

## **BEAT THE STREET: A unique literacy program.**

Jack Pearpoint, Marsha Forest, Marlene Webber

**BEAT THE STREET** is a unique adult education program which mobilizes the talents of street people to help each other. It is a partnership between "streets" and "straights". Neither could do it alone; together they create minor miracles as a matter of course.

**BEAT THE STREET** was born in the minds and hearts of two men who themselves had been the products of the streets. Tracy Lequyere and Rick Parsons, the founding fathers of BTS, lived through the street scene, the prison system and the drug world. Finally they decided to do something for kids who were being missed by the education system.

**BEAT THE STREET** could have been born and run in Buenos Aires, New York City, Jakarta, Los Angeles or Toronto. BTS could run easily in any city where kids congregate on the streets, where kids are dropping out of school, and where drug and alcohol problems abound. The scenario for BTS is in every major city internationally.

**BEAT THE STREET** is a model that can be translated into any country and any language where people are looking for alternatives to the traditional education and human service system for troubled young adults.

### **HISTORY: The Founding of BEAT THE STREET**

**Beat the Street** was founded in 1985 in a unique partnership with Frontier College. Tracy Lequyere had first met Frontier College through the HELP program. HELP is a job placement program run for and by ex-offenders, again in partnership with Frontier College. Tracy was a coordinator with HELP when it was discovered that he could not read or write. He had "fooled" everyone for so long that he was an "expert" at "passing". But at the right time, he was "found out" and was urged to get a tutor through Frontier College.

Tracy remembers the first time he went to Frontier College and met Marsha Forest.

*"To sum it up I was terrified! I thought I was the only person in the world who couldn't read and write and I was 33 years old so I must really be dumb."*

*My fear was bigger than big. It was like seeing a lion charging at you on a city street. I was like a person scared of heights, like a little boy who needed to hold someone's hand. I needed someone who would not let go of my hand, someone to say, "Tracy, it's okay, we'll make it through, you can do it." LOVE--That's what this was all about. A very spiritual kind of love. I knew that Marsha loved and believed in what she was doing and somehow that love and enthusiasm rubbed off on me. All her little gifts and notes added up to making me feel valued and valuable as a person.*

*In looking back I knew that here was a person who accepted me like I was. She knew I was an ex-offender and was one. She didn't pry or ask about my past. She accepted me in the present. She treated me for today, not yesterday. She opened up the possibility of dreaming about tomorrow.*

*After that first meeting, RELIEF is what I felt. I found out there are 4 million other people who are illiterate in Canada. I found out--I AM NOT ALONE!*

*As our lessons progressed and I started to really trust Marsha I started to get mad at what the education system had done to me. I was labelled everything in the book and no one had bothered to teach me. I was madder that it was still happening to kids in 1985. That's how BTS got started. I wanted to do something about the kids who are out on the streets today, who are dropping out of school now and who don't know how to read and write just like me.*

*A kind of madness took over me and I couldn't shake it. In the criminal world I had always been for "my people" so why not now? With Rick Parsons, an old friend and former street kid, and with the help and support of Frontier College, BTS got off the ground."*

Jack Pearpoint, the President of Frontier College helped Tracy and Rick get their initial \$5000 from Imperial Oil, and with determination and drive, BTS became a reality.

**In looking back on the initial concept several points become clear:**

1. Tracy had a history and a relationship with Frontier College that made his request to Jack Pearpoint part of the larger direction in which the college was going.

2. Tracy's personal experience drove him to start BTS. That initial drive and energy was crucial to get the program off the ground. An incredible amount of self sacrifice and time on the part of Rick, Tracy and Jack was needed to start up this venture. In other words Rick and Tracy would never take NO for an answer. Without this persistence BTS would have been just another good idea. With their persistence and driving energy, they shoved a good idea into gear.

