

Stopping the criminal label

by Karen Jubb

A kid with nothing to do steals a yo-yo from the local Metropolitan store. A pensioner steals her weekly supply of cat food from the Dominion. Both are apprehended. Both will go to court. Or will they?

As the justice system operates presently, adult and

juvenile courts are being inundated with so-called petty crimes, many of them too insignificant for serious consideration by a judge who must also deal with grand theft, rape and murder cases in the same day. Still, it is a recognized fact that the same 10-year old who stole that yo-yo will probably graduate

in a few years to more serious crimes if he remains unchecked. It's an all too common problem, and seemingly one for which there are no viable solutions.

There are a few people, though, who believe that with a little timely intervention and a lot of good old-fashioned caring, kids and adults alike can be steered into more productive channels.

The North End Diversion Project began four years ago as a group of volunteers, working in the area extending from old Africville to the MacDonald Bridge, (Wards 3 and 5) between the harbour and Robie St.) in an attempt to create interesting alternative activities for people within the community who might otherwise run into conflicts with the law. In June, 1978, the group was officially ordained as a Project, co-sponsored by the Coalition for Development, an organization of local churches which had previously funded the group in smaller projects, and the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews, which was interested in the forms of social action the Project had undertaken. The federal Ministry of the Solicitor-General agreed to fund the Diversion Project for a three-year period, after the group had submitted a sixty-page brief outlining their goals and intentions.

The North End Diversion Project operates on the premise that labelling someone as a criminal will tend to

spur criminal behaviour in that person; their programmes are designed to come between people and crime (with all its attendant labels) in a creative way. In other words, workers don't simply tell a shoplifter to do ten pushups and take a run around the block the next time he feels the urge to repeat his past performance, but rather encourage people to think, to weigh consequences before committing themselves to action.

The specific programmes include Pioneer Village, a wilderness camp for people who might not have an opportunity to experience camping and outdoor survival techniques; Atlantic Challenge, a programme which uses borrowed Navy Whaling boats to teach survival and sailing; and Fantasy Factory, which teaches skills in doll-making and puppetry, as well as set-making, script-writing and show production. There are, in addition, sport and fitness programmes, movies and slide/tape shows.

The Project supports the Dorchester Lifer's "Save the Children" programme, in which groups of boys ranging in age from 8 to 18 tour Dorchester Penitentiary, and participate in seminars with men, many of them fathers, who are currently serving life sentences. The seminars deal with various aspects of crime and penitentiary life, and are designed as a deterrent to further crime among boys whose sole experience with the law may only have been in juvenile or police courts.

Most of the programmes offered by the Diversion Project (with the possible exception of the latter) are basically intended to eradicate labels, to intervene with a sense of fun, rather than "because you're a criminal". The Pro-

ject's Co-ordinator/Business Mediator, Sandra Lyth, explains that the main focus is on "teaching people to think". Lyth says that there are a good number of people participating in the programmes who have never run up against the law, but who are simply interested in having a good time in a group situation. The Project serves people, not criminals.

According to Lyth, the Diversion Project is generating a good deal of attention in the area which it serves. Although the Gottingen office itself is not particularly noticeable, word of mouth has become its primary advertiser, and the staff finds that they are observed quite closely by community members, who have begun to refer cases, if not to actively involve themselves in administering Project programmes. The Project employs several Dalhousie students as recreational and organizational assistants; this work is part of a field placement for Psychology 322.

The staff of the Project work at identifying needs within the community, and try to alleviate problems which might be potential "trouble spots"; they have also set up a liaison with local merchants and community members, negotiating settlements for such crimes as shoplifting and vandalism, in order to by-pass the court systems and create an alternative system of "Community Justice."

Although the Diversion Project may not eradicate petty crime, it may at least encourage people to deal with small-time criminals in a positive, rather than punitive spirit; and it just might start to get at the roots of non-violent crimes, and stop them before they start.

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