

# Taking it to the streets of Halton

STORY AND PHOTO BY DONNA DANIELLI

They're the "invisible" society, the ones we learn to quickly look past if we even notice them at all, but for Kimm Kent and her outreach workers, they are not only our future but a major component of our present as well.

A tiny woman with a huge personality, Kimm is the Project Manager for the P.O.S.S.E. Project (Peer Outreach Support Services & Education), who recently brought her many years' experience to Halton as a fierce advocate for homeless and at-risk youth.

"The street youth population is worse in Vancouver than anywhere else in Canada, but here it's such an invisible population," she points out. "Most of the homeless youth in large cities are coming from small towns like this, and I think it's better to prevent them from ending up in a big city if possible. People run away trying to find something better and sometimes they find something a lot worse."

What makes P.O.S.S.E. unique is its staffing component - Kimm Kent and Dominic Padula, Coordinator for P.O.S.S.E. are the only adults on the payroll. The bulk of the work done on the streets is done by outreach workers between the ages of 15 and 24. "I was hired for the North Halton Hepatitis C Prevention Project and when it was coming to an end, I asked the youth what they wanted to do next," explains Kimm. "They all said we want to do what you do, and I thought, all right, let's make it happen." The main role of the outreach workers is to assist and educate youth in reducing the risk factors associated with violence, homelessness, drug use and sexual activity. They provide peer driven, non-judgemental support in harm reduction outreach, while supporting at risk and homeless youth in decision-making, coping and problem solving. And they do it by going to the places at risk youth can be found - the streets, parks, malls, under bridges and anywhere else youth congregate.

Teri, a perky little blonde high school student, who seems like she would be more at home in a cheerleader's uniform than in a dark parking lot talking to strangers, is quick to approach other youth, offering them condoms and advice on safe sex. "With this job, you have to be able to deal with awkwardness," she points out. "You kind of adapt to it and learn to deal with it. You never know what to expect." For some street youth, Teri and the other outreach workers may be the first friendly face that they have seen in far too long of a time. "I'm not scared when I'm on the street," says Teri quietly. "If anything is going to be scary, it's knowing that we can't reach some people. Some people automatically hold back, they fear reaching out to people."

It's those youth helping other youth that makes P.O.S.S.E. so successful, according to Kimm Kent. "What P.O.S.S.E. does is so much greater than me," she insists. "We're reaching people that no one else is reaching. Our training develops youth skills in how to support one another, human rights issues, respecting others and sometimes just basic work ethics. It's a supportive environment where youth promote youth power. This is about youth helping youth and youth meeting youth needs."

P.O.S.S.E. provides outreach support on the streets of

Milton, Georgetown and Acton from May to October each year. The bulk of its funding is provided by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, an agency of the Ministry of Culture which provides community funding generated through Ontario's charity casino initiative. Additional support comes from the AIDS Committee of Guelph and the Halton Region Health Department. Much of the outreach centres around educating youth on the risks associated with sex and drug use. "We don't condone or endorse it," Kimm points out. "I don't judge it, I just want to make sure that they're safe." P.O.S.S.E. makes condoms provided by the Halton Region Health Department readily available in a variety of colours and flavours. "In today's society, condoms are essential, half of it is in your attitude. They can be fun." Still, she admits that there isn't really a universal reaction when Teri or one of the other outreach workers offers condoms to strangers in the park. "Some people get really weirded out, some just take the condoms and some ask for more information. But the whole point is prevention. It's an early connection to a person they can trust."

Teri is almost amused by the reaction she sometimes gets. "They recognize us now," she laughs. "They're like, hey aren't you the condom people?" Like the other outreach workers, Teri can be found at least one night a week during the warmer months, handing out condoms and information to any one who wants them. Although each outreach worker works in a different community than they live in to maintain confidentiality, it is not unusual for her to be approached outside of the program for condoms, piercing kits and literature. For Kimm though, it is the young workers like Teri that have had the greatest impact on the streets. "It's people like Teri going out and talking to her friends and then I meet them years later and realize that it was the project that implemented change in their lives. I'm touching the lives of young people and then they turn around and touch the lives of their friends," says a bemused Kimm, who also admits that she sometimes sorrows at the conditions of the seamier side of life that these young advocates are exposed to. "I get afraid sometimes of the things they're exposed to hearing, to hearing some of the nastiness and human suffering. I get afraid that people have to hear about that and know that's out there if they really haven't been exposed yet." Her voice turns wistful as she concludes; "I sometimes get afraid for that loss of innocence." For Teri though, it is exactly that eye opening experience that is so crucial to her dedication. "This is the only kind of program that can actually touch these kids. I'm willing to take the risk to make sure that people have condoms, it's silly for them not to have access to condoms," she insists.

