

Committee offers teens another road to justice

Youths committing minor offences may be diverted from court

By **NICK GARDINER**
Staff Writer

We all make mistakes.

For the sake of young teens whose mistakes could lead them before the courts, the Youth Justice Committee for Leeds and Grenville offers a different option.

About 65 youths aged 12 to 18 have been referred by police and the Crown attorney's office to the committee since it was established as part of the Youth Justice Act in March of 2003.

First-time offenders who apologize to their victims and admit their role in minor criminal offences such as mischief, shoplifting or theft under \$5,000 are eligible for diversion to the committee.

Once there, they meet with their victims and community volunteers to determine what course of action will be taken to address the matter.

Typically, the young offender pays restitution, agrees to curfews, promises not to associate with known criminals.

They may also be expected to attend meetings under the eight-week rebound program which focuses on conflict resolution, anger management, personal responsibility and teamwork.

For the mother of a North Grenville teen found in possession of marijuana, the program was a revelation.

"I was very grateful there was such a group," said the woman, who identified herself for this story as Liz.

She said she was worried her son's behaviour could have led to harder drugs and involvement with gangs and was pleased to find other legal avenues to deal with the situation without going through the courts.



LINDA RABY: Linda Raby is a volunteer for the Youth Justice Committee's court diversion program.

"We talked about things very constructively and we decided what my son needed was a mentor. That's how we got to the rebound program.

"This is what we need more of," said Liz. "I look to this group as a real Godsend. I think we are losing too many youths to drugs, violence and gangs and we need more of these programs for sure."

Her son James (not his real name) said he was initially skeptical about the rebound program offered through RNJ Youth Services Inc. of Smiths Falls.

"When I started I just kept to myself but then I started working with the people. I completed the course and I guess I gained from it," he said.

James also made a commitment to the committee to return to school and is now taking Grade 12 studies with expectations of graduating this year.

He said the experience has helped him and he is most thankful not to have a criminal record.



NICK GARDINER/THE RECORDER AND TIMES

Krista Biccum, co-ordinator of the Leeds and Grenville Youth Justice Committee, interviews a client for a court diversion program.

Linda Raby, a community volunteer on the Youth Justice Committee, said the group tries to focus on the offender's strengths rather than weaknesses.

"The biggest thing I would say about it is you're teaching young people respect by showing them respect," said Raby, who has experience working with youth in continuing education programs and at the Employment and Education Centre.

"We talk with them about what is going on in your life, what were you thinking (during the criminal behaviour) and how has getting caught changed your life. Really, it's modelling respect."

Not surprisingly, said Raby, youths referred to the committee approach the initial meeting with

some apprehension.

"They start off being a little nervous. Who's comfortable? You did something wrong and everybody in the room knows you've done something wrong. What's comfortable about that?"

But the apprehension wears off as the meeting progresses and the youth realizes people are trying to help, she said.

In one instance, she said, a youth was surprised when his female victim asked: 'How can I help you?', Raby said.

"The young person came in lacking trust and that gained his trust," said Raby.

Committee co-ordinator Krista Biccum said it's essential for youths to accept responsibility for their

actions and after that "the sky is the limit" in terms of the disposition.

Biccum said the committee brings in the youth and the victim to determine what the appropriate action is to take.

"It's definitely a collaborative event."

She said the program isn't well-known to the general public "but when parents come through the door they definitely feel there's a benefit."

She said people in the legal system and community agencies also support the program as a way of helping young people find a better path to the future.

"We see a lot of really good kids come through this program who made bad choices."