

Streetfront Alternative: Running For Their Lives

Trevor Stokes



Inside:

President's Message

2

On the Edge of Chaos

4

Bursary Winners

6

Award Winners

8

Awards & Grants

14

Executive Contact

15

The Last Word

16

Craftsman Collision at the corner of Powell and Victoria Drive knows a lot about the Streetfront Alternative Program. The shop has been around since 1977, fixing cars and employing kids from the neighbourhood. The employees nod and wave when you go past, nothing too special aside from the tacit recognition that you are a “local” and deserve to be acknowledged. Cigarettes and coffee cups in hand, overalls dusted in white, the workers sit back telling jokes and commenting on life, while twenty kids jog past them. The kids jogging don’t elicit any specific comment – they are a fixture – as common as

the mailbox or the bus stop. The same group of kids has been running this route for 38 years. Three times a week. 44 weeks a year. I wonder what they think about us. I like to think they are quietly proud or at least impressed by these kids. I think they are. I know I am.

The Streetfront Alternative Program started in 1977. Borne out of a need to offer a different kind of classroom experience for kids struggling with a traditional school environment, it became one of the programs that Britannia Secondary utilized to bring education and hope back to some of its ...continued on page 3

From the Editor's Desk:

Greetings from Leanne Hagglund, the new newsletter editor!

This edition features the winners of \$6500 (actually more than that as we went over budget this year!) worth of scholarship and bursary money. This year's winners are an amazing group, all with unique and inspirational life stories.

Our cover story, written by Trevor Stokes, a teacher with the Streetfront Alternative Program, in Vancouver, describes his program's use of long distance marathon running as a way to build a student's sense of self and courage in the face of adversity. Stokes writes, "The run became the perfect metaphor for the kids at Streetfront. Success in the running program required exactly what most of the kids were lacking- dedication, commitment, perseverance and passion."

And long-time Alternate champion Tom McEvay highlights a Vancouver Island University course for prospective Alternate teachers he has put together to occupy his time in retirement.

I look forward to my new position as newsletter editor for the BC Alternative Education Association. I welcome this new challenge and am excited about being part of the BCAEA Executive family.

We are always looking for insightful articles to include in upcoming issues of the newsletter or to highlight student work like on the back cover. My contact information is on the page 15, so feel free to contact me with questions, ideas or articles.

Happy Summer holidays to everyone!

L Hagglund

President's Message

JD Duncan

This will be my last column as President as Mike Shaw will be taking the reins at the beginning of July. I will be staying on as Conference Registrar for at least another year. How life marches on. I recently attended my mother's 90th birthday celebration and my eldest son is getting married this summer and by the time we go to press another Provincial election will have passed.

I saw many new faces and new names at our last conference which to me an indication that newer and younger teachers are taking up the torch of alternate education and advocating for youth that need to learn in different ways, different time frames and just do not fit into the rigid system that we call regular school. It was nice to see the exchange between experienced teachers and the newer generations.

As someone with 40 years working with difficult and challenging youth, I do believe I have learned a lot. I asked my mother, who is a very healthy and active 90 year old, what wisdom she would impart. Her advice is to stay active and keep moving. I took her cross country skiing this last winter so she walks the talk.

What has been my secret to still feel so positive about working with alternate students? First and foremost I do not take responsibility for their schooling. I lay that on their shoulders. It frees me to truly support them in their



educational journey. Secondly I give them unconditional positive regard, accepting them for themselves and their possible shortcomings. I have a belief that everyone can change if we give them enough time and never reject them. (We can reject behaviour without rejecting the student). And of course patience, patience and more patience.

I also feel fortunate that my great love of white water kayaking, which is most fun during the spring runoff, keeps me sane and leaving my work behind as well as following my mother's advice: Keep moving.

I have enjoyed my year with my students watching them go from "I can't do this, I have never been good at math" to "Hey, I think I am getting this stuff." Through support, encouragement, and believing in them, mental blocks built up through negative school experiences are removed. This is the work we do.

I encourage anyone interested to get involved with our association. I have been told I have a lifetime membership on being conference registrar but I would love someone else to think about taking up that torch and give me an opportunity to show you the ropes. It is fun and I have lots of contact with all participants in our conferences.

