

# Something Positive for a Change

Rewarding kids for doing the right thing is paying dividends to the RCMP and the community at large in Richmond, British Columbia

BY DIANE SELKIRK



RCMP Supt. Ward Clapham (left) and Const. David Edge show local youth a new side of law enforcement.

Const. David Edge pulls up beside three skateboarders. As he gets out of his car to approach the teens, they step off their boards and group together, shoulders tense, eyes downcast. "It's nice to see you here," begins Edge, an RCMP youth-section officer. The skaters look confused by his greeting. They stare at one another, then look around the park, waiting to find out what they're in trouble

for. "I'm happy to see you wearing helmets," Edge continues. One of the teens looks perplexed.

Then, Edge hands out tickets—redeemable for recreational activities, movies, pizzas or slush drinks—and thanks the boys for skateboarding in a designated place while wearing protective gear.

For the next five minutes, Edge and the teens debate wheel types and board shapes, and trade notes on good places around town to skateboard. Along the way, the constable learns the boys' names and where they go to school.

"This might be the first positive interaction these kids ever had with the police," Edge says.

WHILE A six-year-old may bask in the attention of his RCMP hero, within a few years, the relationship between kids and cops changes. "By the time they're teenagers, we've become the enemy," says RCMP Supt. Ward Clapham of the Richmond, B.C., detachment in Metro Vancouver. He says we lose youth to crime in part because teens stop feeling like they belong.

Clapham's thoughts resonated with his colleagues and, in the summer of 2001, the detachment launched a program called "Positive Tickets," in which police gave out certificates—mainly for treats such as pop and snack foods—for good behaviour. After the first year, the city and local businesses came on board, and now the RCMP hands out tickets that also offer community activities such as swimming, bowling and skating.

In Hamilton, one of Richmond's more remote neighbourhoods, the larger recreation facilities are too far away to be useful to the program. So Const. Brook Byam, another youth-section officer, contacted Ravinder Bedi, the owner of Paulo's Pizza, a small local restaurant. Bedi says he eagerly provided the police with 250 certificates for six-inch pizzas because "community kids are like your own—it's important to show we care."

Currently, detachment members give out up to 40,000 positive tickets a year to kids they "catch" doing the

right thing. "We're acknowledging when a kid uses the crosswalk, goes to school or wears a bike helmet," says Clapham. The program, combined with other youth initiatives, has coincided with a 41-percent drop in Richmond's youth crime—keeping more than 1,000 young people a year out of the criminal justice system.

Richmond's demographic poses a unique challenge: fifty-seven percent of the city's 185,000 residents are immigrants, and some families come from countries where children learn early not to trust police. But this mistrust can go both ways. "It can be intimidating to approach a group of kids," Edge says. "I feel more confident when I come bearing gifts."

Edge says when you spend your days looking for kids causing trouble, that's all you see after a while. But when he started to seek out those doing the *right* thing, his perspective changed: "I began meeting these great kids."

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA criminologist Bryan Hogeveen says programs like Positive Tickets help because they give police an opportunity to shake up stereotypes. Kids start to trust police, who then develop a more positive view of youth, and the community begins to welcome teens—an often-excluded group. The point is not to reduce crime, "although that's a great side effect when it happens," says Hogeveen. "The goal is to improve the way we view each other."

Byam, too, sees the larger implications: "People often think of youth

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crime as a police problem, but the solution only comes when we work together." She explains the tickets get kids out of the "trouble" areas where they loiter and provide them the chance to be active. "Kids learn what they can do and where they can be," she says. But the tickets aren't designed to bribe kids into being good. "They're a stepping-off point in forming a connection."

OUTSIDE Hamilton's small community centre, Byam stops when she sees two primary-school kids sporting medals. Jacob and Hailey Castro shyly explain they got their medals for completing a reading program. "Reading's important. You should be proud," Byam tells them. Their mother, Micky Castro, beams as Byam gives the kids tickets for reading. Castro says the positive police presence has improved her neighbourhood. "The kids know Brook is here," she says. "Now they don't hang out causing trouble in the park."

Over at Cambie Secondary School, students are streaming home. When 16-year-old Jason Lee and his friend Eric notice Edge nearby, Eric quickly pulls on his bike helmet—something

he knows Edge gives tickets for. The teens and officer joke about Eric's efforts, then chat about school. Edge surprises them with tickets for being courteous. "He's a nice guy," Jason says. "He always remembers who we are."

While Edge says it's impossible to tell if one interaction will make a difference in a kid's life, Catterina Rios says it can. When the 20-year-old was in Grade 12, Edge was her school's liaison officer and he changed her perception of the police. "He wasn't the stern stereotype," she says. "He was friendly and approachable."

Now a criminology student, Rios says when Edge discovered she was interested in a career in law enforcement, he began to mentor her, providing her with contacts to join the RCMP auxiliary and arranging for her to experience her first ride-along. "I never thought an officer would take an interest in my life," says Rios. "It was so encouraging."

Edge says getting to know kids like Rios has inspired him, and he's learned to see the positive contributions—from volunteering, to being polite to one other—that teens make daily: "They give me hope for the future."

*Richmond's Positive Tickets has been so successful that other municipalities, too, are implementing the program. Consts. Edge and Byam have moved on to other units within the RCMP, but other equally helpful officers have taken their places.*

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