3. BTS came at the right historic time in the culture. The topic of Street Kids was a major issue in Toronto. School dropouts were a constant topic in the media. BTS captured the imagination of the media -- it was an "in" story and the initial founders were "hot" characters. The press coverage far exceeded the financial support for the program and this put incredible stress on both Frontier College and BTS.

4. Without a "straight partner" BTS could not have worked. An organization like Frontier College was critical in assisting with proposal writing, fundraising, etc. No funders were about to give money to ex-cons and street people, no matter how charming and dedicated they appeared to be.

5. Partnership was the key to starting the program: partnership between people who generally don't work together. This partnership was and is complex and often difficult, but it is crucial for the success of any program dealing with marginalized and hurt people.

## **HOW IT STARTED**

Tracy and Rick simply went to the street. They weren't literacy experts. Neither had "educational" or "organizational" degrees. But they knew the people. It was their community.

They walked into the lions den they had left behind and entered into life in the downtown core of Toronto. They lived, ate and breathed BTS for one solid year with steely determination and hardly any funding - to get BTS off the ground.

BTS was not planned and run out of the attractive central office of Frontier College which is located in an affluent business and residential area of the city. The College was the support system, but the street was the blood

pumping in the veins of the program. The College was only a step ahead of destitution itself - inspite of its locale. It had 90 years of history and a reputable Board of Governors. It had credibility, educational skills, a charitable number and spirit - but no money.

Most of all what started the program was the attitude on Rick and Tracy's part that "*Nothing is going to stop us from starting BTS.*" And nothing did.

With little more than a promise of money that would come one day, Tracy and Rick found some other people to help them get started. No one in this early crew had much to lose as they were all on welfare or in low paying jobs that they hated.

This beginning team "**hit the streets**" talking about the program both on the streets and to all the agencies dealing with street people, especially the recognized service leaders in the city core. Running a literacy program for street kids caught everyone's imagination and Rick and Tracy found many allies..

One initial supporter was Joy Reid who ran the Friends of the Shopping Bag Ladies drop in centre smack in the heart of the city. She gave BTS a space in the attic of her run down building , Frontier provided make-shift furniture. a phone and off they went.

It was the various street groups themselves who were to form the core of BTS. Rick and Tracy had meetings with all the factions on the street--bag ladies, winos, bikers, junkies, hookers. These initial meetings were very lively. But these were the people who BTS was to serve. The real hard core illiterate population -- poor, dispossed, angry, hurt, and hungry people, all lacking the skills to either understand their plight or to get out of it.

Death was not an uncommon outcome for many of these intitial BTS people. Death by freezing in the cold winter streets, death by overuse of drugs, death by negligence and neglect, death by stabbings and beatings. BTS gave a ray of hope in a sea of hopelessness.

At Frontier College, we faced the question of whether a literacy program was really what "these people" needed. We knew that literacy was only one small component of an answer to the cycle of Street tragedy, but it was what we could offer.

Frontier College sponsored BTS without any illusions that this would solve the real underlying causes of poverty and homelessness. But we went into the program with the knowledge that we could and would give people something they wanted -- the skills to read and write. From there, people would make their own choices. But they had already told us that they wanted to get back a shred of dignity by at least knowing how to read a newspaper, how to fill out forms, how to help their kids with their homework and how to go to the bank, the store and the doctor with their heads held high..

We knew this was important, not from academic research document, but from the hard cold data collected on the street by Rick and Tracy. They were true participatory researchers -- on the front lines collecting information and building their program on the needs and wishes of the people themselves. They had never heard of participatory research. They were just "rapping" with their community.

