



A promising program is setting violent youth onto the right path, one kid at a time

The PACT Effect

BY IAN HARVEY

At 17, Les Magyar was fast-tracking to a life of crime. His wiry frame and boyish looks belied a lengthy rap sheet, and he'd just been busted again, breaking into a house while stoned senseless on magic mushrooms.

At first glance, he was just another loser in the system. The Grade 11 dropout had spent 15 years in group homes. A long jail term loomed for the boy, out on bail for charges that included assault and harassment. But

one day in December 2005, as he sat in the prisoner's box at the Ontario Court of Justice in Newmarket, north of Toronto, his life took a twist: The judge winked at him and said, "We'll get this sorted out. Just wait."

It was a strange thing to hear from a judge, because the system is nothing if not predictable: Get arrested, get bail or a short sentence, return to the streets and restart the cycle. But that day, Magyar became the first in-

ductee into a remarkable initiative, the PACT LifePlan and Coaching Program, in which ending the cycle of poverty, domestic violence and crime is more about listening and less about jail.

Today, Magyar, 19, lives in his own apartment, holds down a steady job and dreams of owning a car. Yet that December day, he was just another case choking the youth courts and costing taxpayers millions. Justice Rick Blouin knew all too well that jailing him would change nothing. "I saw a kid who did well when he went to school, but made bad choices," says Blouin. "I've seen kids at 15 and 16 who, when in custody, get 85 to 90 percent in school. They want to turn their lives around, but as soon as they get out, they slide."

Magyar is wolfing down a fruit salad at a café near Yonge Street in Toronto. He's wearing a zirconium earring, a white hoodie and baggy jeans, with MP3 earbuds dangling. "I would have agreed to anything to stay out of jail," he says. He had zero expectations of LifePlan, having been to anger-management and other counselling programs, which were, he says, "a joke." But this time was different. PACT founder David Lockett and Lynn Kislock, Magyar's LifePlan life coach, cared.

LifePlan is an outgrowth of PACT's Restorative Justice program. It's for kids with rap sheets like Magyar's, who require something more intensive. From manners to language, attitude to education, the LifePlan program in-

stills skills for surviving without resorting to crime. "Keeping them out of jail for six months would be a success," says Blouin. "We need to grab them before they spend much time in custody, or right after they get out of jail. These are the guys who will commit the vast majority of offences in the future."

The moment Magyar sat with his coach to write his LifePlan goals, things changed. For a year, he obsessively carried his self-directed blueprint for the future. Some things on his list: Stay in school; stay out of fights; control your temper; eat right;

How PACT Began

PACT—Participation, Acknowledgement, Commitment, Transformation—started with a simple, yet almost impossible, idea: Stop the cycle of family violence. David Lockett, 54, an entrepreneur with a social vision, realized that no matter how many shelters for abused women and children he and his colleague, accountant Dan Cornacchia, helped to build, it would never be enough unless they addressed the underlying roots of the violence.

They discovered a restorative-justice program in Sparwood, B.C., run by a lawyer and a police officer. Based on a New Zealand Aboriginal justice program, the Sparwood program diverted hearings for youth crimes from the courts to "conferences," where the ac-

get a job. If he had doubts or temptations, he would consult the plan. It laid out what was expected of him and what he could expect from the program, but his dedication to it was driven by his desire to break free from his past.

Magyar worked full-time to complete Grade 11 in a special class for students with difficulties. One night a week, LifePlan list in hand, he bused 40 kilometres from Brampton to Toronto to meet with Kislock, an employment counsellor and former social worker. And at least one other evening each week, often on weekends, he'd make the same trip to participate in life-skills courses. In cooking class he learned to make healthy food. In film class he made a public service an-

nouncement about street kids. He learned to work within a team and not lose his temper; and he gave back by volunteering his time in cooking classes to mentor other kids in the PACT program.

Like an Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor, Kislock was Magyar's lifeline, listening to his rants at all hours. And she put up with his cursing and anger. "He'd phone me four days out of seven, early in the morning or at night," she says with a sigh. "I just gave him time, and he'd call me later and say, 'I'm still pissed off, but I'm still here.' It got really dicey, sometimes."

Once, Magyar was caught with a pocket knife at school and charged. But the charges were dropped when his good progress in the program was

cused meet their victims face to face. In emotional exchanges, the victims and their families, friends and fellow community members discuss the impact the accused's actions have had on them, emotionally and physically. Using these two programs as models, Lockett and Cornacchia created PACT in 1995, then raised funds in the Toronto community to support the initiative.

In 1999 Lockett hooked up with Justice Blouin, then an assistant Crown attorney in the Scarborough-area youth courts. Blouin had two objectives: to separate out minor incidents and free up crowded dockets for serious crimes involving guns, drugs and gangs; and to ensure kids in the first category didn't end up in the second.

In 2000 the men launched a pilot program; PACT's Restorative Justice

program has since diverted more than 1,300 cases from youth courts, with remarkable success. It costs about \$400 per case (versus a regular court case, which can cost into the thousands); the funding comes from private sources. According to PACT estimates, their recidivism rate is only five to ten percent.

PACT expanded to add LifePlan, plus the Life Skills and Community Service Program. In order to fulfill court-ordered community-service and probation requirements, it channels participants into activities such as film, music and cooking classes, and urban reforestation.

So far, PACT has spread from Scarborough to three other Toronto courts, as well as to those in the York and Durham regions. And there are plans to bring it to other municipalities in the Greater Toronto Area.

considered. "Without Lynn, for sure I'd be in jail," Magyar says. "If I was on the phone talking to her, I couldn't get in trouble."

In January 2007, Lockett, Kislock and a host of other PACT workers and volunteers, along with Justice Blouin, attended Magyar's graduation from the PACT LifePlan and Coaching Program. His father made an emotional speech, apologizing for being absent from his son's life and pledging to do better. Tears flowed freely.

Magyar is moving on, now, holding tight to a fragile peace in a world where once he was at war. Meanwhile, he has passed the torch to the six other kids in the program, whose circumstances are eerily similar to his—such as Grade 9 dropout Jordan.* He's 19, tall and gangly, and wears the usual baseball cap positioned *just so*, with sneakers, baggy jeans and an oversized sweatshirt. The young man's surname is tattooed on his neck in thick, ropelike script. "It reminds me not to lie about my name when I get

*Not his real name.

into trouble," says Jordan, grinning sheepishly.

He had been living on the streets with his father and breaking into cars. And he, too, thought LifePlan was a joke like all the programs in which he'd participated before. He's since learned otherwise.

Not every candidate makes it through, though. PACT has no official figures on their success rate, but they acknowledge that from a total of 12 participants in January 2006—including Magyar and Jordan—several have been arrested or are back in jail. But that's okay, according to Blouin. "You can't expect this to be a panacea," he says. "If we turn around just one in ten...It doesn't sound like a lot, but these kids are costing the justice system and society tens of millions of dollars in welfare and custody. The heartache and distress of poverty are propagated into ensuing generations. 'One in ten' is a success."

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HORRORSCOPES



Horoscopes are famously fickle, and my co-worker's was no different.

During our coffee break, she picked up the newspaper and, as she does every day, turned immediately to the astrology section. "My husband's says, 'Add spice to your life,'" she said, reading the horoscopes. "Mine says, 'Go to bed early.'" CAROL A. JUDKINS