

MIRACLE ON DUFFERIN

by Leah Janzen

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It all happened so fast.

One minute, Joey Everett and his cousin, Clarence, were laughing and talking as they walked down Selkirk Avenue on a steamy summer evening in 2001. A second later, Clarence was laying in a pool of blood on the sidewalk, a gaping hole ripped into his gut by a bullet shot at point blank range by a gang member intent on killing. The bullet put Clarence in a wheelchair, unable to ever walk again. It left Everett with a choice.

“(Clarence) was covered in gang tattoos all over,” recalls Everett, now 20. “I just remember thinking, all that leads to is getting shot, plain and simple.” That day, Everett realized he had to make some decisions about his life — die mired in the gang violence, drug abuse and crime of Winnipeg’s inner city or start the long, slow climb out of the pit of poverty and despair he called home.

With help from Brian MacKinnon, a teacher at R.B. Russell Vocational School, Everett chose the latter and he’s never looked back. R.B. Russell Vocational School on Dufferin Avenue, tucked at the base of the Slaw Rebchuk Bridge on Salter Street, is home to about 550 Senior 9 to 12 students. The school has a large vocational component and also provides some adult education courses. Its population, like the neighbourhood around it, is diverse, with many native students — many new to Winnipeg from their home reserves — and recent immigrants.

Three years ago, R.B. Russell English teacher MacKinnon was shocked by the appearance of one of his students. The young girl had become so overweight her back swayed with the load and her health was deteriorating. MacKinnon, 59, asked the student what he could do to help. The girl suggested she’d like to use the Downtown YMYWCA but couldn’t afford it. MacKinnon decided he’d find a way to make it happen. He told the girl and her sisters that if they went four times that September, he’d find a way to fund their whole year’s membership.

The girls held up their side of the bargain. So began the R.B. Russell Y program, which now has over 370 members, including Everett, who goes to the facility numerous times a week to work out and play basketball.

“Going to the Y takes me away from stuff that brings me down,” Everett said, sitting at the kitchen table in the mall duplex he shares with his sister and her toddler. “That’s why I keep coming back.” The first year, the YM-YWCA agreed to reduce the standard membership fees to \$7 per student per month. MacKinnon — with help from Rev. David Murata at Knox United Church — raised enough money to fund memberships and bus tickets for 18 students to use the Y. He saw some of those students begin to blossom. Some lost weight, others stopped smoking pot or drinking. Others stopped, as MacKinnon euphemistically calls it, “borrowing cars” as a way to find fun and excitement. But MacKinnon — a determined teacher with a seemingly endless store of energy — wasn’t satisfied. He believes all inner-city kids living in poverty should have access to a safe place where they can meet friends, work out, have fun and avoid the constant pull of the easy money and drugs gang life can offer. So he began to look for new recruits for his fledgling program.

Today, MacKinnon stops almost all the kids in the hallway at R.B. asking them if they want to go to the Y. Those already in the program he badgers to keep going or asks how their workouts are progressing. But money to fund the growing program is scarce and MacKinnon worries the venture will crumble under mounting debt and demand. MacKinnon hit up friends like Ross Robinson of B.A. Robinson, Jim Furgale of Furgale Industries and Bill Sparling of Bill Sparling and Associates for donations. e also digs deeply into his own pocket, spending hundreds of his own dollars to keep the doors to the Y open for his kids. He got R.B. Russell principal Gary Comack to lobby the Winnipeg School Division to issue tax receipts to those who donate to the program. But the program still owes the Y thousands of dollars in unpaid memberships.

Tomorrow, the Winnipeg Foundation will consider a request by MacKinnon to dedicate about \$60,000 to the program to keep it viable into the future.

With more consistent funding, MacKinnon plans to offer more memberships to kids — even those outside R.B. Russell — and develop an incentive program that would provide a cash prize to students at the end of the year who maintain their grades and attend the Y regularly. The Y, MacKinnon maintains, may be just a gym, but it provides innercity youth with a place they feel safe and where they can do things they wouldn't be able to afford to do otherwise. It gives kids a chance to aspire beyond their poverty, he said. "If you don't have the money or opportunity to suit up with hockey equipment and get to a rink, then how the hell can you ever dream of being in the NHL?" he asks. "We have to recognize what the poverty experience is for young people, how they don't have the opportunities so many other Winnipeggers have. That means they don't have regular meals, the refrigerator is empty more often than not, they don't have recreation opportunities. These kids are bringing themselves up. We need to help them."