Rick and Tracy's message was clear and concise to all the factions on the street:

***"Go to your people and tell them that if they want to learn to read and write, or get better at math, they can come to BTS. ALL ARE WELCOME. Tell everyone on the street that we're not counsellor's, cops or anyones parents. Tell them that we're people just like them."***

Within the first 5 weeks BTS found and trained 40 volunteer tutors from the street and matched them with students from the street. Non -street people were also welcome as tutors and students but the thrust of the program was **street people helping street people.**

Tracy was both a student (with a non street tutor) and a BTS tutor, a pattern that was common in the program. He remembers his first student:

***" My first student was Rose, a bag lady in her 40's who lived in a Toronto transit box for seven years, and who looked the part. She and I sat together in a filthy laneway surrounded by garbage, leaning against an old mattress. When I first met her, Rose was babbling incoherently about dead babies and rats.***

***While I was thinking about where to start, Rose rummaged deep in her shopping bag and pulled out many pill bottles. I***

***watched her swallow an enormous amount of pills. "Excuse me Rose but can I read the labels on your pill bottles (something I had just recently learned to do myself). She handed me the bottles. The valium perscription prescribed one tablet three times a day. Rose had understood the doctors to say 3 tablets 3 times a day. She couldn't read and so was overdosing daily on many drugs.***

***Our first lessons were reading labels on medicine and the directions for taking her pills. Rose eventaully cut her medication and thus some of her bizzarre behaviour. Today Rose has a room of her own and is at least alive with a ray of hope for the future."***

## **REALITIES**

BTS got off the ground as a program and everyone could see both the NEED for and the RESPONSE to the idea of street people helping one another. The media loved the program. There were allies in human service organizations but the hard core funding to keep the program stable was an impossible dream.

The obvious source of funding was the Ministry of Education and Boards of Education. Put simply, it was too risky - too outrageous. The Toronto Board of Education, thanks to the leadership of Audrey Howard, found some funding for BTS. Other boards we approached insisted that BTS fall under their traditional adult education models, hire their teachers and use their facilities. It was a polite way of saying that this population wasn't worth the effort. It was a not so polite way of saying, do it our way or go it alone. But we were not alone.

We found allies and advocates in other sectors, particularly the corporate sector (Imperial Oil), the media, and the Ministry of Community and Social Services. More recently, since the Ministry of Skills Development has created community literacy funding, partial support has been acquired. But the stalwarts have been Imperial Oil and the Ministry of Community and Social Services - not "education" systems.

It will not surprise anyone that staff turnover and burnout was rampant. It was part of the reality. Jack Pearpoint, who was as committed to the program as Rick and Tracy, managed to get a grant of \$40,000 from the Ministry of Community and Social Services. Later, additional grants for single mothers and other make work projects supplied money for well

intentioned but unskilled personnel. The staff of Frontier College put in overtime to help with proposals and to do the education training necessary for the teaching.

It would be untrue to deny that we cringed, cried, ranted and raved when we observed the budgets of the Boards of Education while we couldn't access money for steel people, and a program responding to real needs of those on the margins. But we plowed ahead to keep the program alive. We observed multi million dollar announcements to build jails and stadiums - but none to house and train the people of Beat the Street. We are not cynical, but we are justifiably enraged at a system that cares more for jails and stadiums than for people's daily lives.

### **BTS IS A LITERACY MODEL BASED ON THE PRINCIPLE OF SELF HELP**

The street is not romantic; it is a dangerous and dynamic community. BTS is a cutting edge education program run on the street and by the street. It is not easy to manage or sustain. It is exciting, intense, exhausting and draining for all involved.

Most neighborhoods and communities offer some comfort, stability and predictability. On the street, however, nothing is predictable except change and danger. Within any 24 hours, everything can be over turned. People are knifed and killed. People are found dead of drug overdose, or of cold weather. People come and go frequently. There are few safe hiding places.

Like straight society, the street is segregated and stratified, except that social class, religion and race are not the main sources of division. In the street people are organized according to lifestyle: -- hookers, bag ladies, bikers, derelicts, drunks, drug addicts, punk rockers and many more.

The street is a complex place with fast superficial friendships, changing loyalties, deep divisions and always fear and danger.