Enjoy the rest of this school year and hopefully I will see you at next year's conference. ♦

Running For Their Lives

(continued from page 1)

most disenfranchised students. It was founded by two outdoor enthusiasts, John Jordan and Bill McMillan, both of whom found the four walls of a classroom stifling not only for their students, but for themselves. They set out to create an outdoor education program that expanded the classroom, put an emphasis on physical education and got kids excited about school and life.

One of the pillars of their new school was a mandatory jogging program. Students and staff alike would go for a 5 km run, three times a week. The run was non-negotiable. The expectations were the same for everybody – go out and do your best. It was never about how fast you could do it; it was all about doing it. The run was therapy at its highest level. It improved the mind, the body and the soul. As Bill often told me, “the best counseling sessions I ever had in 40 years of working with youth, all came from the time we spent on the runs.”

Rarely is there a concentrated block of time devoted just to you and a student, be it as a counselor or a teacher. But the runs change that – running alongside a kid, you use every trick you’ve got to keep that kid moving; persuasion, guilt, threats, pleasantries but without a doubt the greatest motivator is just talking to the kid.

Once the kid is embedded in the story that you are telling, they will slowly start to tell you their story. Before they realize it, the huffing and puffing has vanished and a slow and rhythmic stride taken their place. They’ve hit a point of stasis – where time virtually

is eliminated and the course, the conversation and the experience become everything. Watching silently, as a kid goes well beyond their expected capabilities, is a bewildering thing. The mind is incredible, of that there is no doubt, but its ability to be fooled is almost equally astonishing. Before the kid realizes it, they’ve eclipsed the 2 km they had established as their limit for the day, they turn the final corner and a fully completed 10 km is only steps away.

“The run” became a perfect metaphor for the kids at Streetfront. Success in the running program required exactly what most of the kids were lacking – dedication; commitment; perseverance and passion. I’ve coached every sport you can imagine over the past twenty years and I can unequivocally say that getting students to run long distances is the single most challenging activity you can offer, EVER. There is no ball to entertain you. There is no net to tantalize you. No teammate to pick you up. No cheerleader to help your mind wander. There is not the ever-present hope of scoring a goal or a touchdown. There are only strides and more strides – every aspect of it, dependent on the intrinsic motivation of the kid. If the kid wants to stop, he or she will stop. Their brain and body are screaming for them to stop. My job is to make sure they don’t stop.

I’ve been teaching at Streetfront since 1999. I subbed there one day, found out they ran as a class, and finished my first 10 km in jeans and sneakers. The kids were dressed the same as I was but that was of their own choosing. Some didn’t have shorts to wear but most did. I tried to convince them

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On the Edge of Chaos

Tom McEvay

When I retired in June of 2012 I knew it was more a matter of moving on than quitting work. After 34 years in public education and 25 years as a principal it was time to focus specifically on many of the passions I have. In fact, at my retirement celebration my friends and colleagues erected a banner that read "TOM IS NOT RETIRING, HE IS REWIRING." As I near the one year mark in "retirement" I can certainly say it has been an amazing journey so far.

One of my many passions has long been the challenges facing the most at risk youth in our society. I am well aware that all youth are at risk, but for many, the risk factors seem to be exponentially greater. Poverty, health, mental health, cognitive issues, fetal alcohol, abuse, family struggles, lack of support, poor role models, drugs, alcohol, addiction, self-image, peer pressure and so many more barriers disproportionately face a number of young people in our communities.

For the past 15 years my career in the Alberni School District was dedicated to the most vulnerable and marginalized students in our school system. In my role as Principal of Alternative Programs for School District #70 I had the privilege to serve students who needed us the most. I was honoured to do this as part of an amazing team of teachers, youth care workers, teaching assistants, District resource people, office staff and community partners. Our team grew together every day and became a true learning community. We saw remarkable resiliency, change and achievement among our students.

When I retired I knew I had to find a way to continue to make a contribution to the critical work

I describe above.

