

North Shore News

Rebuilding cars teaches new skills and confidence for at-risk youth

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When Chloe Brown started learning to paint cars at a special youth program through Vancouver Community College, she had no idea she was painting her future.

In 2006, she joined the NASCARZ program, an effort by the Vancouver Police, VCC and the Ray-Cam Co-operative Centre to help youth involved in car thefts and those at risk to direct their love of cars into something more productive.

The students are in the process of rebuilding a 1935 Ford and a Cobra kit car with the help of instructors as well as volunteers from the B.C. Hot Rod Association.

"I like to draw and paint, so I thought it was neat to paint cars and do some designs on the cars of my own," she said, though she's never owned a car.

Now 22, she's still involved as a mentor for the other youth, and she's looking at how to get a scholarship through Ray-Cam for college to become a youth worker, which she said was inspired at NASCARZ.

The program was partly the brainchild of North Vancouver resident and youth worker Alex Vasiljevic at Ray-Cam, who realized something needed to be done when kids started driving stolen cars to their community centre on the Downtown East Side.

"These kids were using them for their own transportation. Fourteen and 15 and they're driving their younger siblings. We were totally oblivious," he said.

That's when he teamed up with VCC and the Vancouver Police Department, with the help of Sgt. Tim Houchen, to develop the program. It started by rebuilding go karts, but then the stakes got higher when Houchen donated a rusted up, moss-filled 1935 Ford he owned, and VCC gave their facilities.

The students are also rebuilding a Cobra kit car, which should be finished this fall.

"You have to meet kids where they are, and kids who steal cars are about cars," said Houchen. "Imagine loving cars and you don't have one. Your family doesn't have one, your friends don't have one, and you're going to get one and most of the time it's by stealing it."

In all, more than 60 youth have gone through the program, ranging from longtime car thieves to at-risk youth and youth who are positive role models in the

community.

Houchen said the program has helped build work experience as well as develop car maintenance skills among disadvantaged youth who otherwise wouldn't have the chance to own a car. Many of the youth who were involved in stealing cars, sometimes up to 10 a week, have left that behind.

Part of that is thanks to volunteers like North Shore hot-rod enthusiast Denny Bromley of the B.C. Hot Rod Association, who has come down to work with the kids and brought his car in for them to see. The support is invaluable, said Houchen.

"When you drive in with a completed hot rod the kids get excited. You come to an event and they get to sit in a car and they get to go and talk to the person who owns it, and see what we're kind of working for."

As for the 1935 Ford, it still has a lot of work to go, and getting parts is often expensive and difficult. It should be ready sometime in 2011, however, when they plan to put it on display at Ray-Cam and use it in police functions.

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