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LIFE

From homeless to outreach teacher

By **Jordana Divon** Special to The Star

 **Fri., Sept. 28, 2012** |  2 min. read

Theresa Schrader's darkest moment came in 2003. That's when the Children's Aid Society arrived at the hospital to take her newborn daughter away. Homeless, drug addicted and working the streets, Schrader had already lost a son three years earlier, after the CAS had placed him up for adoption, citing Schrader's inability to provide a safe home.

Two events helped the Toronto resident get her life together. She won a creative writing contest sponsored by homeless outreach organization Ve'ahavta, an achievement she says restored her feeling of self-worth.

Then she became pregnant with her third child in 2006. Schrader vowed to do whatever it took to keep her baby.

Now a Dean's Medal-winning social work graduate from George Brown, Schrader founded the Street Academy, an intensive college-level program that helps the city's homeless transition from the shelter into the classroom.

How did Street Academy come to be?

[Ve'ahavta founding director] Avrum [Rosensweig] had read an article in the New York Times about a man who taught philosophy to the homeless and he mentioned he always wanted to do some sort of education for the homeless. I sent Avrum some ideas, and with his help I outlined an eight-week program that would help the homeless who felt marginalized and hopeless get back to school. The pilot was in the summer of 2010.

How do students get selected?

We create flyers and take them to non-profits, soup kitchens and community health centres. From there we accept one-page letters asking candidates to tell us about their experience on the street, their experience with the educational system. Then we interview 26 people and accept 12.

What kinds of classes do you teach?

We range from communication, life skills and diversity to career exploration. Then we do two weeks of academic subjects where guest lecturers come in and talk about everything from writing an essay to world religion to the power of happiness.

What happens to students after they graduate?

On average, five graduates move on to the Redirection through Education program at George Brown. Some people go to work. As much as we want people to go on to post-secondary education, we support the goals of our students and those are different for every person.

What's your graduate success rate?

About 90 per cent of our students move forward in life. Some people determine success by what a person does right after the program, but I can't count the number of graduates who went back out and got high, and six months later, that seed that I planted in them began to grow and they stopped. They were just a little bit slower at starting their success.

You've been on both sides of the street. Do you think your personal experience has made you better at helping people?

Definitely. As an addict, I needed (workers who) were going to be real. I am real, and all my students will tell you that there is nothing they appreciate more than that fact.

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