I established a consulting company with the intent of making my experience and passion available to other schools and Districts. I also knew that I had to find a way to harness and share the incredible learning I had been a part of for the past 34 years. Vancouver Island University gave me that opportunity when they approached me about developing a course in alternative education for their Special Education Teacher Specialty post graduate program.

From my own experience I knew that there is little academic preparation available for teachers in the field of alternative education. By and large, teachers for decades have been, and continue to be, trained to work in an industrialized, assembly line system of education designed for a society that has changed dramatically. Education has not kept pace with the needs of a growing number of students. What had been described for many years as the fringe discipline of "Alternate Education," had evolved to try to meet these needs. In doing so we have seen that the much broader, and less evaluative, term of "Alternative Education" has received wider use.

I am a firm believer in the BC Ministry of Education advocacy of "personalized education." I have not been surprised when over the past year or two observations have been made that mainstream education could learn something from people working in alternative education. In my opinion, and that of many others, those people doing exemplary work in alternative education have been practising personalized education for many years.

I am very grateful that Vancouver Island University has given me the oppor-



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www.bctf.ca/bcaea

Running For Their Lives

(continued from page 3)

of the benefits of new technologies – moisture wicking shirts; running jackets; or polypropylene tights but they politely rejected such offers. The longer I taught at Streetfront, the more I understood why – they were willing to run with me but they were not willing to drop their East Van persona. They'd give me their effort but not their pride. I could live with that. I still do.

The runs slowly started to change at Streetfront. Eventually I took the program over and started to have more kids push themselves beyond our initial expectations. I remember running with Mauricio Garcia in 2000 and he was talking about wanting to run the Sun Run. He figured if we were doing all this training already why don't we enter a race and see how we do. I thought that was a pretty intriguing idea at first, and then I didn't think it was such a great idea.

The students I teach don't feel very special about themselves. They are generally not a proud group. Building self-esteem is maybe the single most important goal we have in our program, so I thought about Mauricio's comment through that lens. If we go and run the 10 km Sun Run, when we finish that race, we'll be surrounded by around 50 000 other runners. Of that 50 000, maybe 5 000 will be students, us included. We'll be sharing the experience with a great multitude. In my eyes, that would diminish our efforts. We wouldn't stand out; we'd be one of many. Sure, we did a great thing, an achievement that should be met with pride but for me that wouldn't be enough for my kids. They needed to do something so incredible that they very fact that they accomplished their goal, the world would have to take notice.

Mauricio and I decided to run the Seattle Marathon – all 42.2 km's. When Mauricio crossed the finish line, instead of 5 000 other students sharing his experience, he would be standing alone with the spotlight only on him.

Once the goal was set we went about getting prepared. Our normal 10 km runs needed some augmenting so we decided to periodically run the 18 km's to Deep Cove in North Vancouver. It was perfect for what we needed – my Dad could drive us back, the Tim Horton's on Dollarton would give us a bit of a treat and the hills would prepare us for the latter stages of the marathon which is quite hilly. He never questioned the training regimen.

Two months later we drove down to Seattle, stayed with my wife in a dodgy hotel that smelled of cat urine (we still stay there), watched Yao Ming beat the Supersonics and then got up and did something that nobody would have thought probable – an alternative kid from the downtown eastside, slipped on his And One basketball sneakers (we didn't have the funds to buy running shoes) and ran the whole marathon in 4 hours and 18 minutes. He never complained. He never stopped. He just ran. He was 14 years old. The next oldest was 17. He didn't have to share the spotlight with 5 000. He was the only one. I knew it was the right decision.

Running is hard work and at times your effort seems fruitless or worse, pointless. As the Streetfront kids jog through depressed and tough neighbourhoods, they don't see other joggers, they see sadness and pain. I believe physical fitness is gen- ...continued on page 12

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\$500 Student Bursary Winners

It seems to be becoming a habit, but since we made money on the conference yet again, when we were faced with another great bunch of applicants for our Bursaries and Achievement Awards, we decided that we couldn't decide amongst such a great group, so we ended up awarding six \$500 Bursaries (one extra), and nineteen \$100 Achievement Awards (four extra). We went over budget, but it was worth it! Each of this year's winners epitomizes Alternate students and we are delighted to recognize their hard work and determination. Congratulations to all the winners!



