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NEWS

Sunday 16 April 2000

The Circle that cares

Volunteers help sex offenders beat isolation, stay out of trouble

DEBBIE PARKES

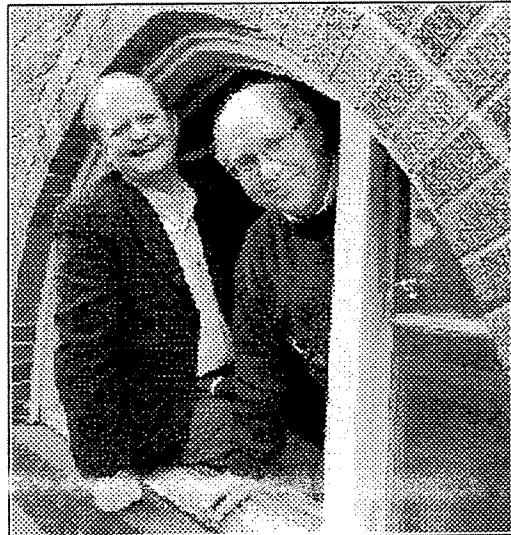
The Gazette

Wray Budreo is used to being hated.

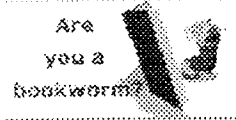
Protesters demonstrated against the convicted pedophile while he was serving time in Kingston Penitentiary. He was chased out of one Ontario town after his release.

But there are those who have been using a more supportive approach - and in the end, it seems, a more effective one in trying to ensure the 55-year-old doesn't commit any more offences.

Circles of Support and Accountability bring together volunteers in an alternative network for sex offenders, who typically have little in the way of family or social support and are often intellectually



YVONNE BERG, CP / Mennonite pastor Harry Nigh, who helped organize the first Circle of Support, and Rev. Hugh Kirkegaard, national co-ordinator of the program.



deficient.

Sex offenders are at greatest risk of committing new offences when they're experiencing stress in their lives or feeling isolated, so Circle volunteers provide a friendly ear when the offender needs to sound off.

They help him find solutions to problems like finding an apartment or looking for work. They offer advice and encouragement and help celebrate milestones like anniversaries and birthdays.

And they watch for signs that he might be at increased risk of reoffending - drinking, for instance, or hanging around schools or parks.

If he's breaking the terms of a court order, they may turn him in.

It's a long way from chasing sex offenders out of town. But many people who were dubious about the supportive approach have been won over - including a police officer who first wondered if these volunteers were just naive "tree-huggers" but who now sits on three Circles, including Budreo's.

The support is proving effective. Sex offenders as a group are at a high risk of reoffending, but the rate among Circle members is significantly lower, said Corrections Canada psychologist Robin Wilson.

In a survey of 30 Circle offenders who had been in the community for an average of just over two years, Wilson found that two had committed new offences (one was charged with sexual assault and one with making an indecent phone call). Statistically, one would expect seven men to have reoffended over that period, Wilson said.

Corrections Canada is now providing about \$320,000 a year toward Circles of Support to cover such things as organizational overhead and community education.

Started in Ontario six years ago with the help of a Mennonite pastor, Circles of Support and Accountability have been formed for about 55



YVONNE BERG, CP / Wray Budreo plays keyboard for volunteers Evan Heise (left) and Jean Bruce, members of his Circle of Support and Accountability.



YVONNE BERG, CP / Jean Bruce gestures as she talks with child molester Wray Budreo during a session of his Circle of Support at the Church of the Crusader in Toronto. Other volunteers taking part are Evan Heise and Don Boyd.

With time, as the man's needs diminish, the formal meetings are held less frequently. But some of the volunteers often will maintain a presence in the person's life. And the offender can always call a meeting if he is having a problem, or call an individual volunteer if he needs someone to talk to.

Budreo recently called a Circle meeting after the fundamentalist church he was attending said it would no longer accept him because he had failed to quit smoking. He's since found another church, and his Circle is helping to bring him and the pastor of his old church together to create closure.

