

## Youth group hands out punishment with a human touch

But for a young addict with no skills and no desire to do much, failure seems constant

### Chris Purdy

The Edmonton Journal

After a teenager sneaked into her garage and trashed her car last summer, Journal reporter Chris Purdy participated in a unique community sentencing process for the young offender.

Edmonton's Youth Restorative Action Project is the only youth justice committee in the world strictly made up of young people, instead of adults, who sit down with young offenders to determine their punishments.

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EDMONTON - He wouldn't even look at me.

This 16-year-old punk with pimples and a wispy mustache sat slouched across from me with his right leg shaking up and down, mumbling every so often to the five other young people seated around us.

He didn't want to be stuck in a room with strangers on that cold December night and I didn't want to be wasting my time.

I went to the downtown studios of the Human Youth Society out of curiosity, to see if a group of kids -- some young offenders themselves -- would really punish this boy for breaking into my garage and trashing my car last summer.

And I wanted to see what the punk really looked like. I had been calling him "punk" in my head for the past four months.

He was the blank face I saw each time I opened my garage door, fumbling quickly for the light switch, fearing I'd get clobbered over the head by the person hiding inside.

And he was the shadow in the corner of my bedroom, the one who made me once jump out from under the covers screaming, "Get out of my house!"

A little melodramatic? Yes. I'd always lived in la-la land, reporting about all sorts of crime but never touched by it.

Until now.

In a grubby little room, we sat in a circle of mismatched kitchen chairs and an old car seat, a yellow flowered sheet covering part of a wall. Blotches of paint stained the floor.

The punk told us his real name, D--. He was a good foot shorter than me and I outweighed him by at least 30 pounds. He wasn't as threatening as I'd feared.

When I got the chance to speak, he finally looked at me from under the peak of his blue and white ball cap.

I told him I was just a normal person, a good person, I thought. And I would have given him my rusty-piece-of-junk Ford Escort if he really needed it.

"Really?" he asked. His eyes widened.

"Yeah."

For the first time, I think, he saw me as a real person. And as he began to talk about his grim life on the streets, sleeping in stairwells and high on drugs, I saw him as a sad, lost boy.

He wouldn't say more than a few words at a time. And as part of this special out-of-court process, an offender only has to share as much as he wants to.

Eventually, D. told us he grew up in Edmonton. He never knew his father. He has no brothers or sisters. His mother was a good parent. She tried, he said.

He never liked school, so he dropped out at age 12. By 13, he was doing drugs -- first pot and then the nasty stuff, crystal meth.

Meth provides a cheap but highly addictive high that keeps users awake without eating for days. It's cooked up from toxic substances such as camping fuel and brake fluid, and causes brain damage, violent behaviour and paranoia.

When D was high, he hung out with other troublemakers. He watched them break into cars and houses, but he didn't join them, he said. When I pushed him on it, he confessed to throwing a rock through a car window and stealing some CDs.

His mother eventually caught him dealing drugs and kicked him out of the house. At 14, he became a ward of the province. But he regularly ran away from his assigned group homes.

D said he had been living on the streets for eight months and was high on meth for three weeks straight when he wandered into my backyard on Aug. 12. He stepped into my unlocked garage and fell asleep in my car, also unlocked. Why would I lock it? It wasn't worth much.

D spent the next day drinking Coke, eating a box of crackers and chomping on apples strewn across the lawn. He was hungry, he said.

And he was stupid. He decided to steal my car but mistakenly locked the doors.

"I'm a dumb criminal," D told us. His sullen face turned into a smile for the first time. And we laughed, almost like friends.

He said he tore apart my garage and ran off to a nearby friend's house to borrow some tools. He crawled in through the car's sun roof, denting the frame in the process, and ripped open the steering column. The car was a write-off.

D was sleeping in the car, again, when two men fixing my fence went looking for some lumber in the garage and found him that afternoon. They startled him. He took a swing at one of them with a hammer before running down the alley.

I think about how differently things could have gone that day if one of the workmen had been injured, if I had walked into the garage instead, if he had broken into my home in the middle of the night.

Would D have hurt someone? He said he was hallucinating and he was so messed up he didn't know what he was doing. So, yes, I think he could have.

After police began searching my south-side neighbourhood later in the day, a police dog caught up with him.

D pushed up the sleeve on his coat to show us the bite marks on his right arm. He claimed the cop ordered the dog to attack him after he was already on the ground.

The others in the circle gushed with sympathy. But I didn't really believe him. I didn't feel bad about the dog bite. I wanted him to apologize. Despite his sad life, he made the choice to do drugs and trash my car. I wanted him to start making some smart decisions.

D said he wanted to change. He hadn't touched meth since his arrest. The thought of going to jail scared him straight, he said. He also landed a job at a Shell station and had returned to living at a group home.

He told us he wanted to pay a fine for the crime and leave it at that. Maybe get his own apartment soon and become a house painter. Easy. No big deal.

The others in the room reacted swiftly, warning D he was trying to do too much too fast. They wanted him to have structure, counselling and help in his life.

Three of these young people have been there before. The fraud artist in the group, a pretty teenage girl, told D a group home would provide him with shelter and support. The young, single mom, who has been in and out of jail for five years, said probation would help keep him in line.

And the recovering meth addict, a young man with a tuque pulled down to his eyes, said it's too hard to quit drugs alone. D would need counselling.

They asked D about his hobbies, interests. Sports?

No. Nothing. He just likes to sit around glued to PlayStation with his girlfriend.

"I'm lazy," he said.

Lazy and dumb. That's how he described himself to us that day. Does he not see anything good inside his soul?

The group did.

"The panel believes that D is on the right path to turn things around for himself," the youths wrote in their report.

After more than two hours, they agreed on D's punishment: up to 12 months of probation, including counselling for his addiction; and 50 hours of community service hours, including \$250 in restitution and an essay to be published in The Journal about drug abuse. A judge, noting D was a first-time offender, later approved the sentence in court.

Following the conference, there were nods and good lucks and good-byes.

D caught me in the hallway, finally looked me in the eye and said, "I'm sorry." I shook his hand.

I believe he's sorry.

I believe he wants to stay clean.

But that doesn't mean he'll be OK. For every kid who finds his way, there's another one who's still lost.

Since we met in December, D was fired from his job and kicked out of the group home. He's living on the streets again and I worry more about him than about how I no longer have a car.

I have a down-filled comforter on my bed, a bean casserole in my refrigerator and enough money in the bank to keep me satisfied.

What I need is faith in justice and humanity and happy endings. And, for right now, I have wrapped all of these things up in this punk, this kid, this sad, lost boy.

I wish him well.

[cpurdy@thejournal.canwest.com](mailto:cpurdy@thejournal.canwest.com)

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