

Detention centre 'fun' for teen

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His mother, who turned him in to police after his first offence two years ago, agrees. "I think if they would have put the fear of God in him when he first broke the law, he wouldn't be stuck in the system now."

There seems to be no compelling reason for John to go straight, other than to end his mother's misery. And that doesn't appear to matter.

So why does he do it?

"Just bored I guess," he says, shrugging his shoulders.

'He said, 'You won't believe this, Mom, we went snowtubing today.'

Mother of young offender

What's another couple of days in a Young Offenders group home? John spent his last stint at Gordon's House in Orillia.

"When he called me from there, he asked me if I was sitting down," his mother says. "He said, 'You won't believe this, Mom, we went snowtubing today.'"

John smirks.

"It was fun," he says. "I get a little homesick when I'm away, but it's not like I'm rushing to get out of there."

And although the young offenders aren't allowed to talk about their crimes, they do. "Everybody likes to talk about why they are in there," John says.

His mother is disappointed.

"I wanted him to come home and be afraid of ever going back there again," she says.

Soon after John was released, he smashed up a family friend's van when he took it for an afternoon joyride.

John was not arrested for auto theft because the friend, who was having heart surgery at the time, did not press charges.

John even went to the police to confess the crime, but an officer told them they wouldn't lay charges solely on the confession of a young offender.

"I couldn't believe that," his mother says. "He admitted to it and they wouldn't even charge him."

York Regional Police Sgt. John Sheldon says the Young Offenders Act presents several challenges for police. It's true, police aren't likely to charge a youth based on his own admission of guilt, he says, without corroborating evidence.

"It's very difficult getting confessions into court," Sheldon says. "There are a lot of extra safeguards in the system for young offenders."

Police must have a reasonable prospect of conviction before laying a charge.

For John's mother, the incident was another example of what's wrong with the youth justice system.

"You try to teach them right and wrong and they get another message from the system," she says.

They got the first taste of youth court when a judge refused to allow John to plead guilty to stealing a gas can from a neighbour and lighting an outdoor fire.

"The judge was appalled that I put my son up on these charges without getting him a lawyer," she says. "But he did it, so he plead guilty."

Both mother and son were ordered to receive psychological assessments at the Clarke Institute.

In the end, John was convicted of theft and mischief.

He received 15 months probation and was ordered to pay \$100 in restitution.

For John's mother, the probation terms were serious, important restrictions placed on her son by a judge.

But she says the authorities, including John's probation officer and police, didn't seem to take them as seriously.

Although she had reported violations, John was never charged with breaching his probation.

"He wasn't following the rules. I kept telling his probation officer this was a total disaster," she says. "But he just kept saying, 'I'm very busy, I've got 50 kids to see.'"

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