Kimm is currently recruiting for more youth outreach workers. Interested applicants should be between the ages of 15 and 24 with an interest in harm reduction, crisis intervention, diffusing violence and sexual health. Contact Kimm Kent at 905-875-6126 before November 18 to arrange an interview. Training sessions will run from 7pm to 10 pm, on different nights in different municipalities, in Acton at the Off the Wall Youth Centre on Tuesdays, in Georgetown at the Open Doors Youth Centre on Wednesdays and at the St. Paul United Church



P.O.S.S.E. (Peer Outreach Support Services & Education) Project Manager Kimm Kent prepares for a night on the streets providing support to artistic youth.

in Milton on Thursdays. Outreach workers receive an honorarium of \$10 per hour. "I'll take as many as I can," says Kimm. "Some youth use it for their 40 hours for high school or as probationary hours. There's also a drop in component and I'm open to that. They're more than welcome to come out and see if it fits for them on a voluntary basis. I want to offer the paid positions to people that I know are going to be able to get the information to the community that needs it."

P.O.S.S.E. Project is more than just handing out condoms though. Kimm also makes available piercing kits and literature on everything from knowing your rights under the law to getting a job with a record. Her phone rings constantly with youth needing all sorts of support, from rides to court appointments to help finding a shelter after suddenly becoming homeless. "I do it because I want young people to be safe," Kimm says with passion. "I want them to know that they have options and that they have the right to make choices and know that there is support out there for them. We're not the entire solution, we recognize that. But we are an important part of the puzzle."

## Partnership with the public is the cornerstone of community policing

BY CHIEF EAN ALGAR

EXCLUSIVE TO THE HALTON COMPASS

At the rural forum held October 18 at the Halton Region Museum, I was asked a very interesting question. The evening's conversation had moved into a favourite topic of discussion: the aggravation of gridlock, combined with the added stress of drivers not obeying the rules of the road. The question to me was, "What can we civilians do to help?"

Let me emphasize that civilians cannot undertake any traffic enforcement of any kind. However, that does not mean that you can't play an important role in helping police officers.

Here's an example. At the previous Rural Forum, a citizen brought to my attention a situation whereby cyclists were traveling three or four abreast on a rural road. Thanks to the information pro-

vided to us, our officers went out the very next day to the site that had been identified, saw the cyclists, and informed them that they were interfering with traffic. Education, not enforcement, was the solution.

Education can solve a host of problems. Speeding, for example, which is an obvious infraction of the Highway Traffic Act. Here's how you can help. First of all, set a good example by respecting the speed limit yourself. In addition to being a responsible driver, you can encourage others to be responsible as well. If you're interested in educating other drivers about speeding, we can lend you our Radar Message Sign. At least two people are needed to operate the sign, and both people are trained by a Community

Support Officer. The training takes about 20 minutes. The sign shows the posted speed limit and also what the motorist is doing. If you are not available to set up the Board, contact your local Community Policing Committee and ask for assistance. Of course you can always contact us directly. Our telephone numbers are on our web page, [www.hrps.on.ca](http://www.hrps.on.ca).

At the Rural Forum, motorcycle noise was once again identified as a source of aggravation for rural residents. The motorcyclists in north Halton are generally law-abiding people who just may live in your neighbourhood, perhaps even right next door. Motorcycles are booming in popularity among middle-aged professionals. In Canada, the average age of motorcycle buyers is about 46 years old.

These middle-aged riders are taking to the road in powerful and expensive machines. The manufacturers are catering to customer demand by increasing the volume. However, there are legal limits to volume, and we will continue to respond to noise complaints.

People tell us that they are concerned about noise levels, and we take your concerns very seriously. We'll continue to keep an eye on the issue. Please continue to let us know of situations that you feel require our attention.

