

## Troubled youth give tips to social service providers

BY ELISE STOLTE, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM JANUARY 24, 2011



Nikki Webb, 23, is part of a group of inner city youth who are working with University of Alberta professors to develop classroom material to teach university students what they need to know about being a street youth in Edmonton.

**Photograph by:** Brian J. Gavriloff, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON — Nikki Webb booked appointments with four counsellors in one month when she was trying to get off the street two years ago.

Each sat stiffly behind their office desk. She felt awkward and didn't go back.

Sure, they wrote her history of mental health and addiction issues correctly in their notebooks, but all that said to her was, "Your life is a mess. It's not going to get better."

Too many well-meaning people working with troubled youth don't understand how to relate to them, said the 23-year-old, stepping away from a meeting on the issue last week.

Not one of the four counsellors offered friendship and warmth. Instead she heard: " 'Well, you can't come to see me unless you go to AADAC meetings.' "

"They were demanding things of me. Well, no. It's not happening that way. Go out and buy me socks or something and then maybe I'll talk to you."

Webb is now part of an initiative to let youths themselves teach workers what they need to know. Organized by iHuman's Wallis Kendal and theatre education professor Diane Conrad, the group has been meeting every Tuesday for more than a year in the drama studio of the education building on the University of Alberta campus.

They hosted their first workshop for graduate-level educational psychology students in December, and have others booked with the Edmonton police, Native Counselling Services, undergraduate psychology students and a public workshop at the University of Alberta's International Week.

The process lets professionals learn from a human instead of a textbook.

Webb now volunteers her story — she tried meth at 13, was addicted to cocaine and homeless for months at a time, was stabbed by an abusive, controlling man a year ago. Now she's on income support, sleeping on a friend's couch as she wrestles with post-traumatic stress.

She looks like an outsider — dyed hair, lip ring and spunky attitude — but she's been clean for a year and plans to study psychology and fine arts at the U of A.

What changed? The fifth counsellor she met became her friend.

They laugh together, talk about a shared love of piercings and tattoos. She bought Webb socks when she needed them, and scrounged office supplies, Post-it notes and binders, when she heard Webb was going back to school.

"She's a friend first, that's for sure. I'm never afraid to tell her anything. The difference it made in my life is phenomenal."

On Tuesday night, Webb and a dozen other participants worked on drama scenes to illustrate common problems between young people and professionals.

They acted out the scenario in workshops, then invited members of the audience to play a role and try to change the outcome.

Participants also built silhouettes of themselves and covered them with words as a way to talk about what a service provider can and can't see when they look at them.

Many of the participants deal with social workers and other service providers daily.

Melissa, an 18-year-old single mother, has a two-year-old daughter and is trying to regain custody of her three-year-old son.

"They're trying to say my three-year-old has all these learning difficulties, but they have to give me a chance," she said. "I know I have to learn (how to help him). But they haven't offered me any support."

She told the group she gets so frustrated, she feels like walking out on social services completely. But that would mean turning her back on her son.

Her group was trying to develop a scene where a young person is angry at a social worker who keeps talking about their file with co-workers.

"I would have lashed right out," said Jamie Courtorielle, 25, who has been in and out of jail since he was 18. Soon he was nominated to play the role of the frustrated youth. He threw a chair and made a hole in the wall, felt terrible and offered to patch it.

When the group broke for birthday cake, they also celebrated Courtorielle's two-year anniversary of being clean from crystal meth. Now he's a student at Concordia University College. He got his high school diploma last year.

In his favourite scenario, he plays a junior high student sent to the student counsellor for punching another student. The counsellor acts like that single act of violence is the problem, gives him a stern look and says: "Do you know why you are here?"

The counsellor can't connect with Courtorielle's character at all. He doesn't realize punching a kid was just a hint of the trouble he's in.

His character has already been kicked out by his parents, grandmother and aunt. He's dealing drugs, and as for the punch, "That's what I do when someone owes me money," said Courtorielle.

It's a great scene because he's been that kid.

"I am talking right from the heart. I was pretty much surviving, that's what it is."

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