

Crime Prevention Week

November 3, 2008

Good morning. My name is Candida Silva. I am a grade 12 student at St. Mary's Catholic Secondary School. I am also a member of the St. Mary's Empowered Student Partnership program.

Looking back to 3 years ago when I was in grade 9, never would I have imagined that I would be at an event like this with Chief Blair promoting the benefits of safe communities and safe schools. No one would have ever predicted that I would represent my school on such a positive note.

You see, I was the "at risk" student. Rarely was I in the building and when I was, it certainly wasn't to go to class. More often than not, I was there to meet "friends" and have a good time. I was in danger of dropping out with no where to go but down. My social circle consisted of people who were on a similar path.

There was a great chance that I would end up involved with the police, but not for the correct reasons and certainly not for the reasons that I am involved with them today.

If I saw a police officer speaking with another teenager I would be there, to hassle the officers, interfere and tell the other teenagers what their rights were. It never dawned on me that I had it all wrong.

Many people tried to talk to me to get me to change my ways. Unfortunately I saw that as being "talked at" and it just made me angrier.

Now I would like to tell you about a day that I consider to be the one that changed my life. It was very early in grade 11. I was cruising down the hallway of our school carrying on in my usual way, loud, arrogant and making life difficult for those around me. A staff member called me over, not to give me grief, nor to question anything I was doing but rather to invite me to join a group called ESP. She told me she thought I would be an ideal candidate. She also told me it was a group of young people coming together to promote safe schools and communities while working alongside and in partnership with the Toronto Police. I can't tell you the words that I used in response, because she is here today and she told me I am not allowed, but I made it clear to her that I had no intentions of working with the "cops."

Her response was "hmmm ok" and she walked away. That annoyed me because I got no reaction from her and I always got a reaction. I went to her office and began telling her that I had one great love in life and that was animals. I explained to her that one of my big things was helping with fundraisers that had to do with animals. At that point she showed me photos of her dog, and just to prove her point showed me her newsletters from different "save the animals" campaigns that she was involved in. She said "I too am an animal lover...you see we are actually very much alike!" Then she made a deal with me. She asked me to come to the ESP meeting in the next 10 minutes and present my fundraising ideas. She told me that she could almost guarantee that there would be students on the team willing to help me out. As she said you might raise more money...so you have nothing to lose.

So I went to the meeting. The students who knew me from around the school were somewhat surprised to see me there. I was not impressed that the first 3 people I saw were police officers, but, 15 students joined my campaign. When I was leaving the meeting, my advisor insisted on my meeting the officers whether I planned to stay on the team or not.

What really happened that day was I found a place where I could be myself and I was accepted. Nobody judged me. My opinions and ideas were just as important as everyone else's. And by the way, by the time I had left the meeting, I had signed on to help them with 3 safety campaigns.

I have made wonderful connections through this program. We have a saying on our team that “when you care about one another, everyone’s safety takes on that much more importance.” It is something that we have all come to believe in.

I now have wonderful friends, who care about me and I care about them.

And who would have thought that me, Candi, would include in that circle of friends a group of 7 school liaison officers and other community response officers who have made such a difference and such an impact in my life.

I can’t really come up with the right words to describe them: but awesome, considerate and devoted come to mind. They have become mentors, role models, and someone we can turn to for support and advice. They are important to all of us, and when they come to our school for a visit or to one of our meetings, we know it is going to be a good day because we have so much fun with them and we really enjoy being with them.

This past summer I gave up my free time to help the officers with their bike rodeos. I am also one of the project coordinators for a community fun day for 14 Division.

I won’t go into all the projects I am involved in through ESP, but I will tell you that I am now the project coordinator for our team for a yearly campaign called “nickels for your noggin” to support the Brain Tumor Foundation. I am working on projects addressing child abuse, bullying, cyberbullying and the White Ribbon Campaign. I am the co-editor of our ESP monthly newsletter which connects youth, The Toronto Police and our community partners.

Since that day when I met my staff advisor for the first time, I have only missed 2 days of school and that was last week when I had the flu. Whenever I do miss school or a meeting I feel like I have missed out on a years worth of information.

I truly believe we can all make a difference in this world. I didn’t believe that 3 years ago. I think crime can be prevented and violence, particularly youth violence, can be greatly reduced. If reaching out to an “at risk” youth can help to turn things around and assist in making the community safer, then a great deal has been accomplished.

I realize how fortunate I have been. Since that first meeting I have had police officers, staff, friends and my advisor assisting me. I am now only short a few credits. And now it is my turn to give back. I used to say “I would like to do this or that” I still love animals but my focus has changed a bit. Next September I will be attending University to study criminology. I no longer say “I would like to be...now I say I am going to be a member of the Toronto Police Service so I can give back and help make our communities safer”