

COMMUNITY

**Coquitlam
and
Maple Ridge**

Project:***Youth Art Engagement for At-Risk Students*****Children of the Street Society, BC**

Children of the Street Society is a BC registered non-profit society whose aim is to prevent the sexual exploitation and human trafficking of youth, based in Coquitlam, on BC's Lower Mainland. Children of the Street Society assists communities province-wide to build resilience amongst their youth through education and art projects.

In 2013 BC's Children of the Street Society was able to engage three groups of high risk youth from Coquitlam and Maple Ridge in the *Youth Art Engagement Project*: these youth attended Coquitlam Alternate Basic Education Program (CABE), Suwa'ikh Aboriginal Learning Centre, and Connex Alternate Program. Some of the youth experienced challenges such as school truancy and dropout, substance misuse, and lack of support at home, which can increase risks of sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

Other youth who participated in this project had positive life experiences and were at lower risk of sexual exploitation. In total 55 youth and 13 adults participated in this project from the Coquitlam and Maple Ridge area.

The project included two components: a nine-week curriculum to educate youth about human trafficking and sexual exploitation, and the creation of an art project by each youth to express an issue related to sexual exploitation and human trafficking. The nine-week curriculum, developed by Children of the Street's youth workshop facilitators, was delivered in the selected schools in both communities between March 2013 and May 2013. The project also included an art gallery celebration that showcased the youth's art projects created during the project in June 2013.

SUCCESS STORY

During the *Youth Art Engagement Project*, a youth disclosed that she had been engaging in substance use with older males in the community. Before learning about the issue of sexual exploitation during the *Youth Art Engagement Project*, she did not recognize that her activities were putting her at risk of being sexually exploited. The youth shared that she had decided to no longer associate with these older individuals, and to reflect on her substance use, as she realized the risks involved with both of these activities.

Workshop facilitators engaged youth participants in conversation about trends related to sexual exploitation and human trafficking, in order to empower them to take responsibility and leadership for themselves and others on this issue. Topics included:

- defining human trafficking and sexual exploitation
- recruitment tactics and warning signs of exploitation
- violence and drugs/alcohol
- de-glamourizing the sex trade
- online exploitation and online safety
- peer to peer / self-exploitation
- healthy relationships
- social responsibility
- community action



Youth participated in a creative process throughout the nine week project. Diane Sowden, Executive Director, describes the impact on the youth:

“As participants saw their artistic projects through to completion, they gained a sense of pride and accomplishment and began to develop a stronger sense of social responsibility, self-esteem and confidence. For many participants, the idea of having an artistic piece that would be shown in an art gallery at the end of the project was a highlight of their academic career.”

In total, youth participants created fifty-five pieces of artwork, including drawings, paintings, collage, photography, sculpture, masks, street art, spoken word and other artistic mediums that highlighted the issue of sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

At the end of the project, youth participants were able to:

- define the acts of human trafficking and sexual exploitation
- identify what sexually exploitive behaviour may look like (i.e., imagine sharing; exchanging a sexual act for anything) and who may perpetrate (i.e., peers; those in a position of authority)
- list warning signs for recruitment into the commercial sex trade
- identify the multiple forums where luring and exploitation can occur (i.e., online, street-level, indoor brothels and massage parlours)
- discuss how gangs, drugs and addiction are related to the issue of sexual exploitation
- critically reflect on and identify protective- and risk-factors related to sexual exploitation
- reflect on how their current or future actions may be exploitative, either explicitly (i.e., distributing a naked image of an ex-partner; buying sex) or inexplicitly (i.e., attending a strip club)
- understand why sexual exploitation is an issue that everyone is vulnerable to

“The Youth Art Engagement Project had a huge impact on the students I worked with. The education the students received was valuable to them; many of the students told me how much they didn’t know before we started working with them. A couple of the students told me that the Project gave them something to look forward to every week, and it allowed them to learn and be creative and stay connected to their school all at the same time. For me personally, the biggest reward was seeing the students recognize that they are cared about and they have supports in their lives, and then sharing that with their friends too, in an effort to keep them safe from sexual exploitation.”

**– Kevin Lescisin
Project Coordinator for Children of the Street Society**

The Principal of one of the schools provided the following information on the impact of this project on the youth at risk:

“*The Children of the Street Society’s Youth Art Engagement Project... at CABE Secondary... was a success all around. The staff involved with the project experienced first-hand the positive effect it had on our students... The twelve students and one teacher who went on to be showcased at the gallery night were gleaming with pride. For many of them, it may have been the first time in their whole educational experience that they felt empowered... Each week, the participants eagerly awaited the workshops and were always sure to be in attendance for them; even though that’s unfortunately not always the case for other classes... They truly believed they could create awareness and make a difference; one small project at a time. Many of the students graduating this year are taking away memories for this program and many are pursuing careers in the arts. We are totally committed to the effectiveness of this program at exposing students to the issues of sexual exploitation while engaging them in school and cultivating their artistic talents. We look forward to the opportunity to be included once again in the future.*”

– Paul McNaughton
Principal CABE Secondary
Coquitlam, BC