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Youth crime has been high profile lately and, as a result, so has the Youth Criminal Justice Act and provincial justice minister Michael Baker's attempt to amend it. But are his efforts misdirected?

by **Michael Ganley**
photos **Ryan Whynott**

"MOST of us in here have already chose our path and we're already doing what we're going to do," says Lloyd, leaning forward in his chair and clasping his hands.



"They need to work more toward younger kids."

He speaks slowly, softly, in a deep monotone. He seldom makes eye contact. When he does, he holds it for only a moment, then his eyes dart away. He smiles slightly and waves whenever one of his buddies passes by. Lloyd is burly, 18 years old, with short black hair. He's dressed in black, a t-shirt and a black summer jacket. He's been a criminal since before he was a teenager, starting with petty theft, graduating to break-and-enters, car-jacking and then assaulting police. He's nearing the end of his most recent stay at the Nova Scotia Youth Facility, better known as Waterville after the small Annapolis Valley town where it has been situated since 1988. He's in this time (having been sentenced almost a year ago) for a break-and-enter.

"Some get out, and they try to make their lives better," says Lloyd (not his real name). "They get out and they do something stupid and break their conditions, then they get back here and start thinking they can't do it. They say 'fuck it.' When they start saying 'fuck it,' it's dangerous because then they'll do anything."

We're sitting in the spacious, comfortable, sun-lit common area

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Taking the wheel

A group of young activists take matters into their own hands and prepare for a cross-country bike tour to talk about how individuals—including youth—can make a positive impact on the environment.

by **Hillary Lindsay**

photo **Michael Tompkins**

Cynics beware: the Otesha Project is about to blow your made-in-China socks off. On May 1, 15 youth from across Canada (ages 19 to 33) will set out from Vancouver, BC, bound for Gander, NF. Over five months of travelling, the group will make presentations in schools, community centres and summer camps to more than 15,000 youth. Their message—“be the change you wish to see in the world”—is so simple it’s almost cliché. But Otesha’s Coast2Coast Tour is determined to reclaim the phrase’s radical roots.

“It’s definitely not in the interest of those who are benefiting from a system that exploits people and the environment for people to feel like they can make a difference,” says Simon Moll, a Coast2Coast coordinator. “Because if people felt like they could make a difference, then they would. And that might result in there being a playground instead of a condo. Or it might result in there being a youth shelter instead of a Tim Hortons.”

Twenty-year-old Moll is coordinating the trip with 21-year-old Keli Bellaire in Halifax. They’ll meet with the rest of the team in Vancouver to begin the 9,000-kilometre trek home. The message Otesha will be bringing across the country is that individuals can make a difference, and in fact they already do make a difference, though their impacts are not always positive ones.

“Take an issue like factory farms where animals are kept in really small cages and fed antibiotics and hormones,” says Bellaire. “These animals don’t have much of a life; they are raised to be slaughtered. But to stop that, all we have to do is stop buying meat from factory farms. So we’ll talk about food choices, from local organic free-range meat, to being vegetarian or vegan. We try to provide a variety of ways for people to change their actions.”

“Otesha tries to put things in a light that connects every small action to a bigger picture,” says Moll. “Not learning about a forest that’s somewhere far away, but how I am a part of that forest, or how the paper that I’m taking notes on is part of that forest. Building up those connections in a really personal way can help foster consideration, whether it’s between people and nature or people and each other.”

The Otesha Project was founded in February 2002 by Jocelyn Land-Murphy and Jessica Lax, two Canadians studying sustainable development in Africa, with the goal to bring change about by personal actions.

“One of our philosophies, and something that I think makes Otesha really unique, is that we don’t talk about anything in our presentations that we don’t do in our own lives,” says Bellaire. This means having an ethical funding policy and printing all project material on reused paper. It also means the group’s transportation, for crossing the second largest country on the planet, is the bicycle.

