

Giving hope to **ABORIGINAL YOUTH**



by André Fecteau

We've all heard atrocious stories about Natives in Canada. Residential schools, poverty, insalubrious living conditions, armed standoffs related to land claims, drug and alcohol abuse, widespread unemployment: the list is extensive.

and the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) joined forces and created the Integrated Support Services Unit in 2003.

Forget about car patrols or sitting in offices to plan new strategies to chase crooks and hooligans. The 12-officer unit (six from the RCMP and six from the OPP) works with Ontario's 134 Native communities in organizing events and programs to promote role models and educate Aboriginal youth about making enlightened lifestyle choices.

There had always been OPP and RCMP liaison officers working with First Nations, but they were only doing so on a part-time basis. The Integrated Support Services Unit has a full-time commitment to Ontario's First Nations.

"We're here whenever they need us to be here," says Cpl Paula Rogers, an RCMP officer who has been part of the unit since its creation.

When she visited her community partners for the first time, they asked her when she would be back. She says it was a bit of a surprise when she answered, "I'm here tomorrow."

The idea behind the unit is simple, says Rogers: in making the kids active, there is a lesser chance that they will wander the streets and look for trouble. This leads to happier communities and brings down the crime rate.

She spends her time organizing basketball tournaments, bike races, youth conferences, culture camps and even girls' retreats, where, along with pampering and watching movies, girls aged from 11 to 16 learn about fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, drug education, discovery dating and sacred medicine teachings.

The Integrated Unit's members go from school to school with First Nation police officers to promote the Aboriginal Shield Program, a drug education course targeted at Aboriginal youth from Grades four through nine. The program supplements the existing school curriculum, and draws from spiritual teachings and cultural aspects specific to First Nations.

All partners involved must agree on the proposed ideas, which are coming from the community, and not only from the OPP or the RCMP, says Rogers. If someone doesn't commit fully, the project is abandoned.

With Rogers' involvement, a Chippewa reserve on the shores of the Georgian Bay in the southern half of the Bruce Peninsula,

Programs created by the federal, provincial and municipal governments have proven inadequate and a sense of hopelessness reigns both in Ottawa and on every reserve across the country.

The numbers on criminal activity highlight the problem. A 2006 study from Statistics Canada on victimization and offending among the Canadian Aboriginal population describes "being young" as one of the factors contributing to criminality.

Statistics Canada's own 2004 Uniform Crime Reporting Survey found that 14% of Canada's population is aged 15 to 24, but that the same age group accounts for 43% of alleged property crimes (theft, arson, vandalism) and 32% of alleged violent crimes.

Male Aboriginals of all ages are nine times more likely to be accused of homicide than non-Aboriginals. In 88% of the cases, the accused was under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of the homicide, according to the 2006 study.

On-reserve crime, whether committed by adults or youth, is three times higher than elsewhere in the country, and young offenders living on reserve are 11 times more likely to be accused of homicide than those off-reserve, all ethnicities mixed.

Aware of the trends, and faced with poor relations with Aboriginal communities, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)

Cape Croker, Ontario, now has its very own annual mountain bike race. The idea was put forward by cycling coach Laura Robertson.

A resident of Port Elgin, Ontario, Robertson wanted to introduce Aboriginal youth to the world of cycling. Knowing that not every kid would want to go for a bike ride, she had something better in mind for them.

"They definitely think (mountain biking) is cool," she says.

She met Rogers in 2003, and since then, the two women have worked together for the annual event targeted for Aboriginal youth, but where every young person present can participate, says Robertson.

Besides the Chippewas of Nawash in Cape Croker, the event brings together youth from the seven other Aboriginal communities Rogers works with: the Oneida Nation of the Thames, the Chippewas of the Thames, the Munsee-Delaware Nation, the Delaware Nation, Walpole Island First Nation, the Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point, and the Chippewas of Saugeen. Aboriginal youth from Manitoulin Island also participate.

During the winter of 2008, Robertson (who is also a cross-country skiing coach) and Rogers coordinated an Aboriginal cross-country skiing camp in Lake Louise, Alberta, for 12 youth from different First Nations.

Robertson says these programs wouldn't be possible without a resource like Rogers and her unit, because it takes time to put events together and it is a scarce resource for a majority of First Nation police service.

Spending time in schools is really good in terms of crime prevention, but more often than not, regular duties take over, says Sgt Wayne Stevens from Cape Croker Police Service.

His staff of five (including himself) covers an area of almost 64 km² and a winter population of about 900.

The assistance from the Integrated Unit has been helpful and officers from the OPP and RCMP bring a certain level of expertise, says Stevens.

For example, undercover agents in the RCMP drug unit have a knowledge that his staff doesn't have, he says. One agent has come to Cape Croker to give a talk to a group of 50 to 60 parents about drugs, the



Hobbema Cadets Visit RCMP Training Centre in Regina, Saskatchewan.

signs given away by drug users and what to look for if parents have suspicions about their children.

"And [the youth-based programs have] had a pretty good bearing [...] in keeping kids occupied," says Stevens.

It's difficult to really judge if the unit is helping to reduce crime, because "you don't know what you've prevented," says Rogers. "And there will always be work to be done." But as an indication of progress, she describes relationships built with her Native partners as stronger than she ever thought possible when she joined the unit. "When I go to a community, people come and hug me," she says.

Such initiatives are necessary to police services and the RCMP, says Ronald-Francis Melchers, professor of criminology at the University of Ottawa. "If [the RCMP and OPP] don't do it, they have to deal with the consequences."

On the other side, Melcher believes it is necessary to give hope to the youth.

According to the 2006 study from Statistics Canada, age is not the single factor instrumental to crime rates. An intricate web of situations not unfamiliar to Aboriginal communities plays an important role: lower education, unemployment, low income, single-parent families, crowded living conditions, and high residential mobility.

The crime problem is not only a threat to our society, but also to the economy, says Melchers.

Young offenders with criminal records or in jail have limited employment opportunities, and when left with nothing to do, but maybe dangerous activities, perfect conditions are created for criminality. **S**

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