

# Jack Knox: BladeRunners cuts troubled youth some slack

By Jack Knox, Times Colonist December 30, 2010

Someone stole the pump from my bicycle on Tuesday. I felt deflated.

"Freaking kids," I said, because that's who middle-aged guys automatically blame when things like that happen.

And when we hear the phrase "youth at risk," we assume it to be polite bureaucratic code for "freaking kid who stole my bike pump."

Which is a pretty narrow, self-serving interpretation. Still, it's a reminder that it's not just the youth themselves who bear the consequences when those risk factors -- drug abuse, dysfunctional families, lack of education, mental illness, homelessness, whatever -- send their lives crashing into yours. And it raises the question of how society is supposed to deal with trains that are threatening to go off the tracks.

Which brings us to the Garth Homer Centre's toilets.

Garth Homer is where adults with developmental disabilities learn the skills it takes to be more independent and included in the community. The centre has been on Saanich's Darwin Avenue for 33 years, which is how long its 23 toilets have been bolted to the floor.

A 2009 study showed that replacing them with low-flow models could save the non-profit society \$3,500 -- and 1.8 million litres of water -- each year. Doing so before the end of 2010 would also mean a Capital Regional District rebate of \$75 a toilet.

Only one problem: No money in the budget. Enter the Victoria Foundation, which came up with \$6,000 for new privies, and Andrew Sheret, which donated a couple of toilets and provided the rest at cost.

Still a problem: No money to actually install the toilets. Plumbers aren't cheap.

And that takes us to Wednesday morning and the sight of a couple of young men sprawled on a washroom floor, wrenches in hand, reefing on bolts that hadn't budged for 33 years. They were participants in the John Howard Society's BladeRunners program, which offers mentoring and training to youth at risk. In this case, that's anyone between the ages of 17 and 30, which might stretch the definition of youth, but matches the time when some people still need guidance. About 60 a year go through the program, which offers a couple of weeks of life and job skills, then helps participants find work.

It's not as smooth and quick a process as it sounds. Scott McKinty, a fifth-generation Victoria carpenter, has been working for BladeRunners for six years, helping prepare guys for the construction industry. He doesn't ask what brings them there, whether it be a court-diversion program, a helpless family, or what. He just worries about getting them pointed in the right direction, hopefully on the path to learning a trade.

"A big part of my job is to tell them things they

didn't hear when they were growing up." Things like show up for work every day, no excuses. Here's how to set an alarm clock, make a lunch, behave appropriately at work. Here's how to get a job and keep it.

He never sees some BladeRunners again after they enter an apprenticeship program. Some come back again and again, right up until age 30. "We don't give up. We just keep working." They rejoice in small victories: A party was thrown when one 30-year-old found himself free of court-ordered conditions for the first time since age 12. "To us, that's something to celebrate."

It helps participants to rub shoulders with others of similar age who set a good example. Those rotating through Garth Homer this week are volunteering under the supervision of Zach Blais, the 23-year-old owner of Solid Plumbing and Gas. He spent a day in the classroom teaching plumbing basics to a dozen BladeRunners before taking them to the site.

For the Garth Homer Centre, the volunteer labour made the new toilets possible. "We couldn't do it without these guys," said Mary Ann Snowden, one of the centre's managers. You wonder if anyone had ever said anything like that about them before.

BladeRunners works with outfits like Literacy Victoria, the READ Society, Saanich Police, the construction association, the carpenters union, Habitat For Humanity. "There's a lot of employers who will give anyone a shot," McKinty says. There are plenty who don't believe in giving up on people, because then where would they -- all of us -- be?

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