults care for them."

SAFE AND SECURE

"If this bus didn't go around to all the different parts [of the city], a lot more drama would go down," says Taylor, 15.

She's one of the young people who've flocked to the bus from the Hyde Creek rec centre, and she stays on or around it for a good two hours one recent Friday night.

The chatty teen is dressed up, wearing grey pants and a black lacy shirt because, earlier, she interviewed for a barista job at a local coffee shop, the first career goal of many for the driven girl.

After graduating from Terry Fox secondary, she wants to travel in Europe and work as a bartender to earn her tuition to study at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. Then she wants to move to a fashion capital like New York, start her own company and, eventually, pen a book. She has plans aplenty.

"And I'm going to reach them all because I said so," she says adamantly.

Taylor doesn't use drugs but says friends and family members do, and it's why she finds the support of the Reach-Out team comforting. Because so many of her loved ones come to her with their problems, she says it's helpful to unload some of the things she hears on an adult who will listen.

During the summer, she found refuge on the bus as a fight was about to break out at a skate park in PoCo. "I was safe," she explains.

And through her connections with the PoCoMo staff, she has been able to add some volunteer experience to her resume and, generally, be more involved in her community.

Taylor has been stepping aboard the Reach-Out bus for about a year-and-a-half, ever since her "foster" mom used to drive it. (Her "foster" mom is her birth mother's best friend and someone she stayed with for a time when she was younger.)

Before the bus existed?

"I'd be walking around PoCo with my friends while they were getting smashed," she says. "On this bus, I can have conversations with people who aren't, 'Let's go get hammered or pop a cap of E.'"

OVERCOMING TRAGEDY

Andrew Lins-Bertrand, 18, mentions his past quickly while smoking a cigarette outside the doors of the Reach-Out bus, splashed with colour at the hands of a young graffiti artist.

Eleven years ago, his stepfather, Darcy Richard Bertrand, killed his grandparents in front of him outside Our Lady of Lourdes church as they left a Thanksgiving Day service, then stabbed his mom at home a short time later.

Lins-Bertrand hasn't had the easiest of lives. But at 18, now graduated from Terry Fox secondary school and working at a gas station, the well-spoken young man says he is doing well, living on his own in a basement suite in PoCo thanks to a government Independent Living foster care program.

Lins-Bertrand says he has had people to talk to during the past 11 years but the outreach workers on the bus are different.

"They give you more realistic ideas and ways of dealing with it," he says, noting most adults just tell him to involve himself in sports teams, etc. "It gives me a safe place to talk about my problems."

When the tall, lanky man boards the bus, Kingston greets him with huge smile and peppers him with questions about his whereabouts and his wellness — she hasn't seen him in a while and is happy to see he's doing okay.

"Are you going to go to college?" she asks.

'I'M GLAD THEY'RE OUT THERE'

Cpl. Doug Francis, co-ordinator of the Coquitlam RCMP School Liaison Officer program, says the more people who help young people, the better — especially when those people are working at night, when there isn't much contact for kids aside from the police.

"They've got the right spirit there, they've got the right idea," he says, noting that the police stay at arms-length from the Reach-Out program, which bike patrol officers frequently see during summertime at popular youth hang-out spots.

A lot of the people Reach-Out aims to serve aren't working or attending school Monday to Friday, Francis said, noting it could be a great idea to enhance the bus service so it can operate during the week.

"The Friday night and the Tuesday night are the same to them," he said of many of the young people who might be helped who are in foster care or, sometimes, homeless.

"They're the last person they can trust."

'WE DON'T TURN THEM AWAY'

As the bus leaves the Hyde Away youth centre shortly before midnight, Kingston reiterates the uniqueness of the program she's grown passionate about over the last year.

"We are able to access the kids that are drinking and doing drugs," she says. "We don't turn them away."

Drug use and illegal activity are not tolerated on or around the bus but Reach-Out workers react differently than youth centre staff when it comes to kids smoking or swearing.

Instead of kicking them off the bus, Kingston says the youth are asked if their behaviour is respectful of others, as mandated by one of the points on a list of bus expectations posted prominently near its front doors. And because the reaction is unique to kids, they listen.

The challenges are unique to the service.

Because the bus has no set stops, Kingston says it's sometimes difficult to build trust with young people when seeing new faces. At the same time, the mobility of the service is part of its draw.

GOING HOME

As the bus makes its way back to its Coquitlam storage space, the quiet of the dark road is emphasized by Kingston and Berdusco – silent, another night behind them.

Moments later, in the middle of answering a question from a reporter, Kingston stops mid-sentence. She thinks she sees kids in a parking lot near Lougheed Highway and Westwood Street and is focused on what they're doing.

Although it turns out to be a false alarm, Kingston talks about the night, the job.

"I just kind of realized it's where I belong — I can actually make a difference."

- To find out more information about Project Reach-Out, to volunteer or to donate funds, contact Jerome Bouvier at jerome@jeromeinspires.com or visit www.pocomo.org.