There is no privacy, no individual space. There is homelessness, poverty, desperation, fear, and living on the edge, all the time. It is a wonder anyone survives this "street" society which mirrors the wider social system in all its most brutal forms. Here the pain is harsher, the greed more vicious, the friendships more intense, the loyalties deeper and the nastiness more violent. There is no past, no future - only the transient pleasure and the ever present terror of the present.



## **THE METHODOLOGY: SCIL** **(Student Centred Individualized Learning)**

***"You may not believe this," says Rick Parsons, "but the major problem for most of the kids at BTS is not letters, it's labels. Our students have been so hurt, so damaged, so abused, so buried under no or low expectations that it kills their belief in themselves and their trust in other people.***

Tracy Lequyere adds ***"and that's why our first job when we connect with a street person of any age is to help build up their self-respect, to believe in themselves so they can believe in the possibility of learning. It is the most liberating thing in the world for a street kid to hear someone they respect say: "It's not your fault you can't read and write."***

***So, we tell the students, "It's not your fault that you can't read and write. You need the extra help that no one ever gave you. You didn't fail,-- the school system failed you. At BTS, we don't blame the VICTIM. We are angry at a system that failed so many of us. We are going to show them that we can learn and that we aren't "retarded" or "learning disabled" --their system is the problem - NOT us.***

If you want to see the sparkle return to the eyes of a punched out, tired and hungry kid, try that line on him/her!

Rick adds, ***"BTS may be the first place a students have ever come where they are not judged, condemned, tested and labelled; where the students are appreciated for who they are.***

## **TERRY'S STORY**

Terry walked into the BTS office with a 3 inch chip on his shoulder. A good looking 19 year old with curly red hair, he was a product of the special education system where he didn't get anything special and he certainly didn't get an education. He was convinced he was severely learning disabled and could not learn. He desperately wanted to read and write so that he



could make his twin neices proud of him. He wanted to read them the children's stories they wanted to hear.

Terry was living at home, drinking heavily and hopelessly stuck -- all at the age of 19! Because he couldn't read and write at all, he felt he couldn't move anywhere but to the streets and to prison.

BTS was his last hope. Terry's tutor, Rick Parsons, asked Terry the key SCIL questions: "WHAT DO YOU WANT TO LEARN? WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO WITH YOUR LIFE? HOW CAN I HELP YOU?"

Terry relaxed and opened up. He told Rick that his dream was to get an apprenticeship in woodworking and to be able to read to his neices. That's where the lessons began.

Rick and Terry made lists of wood products, tools, measurements. They visited lumber yards. Terry would read and copy verbatim from woodworking texts late into the night. We didn't encourage this activity but it helped Terry. Here was someone labelled "unmotivated" and "hard to serve" staying up half the night copying the text from his library books.

Rick worked in partnership with Marsha at Frontier to help Terry. Marsha did the pep talks on literacy and put Terry's so called failure in a new context. He began to look at the system that causes so much school failure. Marsha also found many children's books so that Terry could practice before reading to his neices.

Before long Terry was hooked on books and learning. The once silent Terry became quite talkative and is now on the road to a career in woodworking. Terry didn't stay around the BTS Centres for long. He didn't need to. Once his confidence increased, his skills bloomed. Our job is to hook the students on learning and encourage them to go back into the mainstream education system with the survival skills to cope. Terry came and went quickly. For others it takes years.

### **SCIL THEORY--BASED ON COMMON SENSE**

At a conference held in 1982 at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, 14 researchers from Europe and North and South America came to agreement on three points about how children learn. (Frank Smith, *Insult to Intelligence*, 1986, p32.) We think these points are relevant to the adult learner.

*(1) all children learn constantly, without the need for special incentives or reinforcement,*  
*(2) children learn what is done by the people around them, and*  
*(3) children learn what makes sense to them. More specifically, children learn about using written language from people around them, from the way those people themselves use written language.*

SCIL is based on agreement with these three points, extended to learners of all ages. It is based on the best research from a variety of academic disciplines including anthropology, sociology, linguistics, psychology and education. It is most of all based on common sense and the observation of real people in real life situations.

