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Mon. Jul. 17, 2006. | Updated at 08:07 AM

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Trust, it's all in the eyes

She was a teen criminal headed for disaster; he was the therapist who had to find a way to help

Jul. 15, 2006. 01:00 AM

PATRICK EVANS

LIFE WRITER



DAVID COOPER / TORONTO STAR

Rod Cohen expected an Amazon. This teenager, Adan, had a reputation for busting heads. She was probably 8 feet tall. When she got to his office, would she duck to clear the doorframe or just rip it out entirely?

And then there she was, early for her first therapy session — barely 80 pounds on a full stomach. Still, she was fierce. Full of demands, too. Rod Cohen, make my school take me back.

In 1994, Adan was 15, in prison and facing 200 hours of community service on her release. As part of those hours, the court ordered her to get professional help. That's where Cohen came in.

He is a psychotherapist working with at-risk youth living in and around the Toronto Community Housing project at Blake St. and Boulton Ave. in the Riverdale area. He says Adan came to him with the most spectacularly accomplished f-you attitude he'd ever seen in a patient.

"She was the most difficult, horrific kid. This is a girl who, there's no question in my mind, would have killed somebody and would have spent the rest of her life in jail."

Adan didn't think much of Cohen, either. He had this thing about eye contact. What do you make of a person who keeps looking you in the eyes, even when you're looking down, when you're looking anywhere in the room but at him?

Rod Cohen's Blake Boulton Youth Outreach Service is a bare-bones operation, but it's a step up from where he started his practice: a bench across from a housing project in Riverdale.

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Whatever Cohen was determined to find in her, she was just as determined to protect.

Adan is a Tanzanian immigrant who came to Canada when she was 11. "Adan" is a fragment of her last name. She asked the *Star* to withhold her full name and avoid specifics on her teenage crimes and the childhood traumas that made her angry enough to declare war on the world.

Cohen first heard of her when he got a call from a caseworker at Vanier Women's Correctional Centre in Brampton. They had this 15-year-old girl, in trouble with the law, who in the course of serving her sentence had gotten herself moved from an open custody group home to a minimum security facility and finally to maximum security at Vanier.

The girl would badly need community support upon her release in a few weeks. Cohen agreed to help.

Star readers first met Cohen in 1987, when he was a Toronto street outreach worker rescuing a 20-year-old transvestite hustler called Charlotte, who'd just been bashed by her pimp. Cohen and his outreach partner found Charlotte a place to sleep for the night. He also bought her some new cosmetics so the kid, her gaunt face battered, could paint on some self-respect.

In the 1990s Cohen started the Blake Boulton Youth Outreach Service, offering ghetto kids long-term psychotherapy.

His first office was an outdoor bench across the street from Riverdale's Toronto Community Housing project. That bench was his introduction to the young and the poor living in the area, the majority of them black.

Slowly, he won their trust and got them talking about their lives. Later, a local property manager gave him office space in what had been a storage closet. As the number of kids he'd worked with hit three digits, Cohen moved his practice into the house on Blake St. that it occupies today.

Adan remembers those painful early sessions with Cohen, that tall man in his 40s whose eyes behind his glasses were always trying to get at her. "Eye contact, sitting down and talking, I never experienced that stuff....To get anything out of me was hard."

Adan says events in her childhood had put her in permanent fighting mode. "I just found that anything that came towards me, I had to defend myself. It was me alone. Arguing. That's how I've been taught."

Adan figured, since Cohen was supposed to help with her problems, he ought to be producing faster results. Much faster. "I argued with him. I would put my foot down if I wanted something and then certain things wouldn't go my way and I would fight with him."

He'd remind her therapy was a step-by-step process. "I'd say f--- it, I don't want to hear about your process right now."

Adan, as a so-called "at risk" youth in the ghetto, grew up in a decade when gang violence got increasingly deadly. Cohen has followed the evolution through his patients.

Swarming was the big city-wide panic in the early '90s. Then crack wrecked minds and bodies at a street-price so high it turned addicts into muggers and thieves. As Cohen scrambled year after year for charitable donations to keep his one-man ghetto intervention afloat, the streets of Toronto started filling with guns.

"Somebody's getting those guns in, they're making a shitload of money," Cohen says.

"Once the guns are here, they're in the hands of really stupid young people who are into this culture of kill or be killed."

And this is where Cohen gets really intriguing. He's a man who has devoted his life to what he calls "really stupid young people."

Feelings, relationships and communication are the tools of his trade but he doesn't sound at all like the therapists on daytime talk shows, with their whispery pieties. His delivery is closer to the street, four-letter words turning up in sentences that never deserved them.

He's not trying for "yo, yo, yo," street cred — his dignity is still intact. Maybe that unadorned, cut-the-crap tone of voice is one of the ways he builds trust with kids who have no reason to trust anyone.

Adan trusted him. When her community service hours ended, she decided to keep seeing Cohen, despite never having managed to break him.

"Say, if I called him and I told him to call me back, it's an emergency. When he didn't call back I got frustrated."

That's when she'd rage into his voicemail: If you don't wanna work with me, just say it instead of avoiding me!

Turns out, this was part of therapy, a lesson in boundaries and respect.

Cohen would explain to Adan that he had other patients, he had a private life, too, and if he didn't return her call right away it wasn't because he was rejecting her. He was just busy.

Adan spent years delving into her past with Cohen. In that time, she went back to school. She watched her girlfriends get pregnant and abandon the enterprising dreams they'd nursed in adolescence, but she focused on her strengths.

The best times in her terrible childhood were spent caring for her younger siblings. She loved kids. Even at her angriest, they were always exempt from her fury. She found work in a daycare, and Cohen watched her back with resumé's and cover letters.

This spring, she received a diploma in early childhood education.

Both of our heroes get a happy ending in this story. Cohen says, after years of sacrificing patient time to scramble for funding for Blake Boulton, he thinks something really good might be in the works. Bowing to politics and superstition, he won't share the details just yet.

Adan says she still gets angry sometimes, but knows how to walk away from a fight.

"It took — I don't know how many years," she says. The changes, to her, were imperceptible. He asked for her patience and she learned to wait for the payback.

"Every year, on my birthday, he'd take me out. And he'd tell me one thing that I had achieved that year. I never used to see it."

She sees it now. The pride you hear in Cohen's voice when he talks about Adan is in her voice, too.

When Cohen looks her in the eyes, there she is, looking right back in his.

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