

Helping Kids Be Healthy Inside and Out

# How one teen found hope

by Rona Maynard



*"I was terrified that if we didn't find the answer, he would see no way out," Kim Devine says of her son, Christian.*

**Kim Devine had never felt so helpless. At 14, her son Christian refused to go to school. He wasn't cutting his grade-nine classes to hang out with the wrong crowd. He simply stopped getting out of bed in the morning. And he couldn't tell her why.**

On the face of things, Christian was the ideal teen: kind, polite, compassionate. But mention school, and he'd shut down. As far back as junior kindergarten, he'd been one of those sensitive kids whom classmates would tease and hit because he wouldn't fight back.

"When kids are little and they have an earache, they can tell you, 'My ear hurts,'" says Christian's mother, Kim Devine. This time she didn't know what was hurting.

As meeting after meeting at the school accomplished nothing, Kim watched sadness overtake her son. She worried about suicide, second only to car accidents as a cause of death in young people<sup>1</sup>. She'd read about quietly miserable kids who take their lives — kids who sounded a lot like her son. "I was terrified that if we didn't find the answer, he would see no way out," she recalls.

Kim and Christian's father, Peter Devine, took their child to the family doctor, two psychiatrists and a year of family counselling, but Christian's spirits didn't lift. He told them, "I'll do whatever it takes. I just want to get better."

They were hoping he'd feel safer in a private school — then they heard about STEPS, a free day program offered by Lutherwood in Waterloo, Ontario. Designed for kids like Christian who bottle up their problems, STEPS combines education and treatment in a class of eight students aged 12 to 16. Christian enrolled last winter and graduated in June with a near-perfect attendance record. Here's what the program gave him:

- **A diagnosis** Christian's first full psychiatric assessment showed that he was suffering from anxiety and low-level depression, two of the most common

mental illnesses in children<sup>2</sup>. He now takes anti-depressants. Medication doesn't "make me the happiest person on earth, but it helps me sit back and think before I act," he says.

- **Self-awareness** Christian learned strategies for managing his emotions before they overwhelm him. A talented pianist, he discovered that music relaxes him. Wood-working class revealed another gift that he plans to apply in a trade.
- **A chance to shine** At STEPS Christian met kids more anxious than himself. With his thoughtfulness and charm, he assumed a leadership role. When a classmate was afraid to enter the building, a therapist chose Christian to reassure the student.
- **Confidence** At his June graduation from STEPS, Christian played a favourite song of his godfather's, learning the song in one night.
- **Hope** With the support of a STEPS transition worker, Christian has returned to a regular high school. Now 16, he's looking forward to college. "I know it's not going to be easy," he says, "but I know I'm going to try because I see a future for myself."

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## STEPS TO SUCCESS

Lutherwood offers specialized children's mental health programs tailored to the needs of each individual — like STEPS, a day treatment program that combines education and treatment under one roof.

At STEPS young people 12 to 16 learn coping strategies they can take away and use forever — in one semester. Each student has a primary counsellor, plus an extensive support team that ranges from a psychologist to music and recreation therapists. The intimate classroom includes both a special-education teacher and a youth counsellor for the eight students. And it's okay to sit on the floor or even step out for a mind-clearing walk if that helps a student manage stress. Many students want to stay for a second semester, but the whole idea behind STEPS is applying new tools in the world outside.

Launched 10 years ago by Lutherwood, STEPS is a proven success. Close to 90 percent of graduates leave the program with improved scores on a test of emotional function. An equal proportion are in school or working full-time at least six months after graduation. "Many families have lost hope when they come to us," says Dr. John Colangeli, Chief Executive Officer of Lutherwood. "We know we have succeeded when these children leave us with coping strategies in their minds and hope for the future in their hearts."

The RBC Foundation has funded Lutherwood, home of STEPS and other programs for youth, as part of the RBC Children's Mental Health Project since 1995.

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<sup>1</sup>Statistics Canada

<sup>2</sup>Children's Health Policy Centre, Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University: [www.firstcallbc.org/pdfs/Communities/4-alliance.pdf](http://www.firstcallbc.org/pdfs/Communities/4-alliance.pdf) <sup>3</sup>To a maximum donation of \$50,000

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