We at Frontier College ask anyone to be a tutor if they can accept the basic **theory and values inherent in SCIL:**

1. All people can learn, change and grow. They do this throughout their entire lives.
2. Responding to people according to medically diagnosed clinical labels(mental retardation, learning disability, dyslexia, etc) serves to put people in boxes that stifle their potential to learn, change and grow throughout their lives.
3. Traditional testing procedures only help us box people better. We believe in assessments that help us to be better teachers. Our assessment tool is called a **MAP (Multi-Action Plan)** that takes the student in the direction he/she wishes to go.
4. Adults will learn to read and write if the approach is based on the needs of the learner. We know adults learn when they are respected and treated with dignity, no matter what their situation.
5. Tutors must have high expectations and be sensitive to the context of the students life. Tutors must also demand that the student be responsible for his/her own life.

These points are the heart of SCIL. They don't just come out of a hat. They are based on serious study of human learning and what is needed to help

someone who has not learned the first time around not to fail again. The points are based on theory and research and years of educational practice.

## **A NEW PLACE TO LEARN--THE STREET**

When author and researcher Marlene Webber was interviewing the students at BTS, they all told her that the street was the first place they felt they **belonged**. Despite its life threatening dangers, hunger, poverty, etc , it is home for many who come from worse.

When we listen to our own SCIL theory, we have to go to where people are - where they are comfortable. Thus, it is logical to run an education program in this field on the street, and using the street reality as the core of the "curriculum". Street kids work in the NOW. They don't plan ahead or think ahead. If you want them to come to a traditional school they won't. You have to go to them and with them. The street is where the action is - so that is where BTS had to be.

**Street Walks** are one of the exciting innovations for learning at BTS. A Street Walk uses the street as the curriculum -- menus, signs, license plate numbers, social agency addresses, billboards, graffiti -- these are the text of a street walk. Hook a kid in a street walk, on their own turf, and maybe he'll drop into the BTS Learning Centre.

Pinball arcades, donut shops, local restaurants, park benches, the library, the community centre -- all these are the places and spaces for learning that BTS uses. What begins as a quick lesson at the pinball machine can become correspondence for a housing application or courses for a high school diploma. The goal and dream of many of the students is to receive a High School diploma.

And a five minute "lesson" is ok. If five minutes is all a person is confident to try, that is fine. But the invitation is extended to come back for more...another five minutes, or an hour, or a day. People disappear. They don't come on regular schedules. We welcome them back and pick up where they left off. We don't have illusions that five minutes will turn a street person into a brain surgeon, but it is the first step. And who can say what is possible.

## **THE BEAT THE STREET BANQUET**

Once a year the BTS staff and students invite all their friends and allies to a banquet held at a local community centre.

Everyone who attends truly wants to be there for this is their community. They made it. The participants are welcomed here for who they are and they feel a real sense of belonging. This community is based on fact, not illusion. The students and staff are recognized for their strengths, not their deficiencies, and they feel they are respected. In this community there is always someone willing to listen, someone who has been there and made it out. At this banquet there is the glimmer of hope that had long ago gone out for most of the participants.

Over and over the kids at the Banquet talk about the Beat the Street School and teachers. Even though there is no "physical" school, they feel that this is their school. This "school" isn't a physical place, but a concept that has taken root in their minds and in their hearts. Here is a place they feel at home, where they belong and where there are teachers who look and talk like they do.

Each student receives a certificate stating that they have attended BTS. For many it is the first real tangible accomplishment of their lives. Many weep. Women and men break down and sob. Guests in the audience are moved by the real emotion of the BTS community. As students receive their certificates, they say:

"Finally, I can read to my daughters."

"Now I can at least read this certificate."

"I love Beat the Street"

"Who says I can't do anything?"

