



Paul vanPeenen/NOW  
Jerome Bouvier, left, and Micah Nobel  
with the Project Reach-Out bus that  
hits Tri-Cities streets Thursday, Friday  
and Saturday nights

### **This bus catches kids where they are**

By Jennifer Saltman - Staff Reporter

A group of five girls was waiting for a bus late one night near Poirier Street in Coquitlam. A bus pulled up, but it wasn't the one they were waiting for.

The doors opened and the people on board, youth workers, changed the girls' evening.

The girls had all been drinking and were plotting how to get their very intoxicated friend home without her mother finding out.

The workers on the bus took them in for an hour and gave them information - that it would be best to take their friend home, but let her mother know so their friend could be looked after.

The youth workers then put the girls on a city bus, told the driver the situation and asked the girls to call once they arrived home.

At 1 a.m., they received a call - the girls were home, their friend was safe and they had woken up her mother and told her the situation.

"It's a big step to have that come from a youth," says Adi Aharon, a team leader on the bus.

The bus that picked the girls up that night is the area's first mobile youth drop-in centre, on the road since Dec. 3, and part of PoCoMo Youth Services Society's Project Reach-Out.

This success story was one of many told at a gathering at the Best Western PoCo Inn & Suites Wednesday night. Workers and kids told of the difference the bus has made in the community in the two months it has been on the road.

A renovated airport shuttle bus, purchased with casino money from the City of Coquitlam and painted by youth, delivers crisis intervention, education, information, referrals and follow-up support to at-risk youth.

The bus is a mobile resource centre for youth, staffed by adult outreach workers and a youth mentor team, and modelled on a concept program manager Jerome Bouvier developed in Mendocino County, Calif. A similar vehicle was used to overcome geographical barriers there.

"When things close down, we're open," Bouvier says. "They come and this is their home."

Between Dec. 3 and Jan. 15, the bus went out three nights per week - Thursday, Friday and Saturday - for a total of 14 nights out and 70 hours of service. In that time, staff made 525 contacts, an average of 37 youths per night, and the team is on a first-name basis with 72 kids.

"It's so cool to (drive by and) see kids running out of the bush," Bouvier says.

It breaks down to 216 females and 310 males of different ages. Staff made contact with one youth under 11, 49 11- and 12-year-olds, 169 13- and 14-year-olds, 188 15- and 16-year-olds, 75 17- and 18-year-olds and 20 youth over 18.

On the Thursday after Bouvier compiled the statistics, the bus made 102 contacts after a high school dance in Port Coquitlam, bringing the total to 627 contacts in 15 nights.

Bouvier says there's a core group of youths that seek the bus each week, but staff make contacts outside of that group by visiting different locations every night - 47 different locations in the Tri-Cities since Dec. 3.

It's at one of those locations staff met 14-year-old Theresa Sickles and 16-year-old Ashley Pozzolo. Both girls attended the gathering Wednesday.

"It's a lot of fun," Pozzolo says of the bus. "They don't give an opinion on what you should do."

"You can talk, just talk to them, and hang out," Sickles adds.

Along with snacks and socializing, the team on the bus provides street outreach and education, information and referrals, and prevention and education. Workers have handed out program brochures, community program information, condoms and recreation passes.

Sickles also made a resume for the first time on the bus's laptop computer.

Before the bus was coming around, Pozzolo says she and her friends would try to figure out something to do, and if nothing was going on, they were "just out walking around in crappy weather" or, Sickles says, "making ruckus on the streets."

Youth aren't the only ones who've been impacted by the project.

"It's been personally one of the most enriching things I've had the opportunity to do," Aharon says. "They're sharing stories that nobody else would hear."

Bouvier says youth are sharing these stories because of the youth workers and team leaders on the bus.

"Rare is the occasion when you can meet an amazing group of people like we have running the bus," he says. "I am in awe."

The project is funded primarily by a \$40,000 grant from the University College of the Fraser Valley Foundation. But unless the society can find more money for the project by the time the grant runs out April 1, the bus will be parked.

The bus has six part-time staff and does 20 hours per week of direct service, which costs about \$260 each time the bus goes out.

"It costs money to go out," Bouvier says. "We need funding and we need to continue."

And what will kids do with no bus coming around?

"We'll all be bummed 'cause there won't be much to do," Pozzolo says.

Sickles agrees: "We'll probably walk around and cause trouble."

ù For information or to find out how to help, call Jerome Bouvier at 604-251-6449 or e-mail [jerome@pocomo.org](mailto:jerome@pocomo.org).