

## Leave Out Violence (L.O.V.E.)

by Brenda Zosky Proulx

They meet after school in the windowless basement of a Montréal college, surrounded by spotlights and floodlights, reflectors and backdrops, platforms and wires, and much chaos.

They are the Leave Out Violence (LOVE) kids, 24 teenagers between the ages of 14 and 18. Some have been the victims of violence, a few have been perpetrators, but all have decided that they want to do something, as one says, "to inform people that violence never was, never is and never will be the solution."

And they're working hard to meet a deadline, because this summer they plan to publish their own book of photographs and writings on the issue of violence, its causes, its prevention and its impact on their lives.

So far, their work is mind-blowing, as far from typical "kids' stuff" as it could possibly be. The 250 people who saw LOVE's first exhibit of mounted photographs, poems and narratives last June were amazed at their power.

The show prodded nerve endings and provoked tears. "Peace and love may be dead, but there is always hope," says a caption underneath a photo of a small child doing homework in a dark kitchen. A narrow stream of dazzling sunshine has found its way into the sombre room, creating a path of light across the little girl's book. A bleak landscape, viewed through the black bars of an iron fence, is captioned, "Not even love should make her stay." Another photo shows a teen huddled in darkness on a cold bathroom floor. The caption reads, "My idea of hell: alone in darkness and in total despair." A jarring photo of blood splashed in a sink has the caption: "The pain is going all over ..."

The purpose of the LOVE photojournalism project is to help teenagers, most of whom have been defined as at risk in some way, to develop a critical awareness of the issues surrounding violence in society today. By bringing them together to teach them the practical, marketable skills of photography and writing, LOVE hopes to improve their self-esteem and show them that they can make a contribution to the community. As one 17-year-old says, "Finally, someone sees that I am worth something." Another says, "Someone has to take a stand."

Several aspects of the program are particularly engaging for the kids. First of all, their instructors are a professional journalist and a photographer technician who impose real-world standards on their work. The kids are turned on because they know that they are producing material that will be seen and read by the public. Already, their photographs have been included in exhibits, one of which is now touring Quebec.

The project is funded by the Leave Out Violence organization, which is made up of a diverse group of Montréalers, including doctors, writers, police officers, judges, businesspeople, teachers and students, who believe that violence prevention is everybody's responsibility. They are so-called ordinary citizens who believe the African saying that it takes a whole village to raise a child.

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