Each year, at the banquet, we see poor and oppressed kids breaking the rules and fighting back for their dignity and self respect. With a little bit of money and a lot of commitment, they show what might be possible in a society that put the same time, energy and funds into education as we do into decadent entertainment and defence.

Thomas Merton's essay *"The Street is for Celebration"* comes to mind:

***We can begin now to change this street and this city.***

***We will begin to discover our power to transform our own world.***

***He who celebrates is not powerless. He becomes a creator because he is a lover.***

***But celebration is not for the alone...***

**Celebration is the beginning of confidence, therefore of power.**

(Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, 1979, pp.46-47.)

## **BEAT THE STREET TODAY: WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED**

Beat the Street has grown these past 5 years and now has programs in Winnipeg, Manitoba and Regina, Saskatchewan. These are funded for three years by an Innovations Grant from the federal Jobs Strategy Program. The Western Beat the Street programs deal mostly with urban native youth who are among the most dispossessed in Canadian society. Based on exactly the same model as the Toronto program, the two Western offices reach into the heart of the educational issue. The educational system has failed to create positive alternatives to the drop out problem so pressing in today's society. BTS is one such option.

BTS East and West is still understaffed and underfunded in terms of having any impact on the enormous need. However, it stands as a small flicker of hope for what is possible.

No one who has been associated with BTS has not been touched by its power and its potential. However, no one realized how hard it would be to start and how challenging to sustain.

The two founders are no longer with the program. They have moved on to other areas of life. The Street burned out both Rick and Tracy who themselves needed to beat the street and enter into more tranquil waters.

To begin most innovative projects, you need stars and rockets. But to sustain them, you need a different and more solid commitment, without the glamour and hype that is required to begin.

BTS also needs the continual partnership of the straight and street world for without that partnership, the program becomes another segregated model that breeds the deviance and mistrust so common to any segregated community.

At Frontier College, we learned that it is hard and time consuming to run a program like BTS. Anyone choosing this path better be well prepared for the

pain and passion such programs provoke. It is worth it, but it is not for the meek of heart. It is tough going.

Giving power to people, who have few formal skills and a lack an understanding of the political realities of our society, is a delicate but necessary commitment. It can turn "bad" quite rapidly, and those closest are the most likely to be attacked. If people have only known abusive, threatening behaviour and have never trusted a soul i their lives, that will not change overnight. Yet, it is essential that people be given the chance to learn, to make mistakes, and to try again. We cannot do it for them. We must give them the chance. The miracle is that so many succeed so often - against all the odds. That's why we must give them the chance.

Staff come and go because of low salaries and tense and intense day to day work. Students come and go because of the nature of the Street.

But with it all BTS goes on and sees small miracles daily. Thousands of people come through who we never see again but whose lives are changed by their contact with BTS. We end with the story of one woman who we do see every day...

### **MADDI PARSONS -- a symbol of the success of Beat the Street**

Maddi Parsons (no realtion to Rick) is the person who symbolizes the joys and tears of the BTS family of players. We know her well for she is now part and parcel of the main office at Frontier College.

There are too many Maddi's out there who never get the chance. Maddi is a product of our culture and our times. She is both triumph and tragedy, hope and despair. To change the lives of all the Maddi's out there will take a massive change in our socio-political system. We know that and each work for that outcome in our own ways.

In the meantime, at Frontier, we struggle daily to get enough money to run a few model programs which point the way. They show that people are the victims of the circumstances of their lives and that when these circumstances change, so do the people.

Maddi got a job at BTS through her own street network. She recieved a phone call from a friend that a program called BTS was looking to hire a woman on mother's allowance. Maddi had not worked for 13 years. She was

34 and had two challenging children to deal with. She was in a stable relationship with a young man who did hold down a job. They lived in a small rented house in the core of the city.