A 36-year-old who fled to Toronto after being beaten up in his hometown in Eastern Canada said his own Circle helped him when he got fired from his job for yelling at the boss. A volunteer accompanied him to apologize, and while he didn't get his job back, it did help to ease the bad feelings on both sides, the man said in an interview.

A released pedophile in Hamilton turned to his Circle for emotional support after one of his relatives refused to let him hold her newborn baby.

Peter Huish, Protestant chaplain at Cowansville Institution, said he's all too aware of how crucial it is to provide support to released inmates to maximize their chances of success.

"The single most frequent concern of inmates is how are they going to manage when they get out," said Huish, who took it upon himself to get Circles organized in Quebec and hopes to use the model to also help those who committed non-sexual crimes.

Circles have concentrated mainly on sex offenders who were denied early release from prison. Because they've served their full sentences, they no longer fall under Corrections Canada jurisdiction and so are not eligible for such reintegration services as halfway houses.

The great irony is that these men were refused early release because they were deemed to present a high risk to the community, yet once out were left to manage virtually on their own.

(Changes in recent years to the Criminal Code are helping to correct that. Judges now can order that an offender be monitored in the community for up to 10 years after his release, and conditions can be placed on the activities and movements of pedophiles and other high-risk offenders.)

People involved in Circles often shorten the full name to "Circles of Support," but they say the second part of the name - "and Accountability" - is key.

"There are times when we have real eyeball-to-eyeball confrontations," said Harry Nigh, a Mennonite pastor in Hamilton.

If someone shows signs of reverting to high-risk behaviour, the Circle will challenge him.

Budreo's Circle turned him in once, in the first months after his release

in November 1994, when he violated a court order prohibiting him from drinking. The Circle had suspected he'd been drinking, but Budreo consistently denied it. One day, someone outside the Circle told them what was going on.

Budreo wasn't angry at that person for going to police.

"I know they were doing it for my own good," he said.

What did surprise him, he said, was when his Circle members showed up in court to lend him moral support.

In the end, Budreo was admitted to a residential alcohol-abuse treatment program. He no longer touches booze, he said.

And while he isn't cured of his pedophilia, he has managed not to commit new offences - and vows he never will - thanks to relapse-prevention programs he followed in prison, medication to reduce his sex drive, psychiatric help and the support of his Circle.

Last November, the fifth anniversary of his release, his Circle presented him with a certificate of congratulations, which hangs on the wall in his small bachelor apartment.

Released sex offenders should jump at the opportunity to get into a Circle, Budreo said.

"Get your ass in there before you get yourself back behind bars."

For the public, it's a way to become involved in the corrections process, which for too long has been viewed as only the government's responsibility, said Bob Brown, acting director of community reintegration for Corrections Canada.

"The community itself has to have some kind of ownership," he said.

Psychologist Wilson said: "For a change, you have ordinary, common people taking a reasonable approach rather than just being afraid."

But it takes a special commitment.

Some volunteers said in interviews they initially felt so repulsed by the crime committed that they weren't always sure they could work with the offender, despite believing strongly in restorative justice.

"I found the actual offence so awful, I wasn't sure I could be part of it," said Norma Johnston, a Hamilton churchgoer who was invited to sit on the Circle for a man in his 40s who served time for having sex with a teenage boy.

Johnston committed herself only to trying it for three months instead of the year that volunteers are normally asked for.

A year later, she continues to sit on the Circle, with no plans to leave. These days, its members are busy trying to get the man tested for possible learning disabilities.

Just the other week, Johnston took him and his wife out to dinner.

"You know, I really like him," she said.

Although he has long hair and she's "a conservative 70-year-old" and "we don't match at all," she has come to appreciate his eccentricity.

"It's been a growth thing for me," she said of being on the man's Circle. "I'm glad I did it. I really hope for him that he can not reoffend."

- For information on the Circles of Support and Accountability project in Montreal, call Peter Huish at Montreal-Southwest Community Ministries, (514) 244-6147.

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