

Troubled teen finds her way at Burnaby school

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A Burnaby school for troubled teens is turning lives around with individualized attention and respect.

Sixteen-year-old Anita (not her real name) has made it through more hell than a lot of adults will in a lifetime.

Clear skinned, with lively eyes and an impish grin, she sits at a table at the Whytecliff Agile Learning Centre in Burnaby.



"I've had a pretty rough life if you ask me," she says, as she sits slumped back in her chair. Her small frame disappears beneath layers of baggy hip-hop clothes covered in skull motifs. Anita grew up in what she calls the "Surrey slums." Her mother drank and did drugs and by the time Anita hit Grade 8, things were getting worse.

CREDIT: Jennifer Moreau/BURNABY NOW
Turning lives around: Principal Bryce Hewitt of the Whytecliff Agile Learning Centre in Burnaby helps troubled teens lost in the public school system.

"I was miserable," she says, adding that she had just started smoking and hanging out with the wrong people. "I was emotionally disturbed and I really, really hated the fact I was going into a school with so many people."

The fact that some of her teachers didn't seem to care bothered her more.

"It's their job to teach you - that's all," she says.

Frustrated, Anita burned down a school portable, which also functioned as an activity centre.

"That was my only sanctuary," she says. "The only reason I burned it down was 'cause I hated the school, I hated the teachers and I didn't know how else to show it."

She was promptly expelled and her mother began moving continuously to hide her daughter from the law. Finally, police caught up with them and Anita was arrested. Her probation officer recommended she attend an independent school called the Whytecliff Agile Learning Centre in Langley - that was three years ago.

"I've been happy and healthy ever since," she says, now at the Burnaby campus. Since Anita started at Whytecliff, her grades have improved. Instead of failing, she's earning Cs and Bs.

"It's been a lot better. I could see me finishing my Grade 12 here," she says.

The school is not your average institution with florescent lights, loud bells and chaos in the halls. The lighting at Whytecliff is soft and low, the modern interior is mostly done in wood and it's pretty much quiet save for the humming of computers. The atmosphere is no accident - everything has been carefully thought out to create a comforting, non-distracting environment for at-risk teens who need a sense of security, principal Bryce Hewitt explains.

"You need stability to grow," he says, adding that's something these teens lack in their peer and family networks.

Whytecliff centres are supported by the Focus Foundation of B.C., a non-profit group specializing in help for youth and families with complex behavioural problems and learning needs.

Both centres are accredited, independent schools that follow provincial curriculum required for graduation. The Burnaby location takes kids aged 15 to 19 from all over the Lower Mainland - often bright students with troubled lives, drowning in the public school system.

"This group of youth have a lot to offer society," Hewitt says.

The Burnaby centre opened six years ago and offers two main programs: Youth Futures and the Whytecliff program. Youth Futures students are typically referred to the program by social workers, mental health workers, probation officers or drug and alcohol counsellors. In both programs, students get individualized lesson plans shaped to their learning style and needs. They study on their own but with constant support from teachers. Students also do a host of activities, including physical education, cultural visits, community work and volunteering and educational field trips. Students often stay nine to 12 months, earning credits towards graduation.

Like any independent school, the Ministry of Education covers half the funding and the Ministry of Children and Family Development pitches in for the Youth Futures program. Tuition for the Whytecliff program runs on a sliding scale so as not to exclude anyone based on income.

Hewitt and the centre's one other teacher handle about a dozen or more students in each program and provide more than classroom instruction. They offer emotional support, help with job searches and getting to appointments, and referrals to counselling and drug treatment.

"That's the key difference," Hewitt says. "You've got these professionals all working together in an integrated team."

Hewitt points out that it's important the students are supported in their home as well as the classroom, and for this, the centre has on-site family workers to counsel both parents and students.

Wanda Cassidy is an associate professor of education and director of the Centre for Education, Law and Society at Simon Fraser University. She helped the fledgling Langley centre during its inception about 15 years ago and, as an education researcher, studied the centre.

"I think it's just a wonderful model," she says. "They are doing things that every school should be looking at doing."

Kids discarded by society are succeeding because the centre uses an "ethic of care" in building a culture where kids are cared for, Cassidy says.

"It's an ethical approach to structuring schools so kids are respected, valued, they

feel an important sense of place," she says.

Whytecliff students who spoke to Cassidy for her research reported they felt lost in the public system.

"When they came to Whytecliff, it really was a safe refuge," she says.

"Kids don't learn without feeling safe and cared for. (If Whytecliff teachers) can really make a difference in these kids lives, and my research has demonstrated this, then we have a lot learn from them."

The centre is accepting applications for the fall.

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