Maddi describes her life this way:

***"Life was like, well, HELL! I was worried all the time, and had no peace of mind. My life and me were in turmoil. My son had just recuperated from a major cancerous brain tumor, and my 14 year old daughter had run away. I had run out of places to call.***

***I called every agency in the city for help but nobody helped me. I had to fill out forms and more forms. The people at Sick Kids hospital really took good care of Jeffrey and all the neighbors lent a hand but I was lost and didn't have anywhere to go. I was stuck on mother's allowance which made me feel degraded, worthless and like a big nothing.***

***I was so scared that I almost didn't go for the interview at BTS. I almost got off the street car and I sure wanted to run away because I thought I would fail. I thought I would get turned down, and I was scared I couldn't do anything at all.***

***I was afraid of everything--afraid people would laugh at me, afraid I'd make mistakes, afraid of people in general.***

***Rick Parsons was great. He told me YOU CAN DO IT. He had had a life like mine and so I believed him. Everyday he told me YOU CAN DO IT and I did.***

***Then Jeffrey got real sick again. He started bumping into things at home and staggering around. He was 11 years old and I had to leave my job to take care of him.***

***....Another phone call ...this time from Frontier College . It gave me my final chance. There was an opportunity to start again on the grant I hadn't completed. If I did well, a permanent job would be available at real money with benefits ,etc.***

***I had a little more confidence this time, and with the skills in reading and writing I had gotten at BTS, I was still terrified but ready to go. Frontier College was the real***



*world and to my surprise everyone was really nice to me and helped me a lot. At first I was late a lot. I'd oversleep or miss my bus. I was sick a lot too. Now I'm eating better and I've stopped smoking. I feel a lot better.*

*Marsha Forest "my boss" told me firmly but kindly that I had to be at work from 9-5 like everyone else in the office because she needed me. I couldn't believe it! Somebody needed me and wanted me. I didn't get perfect overnight and the problems at home made it hard to get to work but I got there because this time I was determined to make it, and they needed me.*

*I'm doing good now and I am getting more confident every day. I'm going to have a real salary in the spring (no more grants) and my life is turning around. Just yesterday my daughter got a job. Now she is actually proud of me! She sees me going to work, reading books and cleaning the house. I am both a better person and a better mother because of my start with BTS.*

*I want to help others as I was helped, and I am."*  
*Maddi Parsons Sept. 19, 1989*

## **CONCLUSION**

Frontier College does not want to run more BTS programs under its organizational umbrella, but it does want to help other organizations to run programs like BTS in locations around the world.

We have learned that it isn't easy but it is possible.

It starts with an idea. It starts with real hurt and wounded people coming to organizations like Frontier College for support. It takes a certain kind of leadership to make programs like HELP and Beat the Street happen.

The key ingredients are **RISK** and **CARE**.

People like Tracy and Rick aren't pretty, easy, or simple to understand or work with. The BTS crew is like working with a family of alcoholics, drug addicts and abused and abusing people. The common denominator is poverty and lack of education. The common denominator is lack of trust and

heavy manipulation of "squares" like us. The risk is great, and so are the outcomes.

**But be forewarned** -- if you want a life of ease and comfort don't get involved in BTS. If you want a 9-5 literacy program with no tension, threats or danger, don't get involved with BTS. If you expect smooth organizational management, neat organized meetings and flow charts and time lines, don't get involved with BTS.

But if you want to really deal with illiteracy and its impact on people's lives, do get involved with BTS. If you want to really help the people at the bottom on the heap, do get involved with BTS. If you want to get involved with people who have courage and dignity under incredible odds, do get involved with BTS.

We know many professional educators who would have cracked under the pressure that Maddi Parsons lived through. But she didn't crack. She lived through the fear and trauma of a brain cancer that affected her precious son. She endured the fear and failure a mother feels when her young teenage daughter is running on the streets. But Maddi didn't crack. She cared for her children as best she could. Maddi symbolizes the strength and courage of BTS, and its incredibly rich cast of characters. No one is the same, but the elements of people's lives at Beat the Street carry all too familiar and common themes -- poverty, addiction, abuse, illiteracy.