Dain Antalik

Dain is a focused and goal directed individual who successfully juggles the demands of school and work, and who has a clear vision of his future. Despite a history of personal, social, and academic challenges during his time at Cloverdale Learning Centre, he has achieved top marks in his academic studies. He starts in the Office Administration Program at Douglas College in September and hopes to continue his studies to earn an MBA.



Anissa Catamo

Anissa is a top student at Cloverdale Learning Centre, is actively involved in her school and community, consistently strives for excellence and achieves top marks in all subject areas. She is passionate about creating positive change in society through participation and action, and is currently a student leader on the Policy Change for Education Committee. She graduates in June, and plans to pursue a B.Sc., specializing in Botany.



Alyssa Florio

Alyssa has attended Cowichan Valley Open Learning Centre for the last two years and will graduate with a regular Dogwood in June after successfully completing many courses. She balances her academic life by playing hockey with the Kerry Park Female Midgets. After graduation she plans on continuing her studies by pursuing a Bachelor of Nursing degree.



Darla Larocque

Darla has not had an easy road in life, yet she has overcome obstacles that would cause most people to crumble and give in. In her fight for a better life for herself and her child, she shows resilience, determination, motivation, and strength of character that is admirable, and an inspiration to others. After graduation from VAST, she plans on getting a degree, likely in Child & Youth Care, or Criminology.



Jenna Schachter

Traumatic childhood experiences and poor choices derailed Jenna's academic progress for quite a while, yet she has overcome them, and now that graduation is in sight, works ever harder towards achieving that goal. She earns top marks at Outreach Secondary and has a very high GPA. After graduation in June, she plans to pursue a degree in Child & Youth Care.



Genevieve Schneider

Genevieve has been actively involved with art since she was old enough to hold a paint brush and has continued to study art throughout her school career. Since enrolling in CVOLC she has overcome anxiety and blossomed into an ambitious, uniquely stylish, highly motivated young woman. After graduation she is moving to Vancouver where she was accepted into the Visual College of Art and Design.

\$100 Student Achievement Award Winners

Congratulations to each of the following students for making significant, positive changes in their personal lives and academic progress since enrolling in alternative education. In concert with their teachers and peers, we are pleased to be able to recognize those positive changes by awarding them each a \$100 Student Achievement Award, which is disbursed as a gift certificate to a store chosen jointly with their sponsor teacher.



Johnathon Baker

Johnathon is currently in Grade 11 at Suwa'lkh Learning Centre in Coquitlam. He volunteers his time with the district Aboriginal Youth Leadership Committee and is a camp counsellor at a local outdoor camp. He loves being outdoors and playing the guitar.



Paolo Boyer

Paolo loves art and is very creative, spending much of his time drawing and painting. He recently volunteered at the GOAL clothing giveaway where he displayed leadership skills and hard work.



Zachary Brown-Semotiuk

Zachary struggled with attendance in mainstream school, but since joining TAPS last September has almost perfect attendance. He loves to cook, and his goal is to attend the Culinary Arts program at the College of New Caledonia.



Kayla Burgess

Kayla is finishing Grade 11 at Suwa'lkh and looking forward to Grade 12 and graduation. She enjoys being part of the Aboriginal Leadership Committee, spending time with her Grade 3 buddy class, and would like to travel after grad.



Hayley Clark

Hayley has outstanding attendance at TAPS, even though she has two long bus rides to get there from Nukko Lake each day. She works part time while attending school, and is very determined to grad and go on to college where she hopes to become a naturopath.



April Gagnon

April is a bubbly, positive student at TAPS in Prince George who has learned to balance work and school commitments. She has matured and made sacrifices in her quest for graduation, which she will do in June. Her goal is to become a dietitian.



Melodie Giraud

Melodie moved around a lot growing up, but her favourite memories are of her grandmother's campground in Hope, where she works in the summer. She loves music, and is an independent young lady with a bright future ahead of her.