“I’m entirely terrified,” confesses Jess Abramson, the Dalhousie Women’s Centre coordinator. “I have no idea how to bike across the country. I’ve never biked for longer than half an hour.” Abramson is a Coast2Coast member and says she’s in good company. “I think I’m of a generation that looks at these huge challenges, and says, ‘I’m just gonna hope that I can do that.’” She points to the tour’s young coordinators, Bellaire and Moll. “They’ve never coordinated a cross-Canada bike trip before. They just kind of looked at the challenge and said ‘this is worth it’ and ‘I can do this.’ And it seems to be working.”

Something is definitely working. Coast2Coast has secured funding for the tour, including honourariums for team members needing financial support. Honda has donated a hybrid car support vehicle for the trip and the group’s coordinators have made contacts with community members across the country who are organizing accommodations (backyards, school gyms and campgrounds), presentations (theatre, multimedia and workshops), and food (donations and potluck community dinners). The group will cycle an average of 100 kilometres a day, and on stops they will give presentations and workshops.

The 2005 tour will be the second time Otesha has crossed the country. In 2003, 33 youth biked across Canada making over 250 presentations. This year, three separate regional tours have been added (BC Tour, Prairies Regional Tour, Great Lakes Camps Tour), an Otesha book is being published and a high school training program (for youth who wish to make presentations in their own communities) is also underway.

Local activist Angela Bischoff has only good things to say about the group’s potential. “Youth are integral to the overall evolution of our culture,” she says, “and Otesha has all the skill and creativity to change the world. Their impact will ripple out through families and workplaces across the country. Their tour will literally change lives.”

Talk of changing the world is not uncommon amongst the

Coast2Coast crew, and may cause those with a claim on the “real world” to dismiss them altogether. But Otesha is not a project based on blind optimism.

“We recognize that everything from poverty to climate change is a result of how humans are living their lives; how we interact with each other and how we’re treating our environment,” says Bellaire. “Something that we say in our presentations is that all the problems we talk about are human created—and therefore they can be human solved.” In this way, the Otesha Project is about hope.

“We have to be creating new choices and new alternative ways of living that will hopefully keep building and taking up more space in the world,” says Bellaire. “What attracted me to Otesha is that it’s a really positive and empowering approach to things that can be really depressing. My experience in the past has always been a pretty frustrating feeling of not getting anywhere. You’re trying to tackle these massive issues like stopping the war in Iraq, and you don’t stop the war and then you feel like you haven’t been able to do anything. Otesha seemed to offer a pretty deep analysis of the problems and recognized the severity of all those things, but didn’t dwell on that and moved pretty quickly onto the solutions and how we can all be part of those solutions.”

Using theatre, storytelling and multi-media presentations, Otesha presents a myriad of ways youth can be part of the solutions. A skit starring Hopeful Hooligan, Careless Consumer and Mother Earth takes the audience through choices one makes in only one hour—from when you get up until you arrive at school. Choices like what you eat for breakfast, how much water you use to brush your teeth and how you get to school. At one point, the characters are deciding what to wear. Careless Consumer believes the advertising telling him he needs new clothes to be cool. Hopeful Hooligan, with Mother Earth’s help, learns that most brand name clothes are made in sweatshops and decides to buy her clothes at a thrift store.

Moll admits that being a Hopeful Hooligan in today’s consumer crazed society is going to raise some eyebrows, “You’re going to look weird if you’re riding a bike in the winter. And people are going to think you’re crazy if you refuse a plastic bag and walk out of the grocery store with a bunch of groceries in your armpits. People think that Tupperware is weird, or eating food from a dumpster is weird.”

Otesha’s hope, Bellaire says, is that the youth audience is still open to change, “Young people are the ones that have to live in this world for the longest and so they want to make it a good place to be. They’re starting to gain independence and starting to ask ‘how am I going to live my life?’ It’s generally an age group that’s more open to optimism—and more open to hope.”

The Otesha Project fundraiser, March 26 at St. Matthews Church, 7pm, free. Call 422-7543 or e-mail coast2coast@otesha.ca to confirm your attendance.

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