No one person can last too long under the BTS tensions. New actors have to come on the scene with fresh energy and perseverance to put up with the daily crises that a program of this nature brings. The troops need to be replenished and refreshed, often.

Judith Snow, an international leader in the disability rights movement, and herself a woman who fought and won the right to live in the community with an attendant care system provided by the province of Ontario, was last year's keynote speaker at the Frontier College annual meeting. Judith made several key points pertinent to our experience with BTS:

***Frontier College has participated in a number of formal and not so formal commitments, that have welcomed strangers in from the margins of society. BTS draws on what street kids already know and care about to liberate their minds and their will to become a creative part of society. BTS and the HELP program depend on the smarts, the dogged***

*perseverance and the vision of people who have been virtual outlaws. In fact from its very beginning Frontier College has welcomed the stranger - the one who could not read and write - so that she could participate, making Canada a stronger place to be. The board, members, staff and friends of Frontier College have understood what it takes to be true liberators. She (Frontier College) has stayed strong through building a continuing relationship with the very people she has welcomed in.*

*Frontier College is celebrating its 90th anniversary in 1990. I believe others can now look to Frontier College as a model of how to build creative organizations in the communities of the future. Her strength comes from her tradition of allying herself with the dreamers on the edge. "*

In looking back over the last four years we at Frontier are proud that BTS started and survived. We feel we have learned a great deal and can share our experiences with others. For further information contact us at Frontier College. (35 Jackes Avenue, Toronto, Ontario. M4T 1E2 416-923-3591)

The last word must go to one of the founders - the first poem written by Tracy LeQuere:

### **DON'T PASS ME BY**

### **Additional Reading:**

There are several books published by Frontier College and others which may be helpful:

\* **The Right to Read: Tutor's Handbook**, Frontier College Press: an easy to use guide to teaching literacy skills that works, the Tutor's Handbook outlines in detail the principles of Student Centred Individualized Learning.

\* **The Right to Read: Organizer's Guide**, Frontier College Press: a valuable aid for people involved in local literacy organizations.

- \* **It's About Learning:** Frontier College Press, Marsha Forest & Bruce Kappel: a book about SCIL at work with stories from programs including BTS.
- \* **It's About Relationships:** Marsha Forest, Frontier College Press
- \* **Square John:** Marlene Webber with Tony McGilvary, University of Toronto Press, 1988. (the story of the founder of the HELP Program.)
- \* **Spirits Rising:** Frontier College Press, a collection of student writings and art work from the Native Tutoring Centre in Vancouver.T
- \* **Kick em out or Keep em in: Exclusion or Inclusion in School & Society:** Jack Pearpoint & Marsha Forest, Frontier College Press.
- \* **Frontier College:** Jack Pearpoint, reprinted from UNESCO Prospects, Frontier College Press.
- \* **Insult to Intelligence:** Frank Smith, Arbour Books,
- \* **Beyond Separate Education. Quality Education for All:** Dorothy Lipsky & Alan Gartner, Paul Brookes Publishing, Baltimore, Maryland, 1989
- \* **Educating All Students in the Mainstream:** Stainback, Stainback and Forest, Paul Brookes Publishing, Baltimore, Maryland, 1989
- \* **The Learning Mystique: A Critical Look at Learning Disabilities:** Gerald Coles, Fawcett Columbine, (Ballantine Books), New York, 1987.
- \* **Videos:**
  - \* **It's About Learning:** - A companion to the book It's About Learning. (20 Minutes) 1988
  - \* **Learning in the Workplace:** Frontier College - takes a humorous look at tutoring techniques in workplace settings. (20 minutes) 1989
  - \* **With a Little Help from My Friends:** Centre for Integrated Education and Community (at Frontier College) (1 hour) - grade 7-8 students and their teachers discuss friendship and inclusion. 1988