



Reality Tour

LIGHT in the dark - Lee Robert Mason, addictions recovery specialist and founder of the Young Warriors Network. Daniel Pi photo

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Over egg rolls and chow mein at a Downtown Eastside Chinese restaurant, Lee Mason briefs his young students about what they will see (dealers, tweakers, prostitutes, dirty needles) and smell (feces, urine and rotting garbage) in the gritty alleyways of Canada's poorest postal code.

He has ground rules: Perhaps most importantly, the kids are to "show respect for people on the street. They're trapped in a cycle of addiction but still deserve to be treated with dignity," he says.

Mason's field trip program, called "Kids on the Skids," offers troubled teens a unique and uncensored tour of the Downtown Eastside.

For the past 12 years, the North Vancouver resident has, through his Young Warriors Network, been facilitating addiction workshops and healing programs across Western Canada, the Yukon and Northwest Territories.

His words have authenticity.

Mason used to be a heroin-addicted bank robber, which led to incarceration inside Millhaven Penitentiary, and a string of other Canadian and U.S. prisons.

"If I wasn't using drugs I wouldn't have turned to crime to feed the addiction."

He survived 15 years in the joint, witnessing "all sorts of crap" including murder.

"When I speak to kids I don't glorify it but I don't speak out of a pamphlet either.

They respect the fact that I'm speaking for real," says the tough-talking Mason, decked out in a print shirt and shorts.

His workshops are PG-rated. He warns workshop organizers that his language is peppered with expletives. "I'm going to use it a lot," he says. It's the only way he knows how to talk to get the point across to troubled youth.

After he got out of prison, the Southern Ontario native managed to kick his drug habit and better understand the root of his addiction. He later studied to become a specialist in addictions recovery.

Then, a moment of serendipity. After giving a presentation, a classmate told him of the drug epidemic ravaging her reserve in British Columbia. Because of his own experiences, she asked him to speak to the youth. He agreed to put on a one-day workshop. Mason soon realized more had to be done to reach out to native youth about the dangers of drug and alcohol addiction, and he's been on a mission to deliver his important message ever since.

Last week he held two "Kids on the Skids" sessions, both with around 20 kids from Merritt and Williams Lake First Nations bands. He's also taken members of the Tsleil-Waututh and Squamish Nations on DTES tours.

During the tours, junkies will often give impromptu lectures to the saucer-eyed youths about life on the streets.

The most common warning: "Stay in school; you don't want to end up here."

"The addicts know the kids are down here for an education before it's too late and they end up on the Downtown Eastside," he says. "This is hard-core reality. It's ugly back there."

Some of the kids on the tour are as young as 11 years old. He hopes the tour will change their life trajectory.

"They're getting involved in drugs quite early these days," he shrugs.

One of the swizzle stick-thin addicts who recently spoke to his group used to be an elementary school teacher.

She's now covered in track marks. She's lost her family and her home after her coke addiction turned into an insatiable crack and heroin habit.

She asked one kid how much he paid for his shiny, new sneakers.

“Two hundred,” he replied.

To her, that simply translated into 20 fixes, she said.

Although he doesn't like the term “scared straight,” Mason figures the tours send a powerful message.

“Their eyes are open; they've seen it; they've smelled it and they've walked through it.”

“Is this how you want to be?” he asks.

I don't ever want to end up here,” is a typical response.

For information visit www.youngwarriors.net.