

## The 10 Faces of OJEN

### Annie



Annie - (not her real name) moved to Thunder Bay as a young girl with her mother and two brothers from a reserve in northern Ontario. Her home life was characterized by violence and abuse. She did not attend school regularly.

Annie came into contact with OJEN last year while serving a sentence under the Youth Criminal Justice Act at William W. Creighton Youth Services in Thunder Bay. Hers was the first class to participate in an Active Citizens project tailored for young people in a correctional facility. The positive impact it had on Annie and her classmates has led to its replication in similar institutions.

OJEN's Active Citizen's program introduces youth to social justice concepts and helps to foster civic engagement. It was initially developed for high school Civics students as a hands-on exercise in the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic society. Since then it has been modified for youth in a variety of school and community settings. Through the program youth learn about the role of advocacy in affecting change within an institution, community or society. They meet with community leaders and social activists to hear about successful social justice campaigns. Then, guided by a facilitator, they identify an issue that is important to them and explore the legal issues related to it. The culminating activity involves the youth designing and implementing a social justice action plan to address their issue.

The Active Citizens project developed for Creighton incorporated strong aboriginal elements making it especially relevant to the young women participants. The students were delighted when popular Metis singer/songwriter, Shy-Anne Hovorka, volunteered her time to discuss how her songs and music videos were mediums to raise awareness about issues in the Aboriginal community. When award-winning Aboriginal film maker, Michelle Derosier, visited the class, Annie and her classmates became very excited about the idea of making their own documentary film in which they would discuss their experiences and educate others about alcoholism and suicide.

Michelle and her film company, Thunderstone Pictures, agreed to collaborate with OJEN to produce a documentary with the girls at Creighton.

According to Annie's teacher, being able to choose their own topic gave the students a sense of empowerment and control. "The specific topics of suicide and alcoholism have a significant impact. Some of them have been reluctant to face their own situation and want to run away. This has helped them to face it, which is such an important part of the healing process. It has also given them a sense of compassion. The students believe that their voices will be heard and that they can reach others. It's really healing for them to be able to help others."

"This program is important for youth in custody," she continues, "because it gives them a different perspective from 'everybody is against us' and gives them a healthier perspective of the justice system. Once they get that different perspective, so many things become available to them."

For Annie, participating in the project was a transformative experience. "When Annie isn't in custody, she doesn't attend school very frequently and even if this program came to her class she wouldn't necessarily have had the confidence to stand up in front of her peers and voice her opinion." commented her teacher. "She's had a real increase in confidence and self esteem. This program has taught her that the system is not totally against her and that she can use her situation to help others. She really feels like she can make a difference outside of the facility."

In her own words, Annie had this to say about the Active Citizens project:

"It was fun. I got to meet inspiring people from the community and learn from them. I want the whole world to see this film. My hope is that it will help others who are struggling with thoughts of suicide,"