Christian Huska

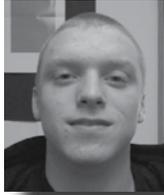
Christian started at Salmon Arm Storefront last September, and he has done well there since. Consistent expectations have helped to stabilize him and encourage him towards his goals of high school graduation and becoming an electrician.



Alex Johnstone

Alexandra has a passion for soccer and plays in Division 3 for the Port Moody Salsa. She is also a single mom, raising her eight month old son. She worked part-time and attended school while she was pregnant, and is known for her punctuality, politeness, and work ethic.

\$100 Student Achievement Award Winners



James Lemky

James will graduate in June with an Adult Dogwood from TAPS. He works part time for the last two years while attending school full time. He is hoping to attend the College of New Caledonia in the fall.



Jessica MacDonald

Jessica has an outgoing personality and is very warm-hearted. She enjoys biking the seawall and touring the city in the summer. She plans on travelling to Hungary after graduation, and is looking forward to a career in the hospitality industry.



Briana McEachern

Brian came to the Salmon Arm Storefront after unsuccessful stints at other schools and other programs. She is doing much better there, showing commitment to her studies, her friends, and healthy life choices.



Paige Morris

Paige is actively involved in both CABE Secondary and her community. She has a special interest in helping at-risk youth. She hopes to study Forensic Science at Douglas College and complete her degree at SFU.



Mariyah Porter

A tumultuous youth and a lot of moves meant that Mariyah didn't do well at school, at least until she started at CABE. She now has excellent attendance and looks forward to graduating in 2014.

\$100 Student Achievement Award Winners



Sydney Rickaby

Sydney has not had an easy life, but she has risen above all the trials and tribulations to become an independent, well-spoken young woman. She is creative, kind-hearted, and plans to attend post-secondary education in the counselling field.



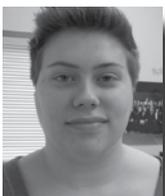
Joey Rooney

Joey started at CABE in 2010 and his favourite subjects were Math, Law, and Socials. He plays hockey for the Coquitlam Chiefs and lacrosse for the Adanacs. After graduation he wants to become a lawyer or take up a trade.



Josh Symes

Josh volunteers at Share on a weekly basis, works at Tim Horton's and plays several sports, including hockey, field lacrosse, and box lacrosse. He demonstrates his dedication and hard work to his studies every day.



Erin Watmough

Erin has attended TAPS since 2011, where she is known as a quiet leader. She does well academically, and upon graduation in June, hopes to enter the field of psychology or counselling.



Sabrina Wellington

Sabrina lives in a household with seven pets. She is a creative individual who enjoys listening to music, drawing and painting, and taking photographs. She plans on moving to Prince George with her boyfriend after graduation to help out on her uncle's farm.

Running For Their Lives

(continued from page 5)

erally a luxury. Those that have the means find the time and summon the energy to stay fit. They see the value and make the effort. Maslow's hierarchy of needs tells us that for most of our kids, finding food, housing or a safe environment trumps any thought of getting physically fit. Kids that value fitness do so because someone has provided that example. My kids don't have that in their lives but Streetfront could be that role model.

As the years passed and more and more kids started to buy into the marathon program, this became painfully clear. One year, I can't remember which one, we ran the Vancouver Marathon as we have for the past 10 years. When the race was over and I crossed the finish line with our last student, I saw my Dad up on the overpass taking photos. He was taking photos of me, but primarily he was taking photos of my students. He was so excited to see those kids do such an amazing thing. He had met many of them when he drove us back from our Deep Cove runs.

That was a pretty good year for us – I think we had 7 kids run the full marathon and 3 run the half. We were all celebrating and excited about our accomplishments. The sad thing was not one parent or family member showed up to watch their kid cross the finish line. We had 10 kids do something that no other kid in Vancouver, BC maybe even Canada, do that day, and nobody bothered to come and share the experience with their kids, except for my Dad.

