

## Helping at-risk youth choose the right path

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by CAROLE PEARSON



**anging out at the mall** is part of Miranda Blomquists job. As a youth outreach support worker with the John Howard Society North Island in Courtenay, its important to go to places where youth congregate. -Its a busy job," she says, -but thats what I like about it."

Going to parks, community centres and shopping malls that are popular youth hangouts is just one part of her job ... but an important one. -Because Im where they are, they accept me a little bit more, rather than going to a counselling office."

As a youth outreach support worker, Blomquists role is to guide at-risk youth in the right direction. If they have addiction problems, she tries to get them into alcohol and drug counselling. With those who have housing issues or are in need of family mediation, she refers them to the Ministry of Children and Families. -They can call me if they need help with housing, looking for a job, or a personal crisis ... and I can pick them up for coffee and have a chat."

Blomquist was born in Courtenay and graduated from Trinity Western University in 2003 with a B.A. in psychology and a certificate from its human services program. -The reason I decided to work with impoverished people," she says, -is because I could have easily gone down that same path myself. My family never had a lot of money and I grew up in an addicted family. Knowing that I could have gone either way makes me have compassion for other people that might find themselves in that situation."

Blomquist has worked with the John Howard Society for five years. Prior to her current position, she was employed at the Campbell River John Howard Societys *Oasis* residential program for girls, which provides help for those who are going through the youth justice system. She has been a youth outreach worker for two and a half years, and is also an activity worker with the 180 Degree program, a detox and stabilization program providing positive activities for youth.

She also works as a staff member of *Safe Care*, a program directed at youth at risk for sexual exploitation or who have been sexually exploited. Part of her job involves going into the schools and speaking to students about the risk factors for recruitment. She also collaborated with other service professionals to establish *Community Against Sexual Exploitation of Youth* (CASEY).

During her studies at Trinity Western, Blomquist volunteered at the Union Gospel Mission in Vancouvers Downtown Eastside. Through activities like handing out mugs of hot chocolate to people who came in from the streets, Blomquist came to realize almost all the people she met had some history of abuse in their past,

including alcoholism, addictions or mental illness. -Thats where I started to understand the root causes of poverty, because although the stories were all different, they were all basically the same in the end."

-The best part about my job is being able to have an effect on peoples lives and knowing I can be a positive role model to youth," she explains. -My dream job would be to work with homeless adults, but what I like about working with youth is theres lots more hope. They have more of their life ahead of them, so theres more time for them to turn their lives around and do something great with their lives."

A new steward for her facility, Blomquist recently attended her first HSA convention. -I was very impressed with the professionalism of it and enjoyed meeting the members from all over, including the ones in our regional area which is North Island," she says. It was also an opportunity to learn about the other professions represented by HSA. -As a community social services worker," she says, -I need to know what goes on in the hospitals."

Blomquist says another high point of the convention was the presentation by Seth Klein, the BC Director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, who spoke on the topic, -Poverty and Inequality in BC: Implications for Health." She says Kleins speech was -phenomenal."

Miranda Blomquist Youth Outreach Support Worker John Howard Society
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-Poverty is one big area of personal concern for me," says Blomquist, -and being an advocate for people, especially for those who dont have a voice to do it for themselves."

Speaking out on behalf of others is the role of an advocate. She says, -The government needs to pour more funding into programs that are working on the root causes of poverty and homelessness: addictions, mental illness, abuse, those types of things."

There should also be more money put into building low-income housing, another -gap" Blomquist sees in our communities. These are all big changes that need many voices to speak out to get government action.

Thats why, for Blomquist, the HSA convention was just further proof of the combined strength that comes with being in a union.

-The biggest thing I came away with is the power in numbers. In every union, we have a united voice and that has more sway than one individual voice."

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