



# VANCOUVER POLICE DEPARTMENT

## INNER CITY SCHOOLS

## MARTIAL ARTS PROGRAM

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## **Introduction**

In March, 1995, the Vancouver Police Department conducted an eight week Police Martial Arts Program at an inner City elementary school in Vancouver, Canada. The area involved has a high proportion of recent immigrants and families on income assistance. The social and economic mix has lead to a high crime rate with a significant proportion of young persons coming into conflict with the law. This program emphasized the defensive aspects of Karate and Judo and served as an effective means of reaching out to young persons on the verge of criminality. Many of these youths were from ethnic communities that traditionally have not viewed the police and the criminal justice system in a positive light.

## **The Environment**

The City of Vancouver is internationally renowned for its beauty and friendly atmosphere. The breathtaking mountain views and the warm climate makes it an ideal tourist destination. These factors also influence the crime rate. A large proportion of new immigrants choose to settle in Vancouver. Being a port City on the Pacific Rim, Vancouver has a strong connection to the drug distribution trade for alt of North America.

Part of the inner city region of Vancouver is known as Mount Pleasant. As an electoral district, it has the towest per capita income level in the province. It is estimated that 54% of children residing in Mount Pleasant live below the poverty level and social services data show that over 1000 children and their families are on income assistance. These children are used to encountering drug dealers, drunks, and prostitutes in their neighbourhood. All Vancouver Police Department (VPD) officers have long recognized Mount Pleasant as having one of the highest

call loads in Canada. On average, only 1 of 4 students speak English as a first language at home and of these, many are of first nations descent. The vast majority of students are recent immigrants and refugees.

## **The Problem**

The environmental factors facing a child growing up in Mount Pleasant have resulted in a very high proportion of these young persons coming into conflict with the law. There has been literally an epidemic of stolen vehicle and other property crimes committed by young persons. As they get older, many are drawn into gangs and engage in violent and sometimes fatal turf battles over drug and prostitution territories.

The patrol officers in the area felt that the answer to the youth crime problem was not more enforcement. Not only would this be manpower intensive with likely only marginally higher arrest rates arising, but this just placed more young offenders into an overburdened and arguably, ineffective court and corrections system. From a crime suppression perspective, prevention as opposed to apprehension has always been more desirable. Consequently, the most promising strategy was for the police to increase positive interactions with inner city youth at an age where they are most vulnerable to crossing over into the world of crime.

This interaction method had to provide a means of getting closer to the youth and instilling a sense of respect for others and the rule of law. It should also allow officers to provide positive role models and hope for the children. Most importantly, it was recognized that these objectives could only be met if the kids were having fun while this was happening.

The VPD has had a school liaison program in place for over 20 years. The school liaison officers are spread quite thin and have a set curriculum to cover with all of the age groups. While this is a very worthwhile service, sometimes the line between teacher and school liaison officer becomes blurred for the kids.

Other youth programs the VPD have been involved with include the Police Venture Scout and the Duke of Edinburgh Awards programs. These programs have not generated significant participation from inner City youth due to costs, lack of appeal, and transportation difficulties.

### The Program

Research into what would be the best activity given the unique environmental factors was conducted through interviews with area Elementary School Principals, Community Center Directors, School Liaison Officers, and social workers. In addition, a literature search located articles on Police Activity/Athletic Leagues and input from the CompuServe Police Forum was received.

A Police Martial Arts program was viewed as the best avenue for achieving the stated goals.

Reasons included:

*,4 cornerstone of the sport is building self discipline and respect for others.*

*It is very appealing to youth in the targeted age group as the entertainment industry (movies, video games, TV) has popularized the sport.*

*The sport has a strong tradition in the ethnic communities (mainly asian) where a large proportion of kids are from.*

*It is not a team sport so that children of all physical skill and age levels can participate together without performance pressures from peers or even themselves.*

*It is a coed activity.*

*The Vancouver Police Department had several patrol officers working in the area with expertise in the sport.*

*It is an indoor activity and can be held at the school.*

The iast reason was seen as very important by the school principals. Many kids have transportation difficulties that prevent them from attending a program at a location other than their school. Also, many care for younger siblings and would not be allowed to take these siblings to other locations.