At that point I fully realized how important this part of my job was. From that day I made it my goal to get as many kids as possible to

cross finish lines that lie before them. I understood that social inertia could work on my side. If I fostered this correctly, I could make this elite cabal of kids, the true leaders of my school. Their influence and social standing would draw others. I didn't care what the motivation was, as long as it got kids to commit. I told these brave kids that your motivation is to do something every day that most won't or can't do. When you do a 10 km training run, try to think how many other high school kids have done what you just did. Be proud of that. Be special. A motivational phrase I use all the time is, "We run because we can." I love its simplicity and its earnestness. We choose to do this – we are not forced or coerced to – we choose it because we know it will help us.

We run because each step that we don't want to take but we do any ways instills a mental toughness that will see us through the challenges that lay before us. This mental toughness will get us out of bed when we should. This mental toughness will give us the courage to tackle the difficult things in life, not to run and hide.

It's 11:35 p.m. on April 29, 2013. I promised a friend I'd write this article, so I'm doing what I said I would. In just over five days I will lead 18 kids down to the Vancouver Marathon Expo to pick up their race packages. Fourteen will be running the full marathon and four will be running the half. Mauricio Garcia will be coming back to run his 4th marathon with us, twelve years after his first.

On Sunday, May 5th I will start running with the half marathoners at 7:30 am, finish that

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race and then run the full marathon course backwards until I find our very last full marathoner. From there I will turn around and run the remainder of the full marathon course, picking up and motivating any student who needs it. I'll cross that finish line with that kid, always behind, it's always about them not me, and the other seventeen kids will be there cheering and dancing around. I will have seen every single kid at some stage of their race. For some, I ran beside them for 21 km. Others might only get a high five, some just a yell and a wave but everyone of them will know I was there. They'll know I cared enough to seek them out, to offer them my motivation. They'll know how proud I am of them.

I often tell my students that the memories you have of your marathons may not mean that much to you as a teenager but wait, there will come a time when those memories will lift your spirits and make you proud once again. I keep having this scene play over in my head of one of my students, now 45 years old, riding a bus downtown. He's behind two women dressed in the latest high tech fitness gear. They are talking anxiously about their preparation or apparent lack of preparation for the upcoming marathon: training schedules dissected, diets analyzed and physio appointments logged. Their nervous energy, palpable to all around them.

My student's life may have gone in many directions up to that point but for that moment he's not listening in as an outsider, rather he's an expert. He has already lived their experience. He is part of their conversation. One Sunday afternoon, thirty years before, he laced up his

sneakers, just like they will and he had the courage, just like they will, to go out and do something that will be painful and at times dreadful. But when he crossed that finish line, he was a champion that day. He did something that nobody else his age did. His medal worn like a badge of courage. That memory will not fade.

They say a marathon takes a little over 55 000 steps to complete. That's 55 000 opportunities to quit. My students don't stop – they don't quit. There is too much on the line. They may bend but they will not break. They will find the resolve to endure. They will finish the race. They will be better for it. They are running for their lives. ♦

Trevor Stokes has taught at Streeffront since 1999 and loves running with his students.

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Bursaries, Awards, and Grants

Mike Shaw

Our 2013 conference was yet another smash hit and yet another money maker for your Association. We are pleased that we continue to be able to offer \$7,000 of bursaries, awards, and grants, a figure which is all the more remarkable when you realize that our PSA has only about 350 members! As a teacher and current member of the BCAEA, you are eligible to apply for our grants or to act as a sponsor on behalf of your students who are applying for our awards. Attendance at our annual conference automatically confers current membership for a year.

The available awards are as follows:

Student Bursary

This bursary is intended for a graduating student who plans on attending a post-secondary institution or education/training program, and who is enrolled, or who was enrolled this school year, in an alternate education program. Five awards of \$500 are available, and the deadline for applications is March 15th each year.

Student Achievement Award

This award is available to an at-risk student currently enrolled in an alternative education program which has resulted in progress towards achieving their personal and/or academic goals. Fifteen awards, consisting of \$100 gift certificates jointly chosen by the student and sponsor teacher are available, and the deadline for applications is March 15th each year.

Student Activity Grant

This grant is available to fund an activity which will be of benefit to at-risk students in an alternative program. Four awards totalling a maximum

of \$2000 are available. There is no deadline for applying; submissions are reviewed when received.