Looking beyond funding his current program, MacKinnon dreams of the day when a "mega-Y" will be built in the inner city. The facility would offer everything from swimming pools and weight training to job skills and parenting classes and what MacKinnon calls "gang and prostitution detox" to get kids off the street. "If it was built in the North End it would save lives," he said. MacKinnon, who has taught at R.B.Russell since 1983, has long championed inner-city kids.

A few years back, a distraught mother called MacKinnon at school saying her son was threatening suicide. MacKinnon left class and went to the boy's home, where he found him sitting on a mattress, drinking whisky and holding a knife. MacKinnon was able to take away the knife and helped get the student into a treatment program. The student was furious, but years later returned to tell MacKinnon, "don't ever stop what you're doing."

Everett grew up in the foster system, having been removed from his family due to drug and alcohol abuse and violence. Prior to that awful day when Clarence was shot, Everett admits he wasn't a model citizen. He hung around the periphery of gangs — agreeing to pull petty crimes for them in exchange for money. Recreation, in those

days, involved drinking or getting high or stealing to escape the crushing boredom.

Everett, a tall, good-looking guy with a long, black ponytail snaking down his back, said his turning point came the day Clarence was shot. Leaving a convenience store with Clarence, Everett remembers seeing a group of guys standing across the street. One of the men rushed at Clarence, who was walking behind Everett. "I just heard a pop and I turned and he fell to the ground," Everett said. Everett believes Clarence was shot because he was trying to "drop his colours," or leave the gang he was in.

The neighbourhood around R.B. Russell school is among the most impoverished in the country. Census data from 2001 show the area, with a population that is 38 per cent aboriginal, has an unemployment rate of 16.8 per cent, compared to the overall rate in Winnipeg of 5.7 per cent. Those residents who are working are making a fraction of what other Winnipeg workers are earning. The average income in the Point Douglas area was \$17,870 in 2001, compared to the Winnipeg average of \$29,145. Over 40 per cent of families in the neighbourhood are led by single parents and over half live below the poverty line. And yet a Manitoba Centre for Health Policy study found the Point Douglas area in the city's core had the fewest number of recreation programs per 1,000 kids in the city. Dennis Howlett, executive director of the National Anti-Poverty Organization in Ottawa, said the lack of resources for inner-city residents is just as detrimental as the lack of basics like food and money.

Barriers

"Time and time again, kids living in poverty get excluded from activities others take for granted because they can't afford to participate. As a result, those kids grow up to believe they aren't worth as much as other kids," he said. "It creates huge barriers for kids to achieve or aspire." In 2001, Manitoba's child poverty rate was a staggering 22.5 per cent — higher than anywhere else in Canada, which had an average child poverty rate of 15.6 in 2001. Federal government research has found the percentage of Winnipeg's inner-city population living in poverty increased from 36 per cent in 1981 to 47.5 per cent in 2001. Winnipeg's inner city poverty rate is

almost three times as high as Canada's. The poverty rate for aboriginal people here is almost five times higher than that experienced in Canada.

In his recent study called *Poverty, Income Inequality and Health in Canada*, Dr. Dennis Raphael of York University found people living within the poorest neighbourhoods are more likely to die of just about every disease than those who are more well off. According to the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy, a male living in Point Douglas has a life expectancy that is eight years less than a male living in East St. Paul.

Lynne Simmons, marketing director at the East Kildonan YM-YWCA, was the marketing director at the Downtown when MacKinnon came looking to make a deal. "That first year he paid for three students out of his own pocket," said Simmons. "I was not going to turn my back on that." Simmons said the Y has a mandate to help those who cannot afford their facility. But, she said, the Y does still charge a nominal fee to ensure those who are members have respect for that membership. "Some kids are walking to the Y in the winter from R.B. Russell," she said. "They value what MacKinnon) has worked hard for them to get." Today, Everett says he uses going to the Y as an excuse to avoid people he knows are trouble. Without the Y, Everett believes he'd be in jail today. Instead, he's attending school regularly and has dreams of becoming a chef.

Leanne Tait, 19, has also used the program to turn her life around. After admitting to MacKinnon that she had begun to smoke crack cocaine, Tait accepted his offer of a membership. The quiet, pretty student first tried running but only got through three laps before losing her breath. Now she can do six laps and she says she's stopped smoking crack. She says she's focused now on pursuing a future in acting or broadcasting. "Lots of kids just have nothing to do," she said of life in the inner city. "Something like this gives them an option from staying home with parents who are drinking or fighting."