The first sessions were held at Queen Alexandra Elementary School. This school had achieved significant recent publicity as one of its students had gone missing, was not reported missing by his mother for over 24 hours, and was found the next day badly beaten and sexually assaulted. This child was subsequently apprehended by the Ministry Of Social Services on grounds of neglect. The school has a free hot breakfast and lunch program and there are no community centres in close proximity.

Publicity for the program was conducted by one of the patrol officers visiting the Grades 5 to 7 classes and talking about the free classes we were offering. The principal, Mr. Dave Short, initially limited the numbers to 40 students with the children first returning the consent forms getting in. The school quickly became inundated with returned consent forms. The first class was full and 25 students that had not managed to get their forms back quickly enough turned up to watch.

The group was very well behaved and a lot of credit is due to the experienced police instructors, most of whom have their black belts and substantial teaching experience. Because of the demand, it was decided to allow more students to participate. By the second class, over 60 students had registered and for the remainder of the program, an average attendance rate of over 90% was achieved. This was surprising and very gratifying for Mr. Short. He was also especially pleased that many of the students that enrolled had no other current or past leisure activities. Furthermore, many of his quieter students felt the confidence to sign up—perhaps because they felt comfort in a police run program. Mr. Short stated that his experience was that very often, these quiet and low key students would surprise him and get into trouble with the law.

## The Structure

Each class would begin with a bow-in ceremony. The gym would be silent as students kneeled in respect to the instructors. The head instructor would tell the students to take deep breaths and leave the stresses of the day behind. The students were then lead through a warm up and the actual instruction would begin. Demonstrations of kicks and punches by the instructors would lead to sounds of amazement from the kids.

During the second last class, a group picture was taken and each student had their picture taken with an instructor in police uniform. During the last class, presentations were made of the pictures and a certificate embossed with the VPD crest. Each student now was in possession of some important reminders of the program, the police officers that participated, and VPD's sincere effort to teach them something important and fun.

### Key Players

This type of program involved several agencies. School Board cooperation was essential. In addition, the Ministry of Attorney General, Youth Programs Section and the Vancouver Police Union provided donations so the juice, pop and certificates could be purchased.

### Future Directions

Arrangements have been made for the program to be conducted at 2 more inner City schools in September and volunteers from the Mount Pleasant Community Crime Prevention office will be utilized to assist with the classes. One thing that was learned is that the martial arts instruction remains at a very basic level. Therefore, other officers with an interest in working with children but who don't have the martial arts background can be used as assistant instructors if provided with training. For example, an officer with a first nations background will be assisting in September at a school with a large native population. A lesson plan has also been developed so other agencies can utilize the program. A very important lesson one of the instructors learned early on is to not stand in front of 6 cases of pop and yell "Come and get it!" This instructor felt like calling in an "officer in trouble" call.

## **SUMMARY**

The reaction from the community has been extremely positive and many other schools are clamouring for the program. In addition, the officers that participated had a lot of fun and were intrinsically rewarded by the appreciation shown by the kids. One of the objectives in the Mission Statement of the VPD is to build bridges with the community and this program has certainly achieved this. The patrol officers that participated are now on a first name basis with many of the students and when they drop in at the schools, they are affectionately mobbed by the students. This has increased these patrol officers' feelings of ownership towards the community they police. Word has spread within the VPD and members in other areas of the Department have asked to participate.

The goal of this program is to reduce the likelihood of inner city youth coming into conflict with the law by having them interact, while still at an impressionable age, with local patrol officers. This will instill respect for the criminal justice system and the police who are sworn to uphold the law. The Vancouver Police Martial Arts Program has provided an extremely successful avenue for this interaction to take place. Using Queen Alexandra as an example, 60% of the grades 5 to 7 students signed up for the once a week classes. Many other students, teachers, parents, as well as the younger siblings of participants would come to watch. The program has taken considerable efforts to organize but citizens, other service providers, community workers, parents and police officers know the results down the road are well worth this effort today.