

## Van patrol from Seton House goes looking for young people in need



Priess Skinner of Seton Youth Shelters, pouring Kool-Aid for children in Portsmouth, works with the van outreach program with Jonathan Williams, center. VICKI CRONIS / THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

By **DENISE WATSON BATTS**, The Virginian-Pilot  
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THIS LATE Wednesday afternoon, the van roamed East Ocean View Avenue in Norfolk - past half-million-dollar houses, snow-white picket fences - and made a right onto the shaded bay streets. It slowed near a park, the driver barely glancing at the four boys shooting hoops.

They are not the kind of kids the van stops for.

Jonathan Williams turned onto Pleasant Avenue and spotted three police cars idling ahead, near a crowd of children. As soon as he stopped, the knot of dusty tennis shoes and bikes flocked toward Williams and his partner, Priess Skinner. They jumped out, popping the hatch.

"What'cha got today?" one boy asked

"Spaghetti."

"Again?"

Williams dug into a Crock-Pot of pasta, and Skinner reached for cups and jugs of Kool-Aid as the kids chattered about a fight. Between a man and a girl. They

think. Something like that. A teen brunette rolled up on a bike, sweaty tendrils flying, her cheeks red.

"My best friend, her mom kicked her out," she said, as Williams handed her punch.

"When?"

"About two weeks ago."

"How old is she?"

"15."

"Where is she?"

"In the police car."

Skinner reached into the van for a card. It read: Seton Youth Shelters, street outreach, 498-HELP. It was similar to the sign on the van's roof.

"That's what I was thinking," she said, "I was waiting for you all to come back."

Williams and Skinner tried keeping count of the food flying out of the van. They also noticed that no adults came to see what these guys were handing out to their children.

These are the kids they are looking for.

**Williams, 25**, the bearded one with a quick smile, has worked the van more than a year. Skinner, the one with the dreadlocks, with the rich voice of an English professor, a little less. They are considered long-timers with program coordinator David Mount's crew. It's trying work.

The van outreach began six years ago through Seton Youth Shelters in Virginia Beach. The van patrols Norfolk, Virginia Beach and Portsmouth looking for the most vulnerable of kids - homeless, runaways, throwaways - before drugs and prostitution nab them. And while that is still their focus, the drivers have found too many other needs to ignore: Children out at midnight because there's no one home. Kids with homes, but no food. Fourteen-year-olds with genital herpes or suicidal thoughts.



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Mount and his staff of four circulate among 18 neighborhoods, Monday through Wednesday, knowing they are only skimming the need - but it is all their limited funding and donations will allow. Homeless teens are difficult to track - hidden on a friend's couch, not likely to catch a bus to a shelter - but by Mount's last estimate, Virginia Beach alone has 500 to 800 at any given time. And the summertime gets busy, Mount says, as many homeless shift along the East Coast like waves, crashing into Virginia Beach, spreading out among the tourists.

Mount says there's no way to estimate how many are needy but not homeless.

"Youth can be at risk in a \$600,000 neighborhood or low-income," he said.

"It's just how."

Mount's funding is designated for 12- to 21-year-olds, and last year his outreach logged about 6,200 contacts. He personally tallies and feeds a thousand or so more. The younger ones.

The following Wednesday, Skinner and Williams looped through East Ocean View; no word from last week's 15-year-old. Skinner headed toward Portsmouth through the crush of afternoon traffic; today would be a sticky journey.

They had no food because the donations pantry was bare. They stocked the backseat with "survival packs," storage bags crammed with toothbrushes, toothpaste, clean socks and mini-bottles of shampoo. Six gallons of Kool-Aid chilled in the rear.

They cruised along I-264, exiting near Jeffrey Wilson Homes. This would be their first trip there in a month. During their last, kids asked for food and then threw it back at them.

Williams and Skinner got smiles today but did not linger long, and within minutes they turned into Swanson Homes. They rolled down their windows, as they always do, even on the bleakest of winter evenings, so that people will see them and, hopefully, approach.

The van circled the neighborhood before slowing into a parking lot behind the two-story apartments, where laundry waved from clotheslines.

"We have one," Skinner said as a little boy trotted to the van.

"I know his mama, too," Williams said. "He has sisters."

Within seconds, kids scampered toward them, smiling, as if the ice cream man had arrived. Fifteen encircled Williams and Skinner before they could pull out cups.

"I thought you said you were going to bring popcorn," a girl said.

"Would you like some Kool-Aid?" Williams responded.

Skinner noticed a teen a few yards away with a football. He gave an uptick of his head, and the boy spiraled the ball his way. He caught it, and some boys chased him for a game of touch football. Williams then spotted a girl, 6-ish, with a rainbow of pigtails, lingering a foot behind the van.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

She grinned.

"I like your barrettes," Williams said. "Would you like some Kool-Aid?"

She smiled and leaned closer to whisper: "Do you have any food?"

The most important part of their work is getting to know the kids.

For now, what most of them need is someone to ask how their day has been. To remind them to say "please" and "thank you." To explain, to baby-faced boys why they don't need the condoms they ask for and how sex should not be on their minds.

But a month later, six months, a year, the needs often multiply and explode, and Williams and Skinner hope the kids remember the guys in the van.

They do, often in good ways. The children invite them to their dance recitals and show them their report cards. They ask them where they've been if they miss a day.

The van crew knows kids they see today might be gone next week, vanishing like ghosts when leases run out or apartments are razed.

Williams and Skinner have kids they try to monitor, but they need a comfortable detachment or they would carry the kids' lives home with them. Then they couldn't keep doing what they do.

Even so, Williams worries sometimes that he hasn't seasoned the pasta well enough. Skinner works two other jobs and is technically only a part-timer, but he's often at the shelter at midnight.

Williams and Skinner said they did stupid stuff themselves growing up, got into scrapes they don't like to talk about, but it gives them the credibility to tell a kid, "I know what it's like."

**Skinner threw his last ball** 10 minutes later, around 6:30, and reminded the kids to play in the grass. Before he got in the van, Skinner called over a child plastered with dust. He tied his shoes.

A half hour later, the van rolled through Prentis Park, and after constant stops and chats, the partners realized they were down to the last few cups of juice. Williams looked pained as they waited on Lincoln Street, down the road from Dale Homes.

They still had Dale and Lincoln Park, and Williams last week told the kids in Lincoln that he'd have plenty for them when he returned.

"Let's go out and give them what we can and we can talk to them," Skinner said.

"OK," Williams said, "I'll just hide my head."

As the van moved into Dale Homes, a light rain fell, but kids came. Williams gave out their last cups of Kool-Aid.

They drove only a few feet when a group crowded around.

Skinner pulled out all he had left. A pack of Juicy Fruit gum.

Williams tugged out a couple of pieces and talked to a group from the passenger side, Skinner handled the others.

Clouds thickened overhead as the gum disappeared. It was nearing 7.

They headed toward the next block, Lincoln Park, bracing for the pouts and foot-stamping of little girls miffed because there would be no food, cookies or juice. But Williams and Skinner had to go because they said they would. They don't like disappointing the kids; the kids get enough of that already.

But they also knew, these kids need more than Kool-Aid.

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