

INFILTRATING YOUTH CULTURE: ONE WAY TO UNDERSTAND CYBER-BULLYING

Constable Scott Mills is one face of Chief Bill Blair's outreach

SARAH BOESVELD
JULY 26, 2008

Constable Scott Mills is fed up with the Canadian Teachers' Federation's recent call for legislation against cyber-bullying.

"All the kids are online and there's no adult mentorship out there," he said. "Of course you're going to have cyber-bullying if you're not there to help these kids out."

Constable Mills is in a position to know. As Toronto Crime Stoppers' community youth officer, he is one of the few cops who understands the online realm. He has more than 1,100 Facebook friends, three-quarters of them high-school students.

By delving into the virtual world, the 41-year-old officer has found the way to reach the teens he's trying to help. It's not the first time he's pioneered a novel approach for turning would-be thugs off crime - in fact, Constable Mills is swiftly earning a reputation as one of the most innovative mentors on Toronto's force.

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"He's an inspiration to get things done," said Kedre (Bubblz) Browne, 19, who painted illegal graffiti for five years until he met Constable Mills last summer. "We see how personal he is, not just with us but with the whole entire community," Mr. Browne said.

Constable Mills invited the young artist to participate in a legal graffiti program he had founded. Mr. Browne says the officer has helped him with almost every legal project since, including the Six String Nation guitar mural in the back alley behind Lee's Palace on Bloor Street West.

The forward-thinking officer landed the Crime Stoppers community youth gig in January, 2007, after impressing police brass in his three years as a school officer in a downtown division.

Constable Mills started dreaming of becoming a cop at age 5. At 23, he became a constable in Peel Region. Two years later, he narrowly escaped death after his ear was clipped by an angry man wielding a meat cleaver during a domestic-assault call.

About 12 years later when he moved to Toronto's 14 Division, he was stabbed in the back of the neck with a metal peg wielded by an enraged man in Kensington market.

It was while working in 14 Division that he got involved in the graffiti-eradication program that helped Mr. Browne. Realizing the division is a North American graffiti destination, he embraced the art form and launched the Legal Graffiti Art program, which helps aspiring graffiti artists find legal places to paint.

But however rewarding it is to help youngsters, efforts to secure space to paint legally are constantly thwarted by a lack of funding and governmental structure, Constable Mills says, perhaps because there are still perceptions that all graffiti is painted by young hooligans. He's now trying to find somewhere to build an indoor BMX park, but can't find property cheap enough.

"Just like this cyber-bullying ... [police] are all told in the graffiti world, 'Oh, don't go out and help these kids.' [Kids are] all out on their own, so they vandalize," he said.

Yet Constable Mills sees positive things ahead.

Toronto Police Chief Bill Blair also believes mentorship will help keep youth out of trouble, and he's made some hiring decisions to prove it. By September, 30 new officers will each be assigned as mentors to students at different schools.

"It's getting youth and officers together in a friendly environment, in an environment they feel safe in, so it's not so shocking when they see a police officer," says Detective Larry Straver, the co-ordinator of Toronto Crime Stoppers.

Constable Mills says it was "a really happy day" when Chief Blair stopped him in the hall at police headquarters three or four months ago to tell him about the new batch of hires.

"He totally buys into this whole youth-engagement philosophy and mentoring kids and being there to help them, as opposed to putting handcuffs on them," he said.

"People say, 'Oh, we've got a big problem and we need laws to fix it.' Well, no, we need to spend time with the kids that are doing it and learn about what they're doing and then mentor them in the proper way of doing things so everybody's happy."

As to the issue of cyber-bullying, Canadian Teachers' Federation president Emily Noble says the legislation is necessary because the current harassment laws are out of date and don't protect teachers and students from threats delivered on the Internet.

"We would say there are sections of the criminal code that don't refer to the new technology at all," she said.

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Phillip Crawley, Publisher