Regional Conference Grant

This grant is to support a regional alternative education conference that has as one of its goals the promotion of membership in the BCAEA. A single grant of up to \$500 is available.

Kathi Hughes Innovative Programming Award

This award is given to an alternative education teacher whose program innovation is deemed significant, and who is willing to share the details of their innovative work with our membership in a newsletter article. One award of \$500 is available, and the deadline for applications is March 15th each year.

Regrettably, this year we had to reject a number of applications because they were either incomplete, the sponsor was not a teacher or was a teacher but without current membership in the BCAEA, or the applications arrived after the deadline. We hate having to do that!

Application forms do change from year to year, as do the award criteria, and in fact, will definitely be a little different for 2014. Be sure to download the latest forms from our website. The address is at the bottom of this page. ♦

Mike Shaw is the Chair of the BCAEA Awards Committee and the Publications Manager. He teaches at a storefront school in West Kelowna.

On the Edge of Chaos

(continued from page 4)

tunity and freedom to develop and teach a course dedicated to the core work of alternative education. I have titled the course “On the Edge of Chaos – Working with High Risk, Vulnerable and Marginalized Youth.” As I explained to my first cohort of teachers and administrators enrolled in this course in the spring of 2013, the reference to “On the Edge of Chaos” comes from my belief that the needs of the student must outweigh the needs of the system.

Let me explain further. Our education “system” is designed to be administratively efficient and financially cost effective. When we truly try to find ways to meet the needs of the most challenged students, we often have to think way outside of the box and we have to take some risks. For some in the education system, and in society in general, the

resulting chaos is too much and they revert to what they have known for generations. Unfortunately, in this “back to the basics” scenario there is collateral damage in the form of lost students. I have never been able to accept such losses and hence I have learned to embrace the chaos and live in the dynamic environment of change that I believe should be the norm in education. ♦

Tom McEvay is a retired principal from Port Alberni. If you would like to receive a copy of Tom’s outline for the course “On the Edge of Chaos – Working with High Risk, Vulnerable and Marginalized Youth”, or for more information on his ongoing work in alternative education, please contact him at tmcevay@shaw.ca.

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The Last Word ...

Difficult situations often lead to personal growth. The most difficult situation that I have been in, and that has taught me the most, was my addiction to heroin.

I began using drugs at age 11. It started with pot, then came ecstasy, lots of alcohol, cocaine, and an addiction to GHB. After that, it was anything I could get my hands on, including mushrooms and Ketamine. You name, I did it.

Next came my addiction to pills — any anxiety and depression medication that could get me a buzz or high. Painkillers like Oxycontin, Percocet, and Dilaudid were the most common for me because of their strength. After using pills came my crystal meth addiction.

And then there was heroin.

One of the most important things I learned from my addictions is how to understand people better. I know and understand that nobody wakes up one morning wishing and saying, “I’m going to be a drug addict.” I now understand why some people choose to continue using and stay in that lifestyle. For some people who don’t have support with an addiction, that lifestyle is all they’ve ever known and it seems easier for them to stay that way.

Another way I have personally grown is that now I can experience emotion. I used to get high so I didn’t have to feel anxious and depressed. Now I have different strategies for when I feel that way. For example, I read or listen to music. Reading has helped me more than anything because when times are tough it’s nice to be able to escape in a healthy way with a book. Now I can

also let myself feel love, appreciation and support from my friends and family.

The other way I have grown personally from this difficult situation is that I have much stronger willpower and have more clearly defined goals. I have strong willpower now because I have been clean and sober for two years. Now I love school. I want to work and learn because I believe in myself that I can. I want to have a great future that includes an awesome career, a family, great friends and many special moments.

My past addictions have led to many life changes that were very difficult, but they were all worth it in the end because of how I have grown. Most people might not understand, but I am grateful for my past because it has led me to being the person I am today. I believe I am much stronger, more grateful, and more compassionate and understanding toward people who are struggling. As unfortunate as my situation was, it’s made me the great person I am today. ♦

Tanaya B. attends a storefront school and takes things one day at a time. Her courage and resiliency are an inspiration to her teacher and her classmates.