

# NURSING:

## A LEADING FORCE FOR CHANGE

### Leading change through justice for children and youth at risk

By Norma Nicholson, RN, BA, MA, Mississauga, Ontario

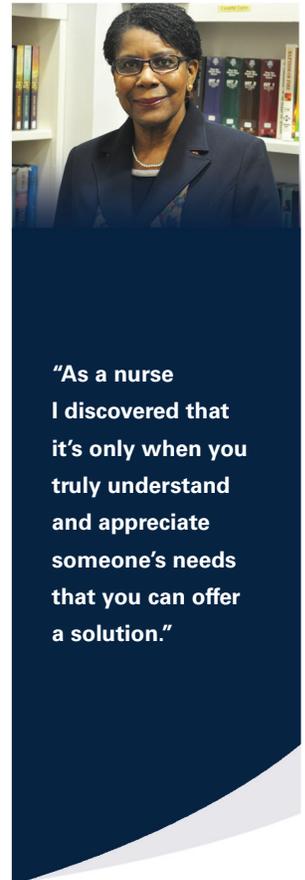
After 40 years as an RN and five years as a health-care manager for at-risk youth and children, Norma Nicholson continues to lead change on behalf of young persons. Drawing on her own life circumstances and her work experience, she has taken on a more active part in the change she wants to see.

Although 'officially retired,' Norma now leads seminars in her community and throughout Ontario to debunk the myth that at-risk children and youth involved in the justice system are "bad kids." Her effort to shed new light on the issue is based on her own recent book, *Young Lives on the Line: You Can Make a Difference*. Yet, Norma's commitment to young persons has deep roots: she was an at-risk child and youth herself.

These early circumstances enabled her to learn firsthand what it takes to unlock the potential of an at-risk child and youth and to help them become a productive adult. In Norma's case, the coaching and mentoring she received growing up made all the difference. Such community supports were a key reason her own homelessness did not lead to any involvement with the youth justice system. In turn, Norma's experience with these coaches and mentors helped to spark an intense passion and burning desire to change the ways our society views these young persons.

But solutions can only begin, she believes, when people look beyond signs and symptoms and see the root causes that place children or youth on the path of delinquency. These include inadequate health care, past abuses, trauma, negative parenting practices, childhood illness, mental illness and learning disabilities.

"As a nurse," Norma says, "I discovered that it's only when you truly understand and appreciate someone's needs that you can offer a solution." In her years managing health care for young persons in the justice system, she often wondered what changes she could make in the community. "I thought about the differences and outcomes for children who had undergone terrible abuses, mental illness, abject poverty and who had nothing to live for. Some became productive adults while others ended up in the youth justice system." By looking at research, listening to children and looking back at her own life, she understood how her involvement could make a difference.



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At a recent seminar one mother stood up and stated very loudly: "That is my son. I do not know what to do. He is lost." After listening to her story, Norma took time at the break to walk her through the available support systems and to help schedule a medical specialist examination and an addiction counselor's assessment. Within three months, intensive therapy has put this youth on the path of recovery.

Today, Norma is pleased that many organizations have bought into the idea of looking at the root causes of delinquency. If we address these issues in the community, she says, there is no need for young persons to become involved with the justice system.

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