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Human interest Feature Article

HOPE, ACTION, VALUES & ETHICS

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"Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is to not stop questioning." –
Albert Einstein

I'm often asked by friends and colleagues; "You guys have such a successful program, why doesn't everyone in the Downtown Eastside enroll in the course and then they could clean up that whole area of the city?" If only it were that simple. But when I start to think about how to answer that particular question, I always end up being reminded of what the acronym H.A.V.E., actually stands for; Hope, Action, Values and Ethics. It really does sum up what this school teaches.

So I try and let people know that the successful graduates of this program all have one thing in common. They all made a decision to change their lives before they ever walked through our doors. Perhaps they didn't know how that change would come about, but they did know that change was imminent. What we do here at H.A.V.E. is help facilitate that change, but at the end of the day the students themselves make it happen. Once you have made up your mind on a subconscious level, there is no turning back. We have had students here who didn't make it the first time around, but the great thing about this school is the doors are always open. These same people have come back, completed the program and gone on to bigger and better things. They may have had a setback but they didn't give up.

Having said all that, it's never as cut and dry as a person deciding to make a change, enrolling in the program and getting a job at the end of it. Many of the students are on income support while they complete their training. Now anyone who's attended University on their own ticket will tell you that they had to have at least a couple of part time jobs to get them through school after bucking up for tuition. So if you are on basic income support you receive \$610.00 a month. \$375.00 of that is your shelter allowance. Down here you cannot find a room to rent for less than \$450.00. That means that you have to make up the difference (\$75.00) out of your living allowance which leaves you only \$160.00 left to live on. When I say live on, I mean buy food and pay bills. Sorry, but that's almost impossible. So that means having to access the food bank and stand in line for the occasional hot meal once or twice a week. So having said all that, the students who come here and keep showing up day after day is nothing short of a miracle.

One of the questions I ask new students is; "How is your diet?" I know, it sounds like an odd question but it is extremely relevant. Diet is all part of the cycle of poverty down here. British Columbia has the highest child poverty rate in all of Canada. So what happens is; children of parents on welfare do not have enough money to provide healthy food for their kids. Those kids go to school with either no breakfast or a

breakfast lacking in protein and vitamins and this results in a lack of concentration which leads to poor performance in school. Poor performance in school leads to higher drop-out rates and a lack of education leads to few if any job opportunities. Hence, the cycle of poverty perpetuates itself.

Few people outside of the Downtown Eastside take these sorts of things into consideration. Consider this; if you are homeless and have a poor diet, you cannot concentrate and you don't get proper rest. If you are sleeping in a shelter surrounded by 60 or 70 other people in close quarters on an uncomfortable bunk or on a mat on the floor, it's pretty difficult to get a good night's sleep. If you are sleeping outside it's even worse. When you spend most of your time being tired and hungry you are more susceptible to illness. There is a seriously lack of healthcare for the poor. All these things keep opportunity at arm's length.

So this brings me back to our acronym; Hope, Action, Values, and Ethics. The first thing students get when they walk through these doors is Hope. We let them know that for the next eight weeks, they will not only receive top quality training by a C.C.C. certified Chef (Executive Director, Amber Anderson) but we will provide breakfast and lunch every day they are in class. Those two meals make an enormous difference. Upon completion of the program they will receive their Food Safe Certificate and a Prep/Line Cook certificate. Our Job Development Manager, Len Nakonechny then coaches them on interview skills, cleans up their resumes and sets up interviews. For many, all these things add up to more Hope than they have seen in a very long time.

After a week or two the students begin to see how the skills they are learning can be put to use when Cafe 374 gets hit with the lunchtime rush. They are under the gun and the food orders are coming fast and furious and there is not much margin for error. That is Action.

Many of the people who attend our program have spent a very long time armed only with their survival skills. Here at H.A.V.E. they are given breathing room and time to develop new skills. Ones that are applicable in the job market and a lifestyle that requires less survival skills and more social skills. What students discover here is that any learned negative behaviour can be unlearned and replaced with new lessons such as how hard work is rewarded with a sense of accomplishment of a job well done. They can learn that honesty and integrity are tangible assets capable of opening doors that were previously thought to be forever nailed shut. In short Values and Ethics are the things that complete their tool kits that they will carry with them into their new lives.

So to try and answer the question; "why don't these people just pull up their socks and get on with it?" Because a) it's just not that simple and b) people need more than just a decision to change their lives, they need opportunities for learning and a place to grow and gain some self respect. What they need is somewhere that instills Hope, Action Values and Ethics in a nurturing community environment. In short; what they need is more places like H.A.V.E.