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ROD COHEN'S 'FRAGILE PROJECT'

BY NATALIE ALCOBA

Across from the stained towers of Riverdale's gritty projects, a small group is gathered around a fold-out table for a board meeting of the Blake Boulbee outreach service, the last best hope for some of the city's hardest kids.

A young man interrupts, a brown paper bag in his hand.

He nods at Rod Cohen, the centre's executive director: "Hey Rod. I've got it," he yells.

Cohen never rises from his seat. "Just take it into the back and put it under my desk." The youth does, and leaves on a promise to return the next day.

Cohen looks impassively at his puzzled board members.

"He just brought me his gun."

For Cohen, this is a moment worth reliving, a victory in his long, weary battle to save the city's troubled youth. Sit him down in the converted two-bedroom house not far from the \$5 lattes of the Danforth, and you'll hear all about the fruits of his labour.

He'll rummage through a desk drawer in his office and triumphantly hold up an unspent shotgun shell. "Instead of blasting it at somebody, it was brought to me," says the 47-year-old father, a towering former rock'n'roller who has played the Horseshoe Tavern.

Cohen rid himself of his long brown locks, earrings and anarchistic tendencies years ago. Now he sports a respectable pair of rectangular rimmed glasses, which don't hide the light in his eyes when he points out the artwork hanging in his office.

The paintings were created by a once broken girl who, after 10 years of meeting with him, is a university graduate.

Mr. Cohen helps transform

IN THE HARD-SCRABBLE PROJECTS OF RIVERDALE, HE STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE IN THE TOUGH BUSINESS OF KEEPING PEOPLE ALIVE

Toronto's "hardest" young people through the Blake Boulbee Youth Outreach Service [BBYOS], located in the house on Blake Street, just north of Boulbee Avenue. It is an intensive, one-on-one counseling program that is touted as a rare thing in this city: individual, long-term, no-charge therapy for high-risk youth.

Many see this kind of thing as the best hope for a city in the grip of what started out as the "Summer of the Gun."

Last year, a group of Toronto academics identified one-on-one counselling as one of the most effective tools in preventing high risk youth from sinking further into delinquency.

"Frankly, it's not pretty work," says Gren MacDonald, president of the BBYOS board of directors and vice-president of sales and marketing at Green Shield Canada.

Still, BBYOS struggles to find funding. It doesn't qualify for city money, and relies on donations from foundations and individuals.

Earlier this year, it had to lay off

half of its staff, a woman who had connected with many of the young girls in the neighbourhood. "That sort of really brought home how fragile the whole project is," said Daniel Egan, a resident of Riverdale who works for the city and volunteers his time on the BBYOS board of directors.

Mr. Cohen jokes the struggle for cash helps him relate even more to the young people he counsels — youths who have come through "the slaughter."

He works alone and receives referrals from as far away as Burlington; from schools, police and social service agencies that don't have the capacity to help the volatile youngsters, but trust Mr. Cohen can.

"It's very special what he offers us," says Andrea Hicks, a vice-principal at Danforth Collegiate and Technical Institute, who has referred about 30 kids to Cohen over the last three years. "He's the additional significant adult in these kids' lives. He's the neutral observer, the listener, the life coach."

BBYOS (on the Web at bbyos.org)

has come a long way from its early days in 1989, when Mr. Cohen operated from a street-side bench, a stone's throw from where the centre is located now. He had a background of working with street kids, in an environment where anyone with condoms and an open mind is welcome.

But the key to reaching and helping the children of the projects is trust — and that takes time.

"For days I watched this world go by me. It was very frightening," says Cohen, who grew up in a single-parent household in Willowdale and now lives about an eight-minute walk from the Blake Boulbee projects.

His first real breakthrough came six months later, when he went to visit a neighbourhood boy thrown in jail. By the time he returned to Blake Street that afternoon, all the local kids knew where he had been. "That was the icebreaker," he says. Shortly thereafter, the operation moved to a spare office in one of the highrises, then a storefront unit in a derelict strip mall.

In 1996 Mr. Cohen saved a neglected two-storey house from the clutches of crack addicts and turned it into a therapeutic oasis. Hundreds of young men and women, from 12 to 25 years old, have curled up in the large cushiony chair in his second-floor office, and tread into the depths of their despair. The damage is deep-seeded: boys and girls who bury the scars of emotional and physical abuse, young people who have never known an adult to hold a full time job, illiteracy, explosive tempers, even a list of criminal charges by the age of 13.

"It's definitely the first place I felt safe in a long time, the first place I felt safe to cry," said the young woman who created the artwork in Cohen's office. At 14 she ran away from east Harlem and her crack-add-

dicted, HIV positive parents to a friend in Toronto.

Now, she's 25, a university graduate and mother who works full-time. "You don't change or turn that stuff around in two or three years," says Cohen.

The young woman says: "The trust thing is huge. After 10 years, Rod really knows my limits."

He's pushed others to redefine theirs by sitting down with opposing sides of a neighbourhood dispute, with pizza and soft drinks, and addressing the "nonsense" on a human level. "It's a testament to Rod that there hasn't been more violence in the neighbourhood," says Egan.

Indeed, Blake Boulton has been spared much of the gun violence that has gripped other parts of Toronto.

Cohen, with his background in psychotherapy, social work and psychology, has succeeded because the door is always open, but judgment is never allowed inside.

The BBYOS board hopes the city's renewed focus on deterring young people from crime will send more money their way.

Manjit Jheeta, manager of Toronto's Community Safety Secretariat, noted that while a clinical-style program like BBYOS is a critical piece to the city's overall safety strategy, it is considered a health service, and does not qualify for city funding.

"There's a difference in our jurisdiction as a funder and providing leadership in terms of moving community safety forward," she said.

The city's funding focuses on community based programs, she said.

MacDonald doesn't dispute the worthiness of programs that do get funding. "We're saying it's not the only need."

Sometimes, all the hard work falls short.

Two years ago, Cohen received a midnight phone call informing him that Blake Boulton neighbourhood youth worker Kempton Howard, 24, had been shot and killed in the hallway of one of the highrises.

Cohen knew Howard, and says the young man was doing a lot of good. He also knew the accused; they were his clients.

"You can do as much as you do and still things are going to happen," he said.

Afterward, Cohen helped reassemble the emotions of those who bore the loss.

"Resolution is a moving target," reflects Taiwo Bah, who called Howard his best friend and still seeks counseling at BBYOS. "I went to Rod because I needed someone to talk to."