

Businesses team up with AIDS Committee



By Brock Weir

He may have been told by one mother that having a bowl of condoms on the cash counter wasn't necessarily a "good look", but although they are now in a more inconspicuous location in the store, the one criticism isn't going to dissuade Steven Pink from doing his part to promote safe sex.

Mr. Pink runs Aurora's Spuds Skate Shop, one of six locations throughout York Region partnered with the AIDS Committee of York Region (ACYR) as condom dispensaries to provide the birth control to customers and the public alike free of charge to help combat the spread of HIV and STDs.

Spuds became involved with the program shortly after opening on Wellington Street East and John West Way last summer when a volunteer from the AIDS Committee of York Region made her pitch.

"Nothing can hurt you from promoting safe sex in any store," said Mr. Pink. "There is no store that shouldn't be promoting that and trying to prevent pregnancy and promote safe sex among teenagers. I don't know why anyone would back down on the offer to try and give students an option to protect themselves."

The condom dispensary program within York Region is the brainchild of Glenn Blake, who brought the idea in from working with the program's counterpart in Durham. He was hired by the ACYR last June and with its success in Durham, he went to stores that typically cater to youth, such as Spuds Skate Shop, and tattoo parlours, as well as adult stores to hit all age groups. Although six stores in the Region have signed on, it is not an idea that has particularly caught fire.

"Often people wouldn't be willing to distribute them because some of the ones we approached didn't want to be giving free condoms, and there are also some stores that may sell condoms so they wouldn't want to give them away for free," said Mr. Blake. "The places where you have the best luck are the mom and pop stores so you don't have to send it up to head office and see what they think. There are better places to do it. Spuds was right on board and that was really cool, especially since that is the demographic that can really use the free condoms too. Tattoo shops also care about harm reduction so they are already on board with providing safe, harm-reduction equipment."

Being located beside a high school such as St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School was a good fit from the perspective of both men. Many of the customers, said Mr. Pink, are "just coming into the sexual phase in their life" and the ACYR thought it was an appropriate place. Whether or not it is, however, the target demographic has had a mixed reaction.

"Unfortunately, immaturity plays a lot into getting free condoms," said Mr. Pink. "A lot of kids laugh at it and they don't take

it seriously. I kind of feel it out before I would ask a kid if he would like condoms thrown in with his purchase, or if he is looking for condoms. I would say there is probably a group of 10 or 12 students that came in and have come back for more because they are trying to save money.?

The program itself, as well, has received a mixed reaction at the AIDS Community who keep such dispensaries in stock.

?There are always going to be those people that if you're going to be putting equipment out there for people to reduce the harm that they could potentially do to themselves, that you're enabling them, but the reality is people are taking these and they are going to be used at some point,? said Mr. Blake. ?The reality is we're going to be doing a service by providing this, and so too are the stores. It is kind of brave for any of our stores to be so willing to work with us on these issues.

?[Programs] like this are important for a number of reasons. You may get yourself into a situation where you just wished if you had a condom [or] had one in your pocket to keep it safe for later. There is also that discussion that you have. A lot of kids will go in, they'll think, ?What's this?', they'll look and they'll giggle but it offers the opportunity to have discussions about safe sex and also to normalize it.?

The Aids Community of York Region is teaming up with local restaurants and eateries on April 24 for A Taste of Life. Participating restaurants in Aurora, Newmarket, Richmond Hill, and Stouffville will donate 25 per cent of their sales that day for those who have a reservation to the AIDS Committee. Participating Aurora restaurants include Bonsai Hill Tea Shop for high tea at 1.30 and 3.30, and Chinook for a \$45 set menu. For any businesses interested in becoming condom dispensaries, email gblake@acyr.org.