



Visit us at  
www.karensflowershop.com  
487 Laurier Ave.  
878-2881

# COMMUNITY

## POSSE there for youth who don't know where to turn

By **Stephanie Hounsell**  
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

At the tender age of 13, when the world should've been her oyster, Delta Hillyard found herself an orphan.

Her father was killed and her mother deserted her a few months later. As a way of coping, the confused and alone youngster — who'd also been molested as a child — turned to drugs as a way of getting through each day.

She tried to commit suicide several times.

Now 20 and preparing to graduate from E.C. Drury High School, Hillyard has been sober — from both alcohol and drugs — for two years and her life has a new focus: helping other youths who find themselves in similar ordeals.

She counts herself lucky. She's alive. She didn't overdose on drugs or get HIV/AIDS or Hepatitis C. And she wants to make sure none of her friends do, either.

"A lot of my friends died, and I don't want to see that happen to anyone else," she said passionately, her voice breaking, at a recent presentation to a regional committee.

Hillyard is a youth educator with the Peer Outreach Support Services and Education (POSSE) Project, which services north Halton.

POSSE trains youths who then reach out to their peers on a street level to provide them with information and support they need as they make choices that could affect the rest of their lives.

Hillyard is going public with her painful story in an effort to get the word out about POSSE, particularly now that the group's in need of funding to continue.

POSSE is a project run by youth for youth between the ages of 15 and 24, and focuses on human rights and harm reduction.

Kimm Kent, POSSE program manager, said the harm reduction approach is all about reducing the dangers associated with drug use.

"The 'Just say no' approach works really well, but it's not for everyone. This is a non-judgmental approach for people who have chosen otherwise," Kent told the *Champion*, adding, "The thought is you can't quit if you're dead."

POSSE helps reduce the risks of drug use by providing users with free drug use kits and piercing equipment.

"(People say) 'Aren't you saying it's okay to use?' No, I'd prefer that no one use crack cocaine," she said, adding, "We train (our volunteers) that addiction's not sexy."

Although there's no preaching to quit, Kent said users are more likely to quit if they



GRAHAM PAINE / CANADIAN CHAMPION

**MESSENGER OF HOPE:** Delta Hillyard is going public with her painful story in an effort to get the word out about POSSE, particularly now that the group's in need of funding to continue.

have the information and support to do so.

She acknowledges that not everyone in the community agrees with the harm reduction philosophy; some parents don't want condoms handed out to their children, or to know their children could be getting needles and other drug paraphernalia from project volunteers.

To them, Kent extends an invitation to meet with POSSE members and the people they help, and to find out more about the project.

Other people don't believe the situation is as POSSE reports, Kent said, adding she gets accused of inflating her statistics that show many teens report using substances ranging from crack to alcohol to pot. Many of them, Kent said, also reported living in unstable situations and some in abusive homes.

At a recent meeting of the Region of Halton's health and social services committee, Kent made a presentation to councillors along with Hillyard and two other youth educators.

She explained that POSSE received a three-year grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation for \$224,600, but that funding ends next year. The project is seeking sustainable funding from Halton Region, as well

as from corporations, fundraising and the United Way — the Milton and Halton Hills agencies have already given \$6,000 for 2007.

"The future of it lies in your hands," Kent told councillors.

She explained the group has a mandate to encourage safer decision making to reduce the risks associated with drug use, sex, homelessness, violence and discrimination.

The youth outreach workers are trained in sexual health, anti-racism and anti-homophobia, and reducing harm associated with substance abuse, among others. They also learn how to defuse violent situations, intervene in crisis situations, and identify and report hate crimes.

"It's the only street-level, peer-based program in Halton," Kent said.

To their peers, the youth educators provide a non-judgmental, listening ear as well as information.

Young people who don't know where to turn can find POSSE volunteers ready and willing to drive them to food banks, court appearances, shelters, etc.

They can also get emergency kits containing food vouchers, phone cards and hygiene bags.

The youth volunteers also run a magazine

called The Undercroft, which provides a forum for young people to express themselves through art or writing.

So far, Kent told committee, the trained student volunteers have made almost 2,000 outreach contacts and distributed 11,000 condoms and 550 clean needles.

The project began in 2002, and operates under the umbrella of the AIDS Committee of Guelph and Wellington County.

Hillyard said she wishes she'd had someone like a POSSE volunteer to talk with when she was using drugs. It wouldn't necessarily have made her quit any sooner, but "It would've helped," she told the *Champion*.

She explained it's important to not simply tell someone to stop using drugs, but to look at the deeper issue fueling their addiction.

In July, Hillyard is moving to Thunder Bay to do youth outreach with a largely Native community.

"It's really empowering to feel I've helped someone," she said.

In addition to securing funding, POSSE is also looking to expand into south Halton.

For more information, visit [www.posse-project.ca](http://www.posse-project.ca).

Stephanie Hounsell can be reached at [sthiessen@miltoncanadianchampion.com](mailto:sthiessen@miltoncanadianchampion.com).

**TV COGECO**

Truly Local Television

[www.cogeco.ca](http://www.cogeco.ca)

NORTH HALTON STUDIO

Laurier Plaza

500 Laurier Avenue

Milton, ON L9T 4R3

905-878-9306

### Cogeco Cable Channel 14

### Programming Schedule — Tuesday, May 22 - Monday, May 28, 2007

Tuesday, May 22	Wednesday, May 23	Thursday, May 24	Friday, May 25	Saturday, May 26	Sunday, May 27	Monday, May 28
8:00am - 1:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	8:00am - 1:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	8:00am - 12:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	8:00am - 1:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	8:00am - 6:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	8:00am - 6:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	8:00am - 1:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA
1:00pm SportsZONE Live	1:00pm Halton Hills Council (cc)	12:00pm Swap Talk (Replay)	1:00pm The Grate Groan-Up Spelling Bee	6:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	6:00pm Halton Region Council (cc)	1:00pm Halton Region Council (cc)
2:00pm - 6:30pm Plugged In! EXTRA	3:30pm - 7:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	1:00pm HCDSB's 'Sharing The Spirit' Awards	3:00pm - 5:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA		8:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	3:00pm - 8:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA
6:30pm Optimist TV Bingo (Live)	7:00pm Simply Halton	2:00pm - 6:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	5:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA			8:00pm SportsZONE Live
7:30pm Plugged In!	7:30pm Plugged In!	6:00pm The War Amps Present...				9:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA
8:00pm Auto Experts (Live)	8:00pm Swap Talk (Live)	7:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA				
9:00pm Halton Hills Council (cc)	9:00pm HCDSB's 'Sharing The Spirit' Awards	8:00pm Living Healthy				
11:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	10:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	9:00pm The Grate Groan-Up Spelling Bee				
		11:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA				