

Retired policeman paints for 'kids'

Peel Bay

Bk

June 17-90 MN

By LYNDA CHIOTTI

Karl Barnhart has turned his first year of retirement into a cross-country crusade to help thousands of kids he's never met.

The 55-year-old former Peel police superintendent could have looked forward to idyllic days indulging his painting hobby at his country home on the Niagara escarpment. Instead, he has devoted his talent and time to helping raise funds for the Kids Help Phone, a nationwide free phone service for children in trouble.

Barnhart has donated a special issue of signed and numbered prints from six of his paintings depicting children in hopes of raising \$500,000 to benefit the phone service.

Since the toll-free line was launched in May of last year, more than 100,000 calls have been received, many from chil-

dren suffering physical, sexual or emotional abuse. Children who call the number, 1-800-668-6868, are guaranteed anonymity and are referred to social agencies for more help only if they request it.

Barnhart sees the help phone playing a vital preventive role against some of the gruesome situations he dealt with in his 30 years as a police officer. Many of the adults he met who were involved in serious crimes had suffered troubled childhoods.

While on the police force, Barnhart worked as a composite artist, rendering drawings of suspects from the descriptions provided by crime victims. In these situations, he says, "I got to really understand the trauma that people went through, and I felt the frustration of not being able to help more, especially with the children."

"To me, the answer was the Kids Help Phone because you have an anonymous line that reaches out to children at their level," says Barnhart. The service operates 24 hours a day and is staffed by professional counsellors. Most of the 800-plus calls each day are from 10 to 14-year-olds wanting to talk about family conflicts, peer pressures or simply wanting someone to listen without criticizing.

"When I retired," explains Barnhart, "I decided to take my skill as an artist and my experience with people and combine these into a powerful force that would bring attention to the Kids Help Phone... and the need to reach out a hand to kids."

Barnhart's six paintings portray real children, several from the Mississauga area, in natural situations. One depicts

in Inuit family from the James Bay area with carefully authentic background details. He is anxious to show the dignity of children. "I really want to make people aware how important it is... to simply look at the beauty of kids."

About five years ago, Barnhart started painting old people and old people with children. "I paint young people and old people because they're the ones that don't wear any masks." He pays close attention to body language and facial expression in an effort to convey emotions. His admiration of Norman Rockwell's facility in capturing a commonplace but evocative moment is evident in his choice of subject matter. The children are shown playing, sharing confidences, daydreaming.

Barnhart now paints 10 to 11 hours a day, breaking occa-

sionally to enjoy the nearby Bruce Trail with his wife and three dogs. "It's a grand life, let me tell you," he exults. He plans to keep on painting children and sees a continuing involvement with the Kids Help Phone.

His six limited edition prints are peaceful, positive scenes, which Barnhart hopes can directly help children whose lives are not so positive. "Kids need a special place in this world," he says, "if we expect them to carry on from where we're going to leave off."

While news of the Kids Help Phone is being spread among children by the media, Barnhart feels it is vital to let people know there are ongoing costs to keep it operating. He hopes corporations and service clubs will become aware of the need to support it.

(Courtesy Today's Seniors)