

Workshop scares kids straight

BY STEPHENIE CAMPBELL

Tribune Staff Writer



Lee Mason brings his workshops to lakecity

Lee Mason points to a boy in the crowd, and asks, "Have you been in jail?"

The boy nods, saying, yeah, he's been in for assault. He looks about 12 years old.

"Were you scared?" Mason asked.

The boy nods.

"You been in trouble with the law? No? Not yet?" Mason says as he stalks around the circle.

Mason brought his Young Warriors Network Scared Straight Workshops to Williams Lake last week. His approach is brutally honest, his language the same rough street talk of the young people he's trying to reach.

In Wednesday's exercise, Mason used his own experiences in prison to graphically show almost 200 young people, mostly First Nations, that spending time in prison is most definitely not cool.

"Don't be a loser, there's enough losers in prison already," he says.

He tells one young man to take off his shoes and pass them over.

"How do you feel?" he asks the boy, who admits to having stolen from stores.

He shrugs, Mason throws them over his shoulder, across the room.

"Think about how other people feel when you take their stuff," he says.

"Think about how what you're doing affects other people."

Mason, a youth counsellor and chemical dependency specialist based in Vancouver, says he singles out the most at-risk kids, the ones with the biggest attitudes, and calls them to terms for what they've done.

One boy loses his temper with the heckling, saying "I didn't do nothing to you."

"Life's a bitch, isn't it?" Mason taunts. "You don't like my attitude? Good."

Mason harasses him until eventually, the boy has to smile.

The next moment, Mason stalks the circle again, asking "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

After watching him in action it seems shocking to find that, one-on-one, Mason is surprisingly soft-spoken. During a break in the intensive five-day workshop, he says he saw a gap in services for young people, especially First Nations youth.

"I'm sick and tired of seeing young people dying from their drug and alcohol abuse, and I'm sick and tired of seeing First Nations youth ending up in prisons," Mason said.

He believes that prevention education is the only way to break the destructive cycle of abuse and substance addictions. His Scared Straight workshops for youth focus on drug and alcohol abuse, street gang and violence prevention, anger management, self-esteem and suicide prevention.

Mason says the Young Warriors Foundation tries to teach youth to walk the path of the peaceful warriors, who respect all living things and look after their elders and their communities.

"When we teach them to respect all living things, they start to respect themselves," he said.

As for his straightforward approach, he says it may be the only way to get through to already troubled young people.

"These kids know I don't bullshit them," he said.

Mason also conducted community education seminars for adults while he was in town, on organized crime and suicide prevention for families.