

BULLETIN

Motivating youth through inspiration and hope

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Jerome Bouvier, championship tennis player and school-based prevention worker for SHARE Family and Community Services

Picture this: you are 24 years old. You live the fast life in LA: parties, celebrities, race horses, booze and drugs. Its a gorgeous day for waterskiing on the California coast ... but youre drunk. Suddenly, the boat veers left. You swingright. You crash into the rocks, and shatter your spine.

When Jerome Bouvier came out of a coma four weeks later, he was paralyzed from the chest down, and he would spend eighteen more weeks in hospital.

A catastrophic accident like this would slow most people down ...but not Bouvier. If anything, it spurred him on to achieve more, and today, sixteen yearslater, he is still accelerating.

Bouvier now works as a school-based prevention worker for SHARE Family and Community Services. His energy and dedication, coupled with his friendly, welcoming demeanor, make him ideally suited for his job. His enthusiasm is infectious.

"Primarily, my job entails raising awareness and information around substance misuse and education, to prevent substance misuse," he says. "Its also about developing activities and programs that engage and invite

youth to be involved, and hopefully influence positive lifestyles."

Bouvier also does career and personal planning presentations to both classes and assemblies of high school students, as well as professional and community training for parents and other community professionals for implementing prevention programs.

This ties in with his business enterprise, called Winds of Change Empowerment Seminars. "It takes me throughout the province, taking the work that I do to conferences throughout BC. This means a lot of assembly speaking, motivational speaking, and substance abuse speaking," he says. "I do other workshops and community partnerships. One I do a lot is called "They're the Experts," about recruiting young people into being part of the process and solution instead of alienating them. And I do presentations about disability awareness, too."

Bouvier has inspired many, many youths through his work so far. "Over the last two years, I've probably had conversations with over 15,000 young people," he says. But Bouvier is consistently modest about his considerable achievements, and insists that the young people he works with deserve the credit. "I'm very honoured to feel that the kids connect with me very easily, and there's a simple reason: it's because I give them complete respect back. I'm no better than they are, just because I have a few years on them. I just give them complete opportunity and freedom to express themselves. I learn so much from them."

Jerome Bouvier is a powerfully prolific man, and he likes to keep busy. When he isn't working as a youth advocate, or holding home-based classes for teens on quitting smoking, he heads a theatre company called Detour which tours throughout the province. He directs a fifteen-member troupe who develop and script their own plays. "We're doing two plays this year," he says. "One is on adolescent sex and everything that entails, and the other one is called Never Enough, which is about fitting in, belonging, and the different things that young people will do to try to fit."

Tonight, he is attending the inaugural meeting of a non-profit society he has long worked to put together. "We created a model that will be a multi-service resource for substance affected youth and their families," he says. "We're looking at recruiting private funding, and to establish this in a little while with a youth team and community professionals on board. This is my dream. For the first couple of years it will be a day program for about 16 youth and their families, and we'll provide programs like healing circles, drama, video editing, horticultural programs, and a multitude of other opportunities for youth."

In his leisure time, Bouvier enjoys playing tennis, biking, and scuba diving. "When I'm not working, I'm on the Canadian National Tennis Team," he laughs. "And I'm also on the Western Canada Games Tennis Team representing BC. But when I want no distractions, I go diving."

"I like to go down to about 60 feet where there are no phones, and no hassles, and sit there and talk to the crabs for a while."

At other times when he wants to wind down, Bouvier carves. "I do Native carvings. I have a very big piece that's displayed at Douglas College in the library. It's a very big piece ... 12 feet by five feet ... called the Spirit of Community," he says. And over the next year or two, he hopes to open his house to foster children.

Jerome Bouvier was born in Blind River, Ontario, but grew up in Manitoba where his father owned junior hockey teams. Young Bouvier and his three brothers started racing horses, and it wasn't long before he found himself in the fast lane. "I raced horses all over," he says. "I started doing drugs at 15, and quit school in grade 11. I'd been living the fast party life in California for a few years before I got hurt in 1983," he says.

But even back then, his accident didnt stop him. "I was in acoma for about four weeks, and then got out and went back to racing horses. I was the onlyknown disabled person racing horses, and I continued my drug life style as well. But otherthings in my life, like being shot and having a .45 stuck in my mouth, tended to influenceme not to do drugs anymore.

"But I continued racing. I took my own stable on my own and racedin California, Philadelphia, Chicago, Florida, New York ... and what happened was, kidsstarted to call me and wanted to talk to me," he says. "I was on a lot of TVshows, and was featured in USA Today, things like that, so kids were starting to look atme as a role model. That influenced me to start volunteering, so I volunteered with streetyouths in New York and LA, and chose another career. So I came back here to BC in 1989,still racing horses, going to school full time, and starting my other career."Eventually, Bouvier sold his last horse in 1993.

"Its been interesting, but its been a challenge,obviously. When I speak to youth and when I talk about drugs, Im a storyteller. Itell my story and relate to whatever issue that a school or other organization wants me toaddress: everything from relationships to substance abuse. The motivational part comesfrom speaking about how you can do pretty much anything you want to do. It depends howmotivated you are to do it, and dealing with challenges in our lives that we all have.Thank god for my challenges, for through them I have found my courage, myself, my work,and my spirit.

"My message to youths is that you dont have to buy or use ortry anything to feel valuable."

Bouvier has strong feelings about the current strike in the communitysocial service sector. "Government has to pull their heads out of the sandbox,"he says, clearly angered. His voice hardens. "This sector needs to be funded. Ifsociety isnt healthy, everything else is irrelevant.

"I know how undervalued this sector is, and it makes me angry. Isupport my fellow workers in this strike, because I know that it will be beneficial foreveryone ... and ultimately, especially for the kids."

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