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Work with the illiterate leads to Order of Canada

'Beat The Street' man honored

By LIDIA FERRARI
Staff Reporter

A Mississauga native's work with illiterate street people has earned him a membership in the Order of Canada.

Tracy Lequere, 38, said that because he was told the news in broken French, he thought the Governor-General's office wanted him to present the award to someone. The next time he spoke with their representative, however, he was assured that it was indeed him who was receiving one of Canada's highest honors.

"Of all the awards, I really appreciate that one because when you're down in the trenches you wonder if anyone cares," he said.

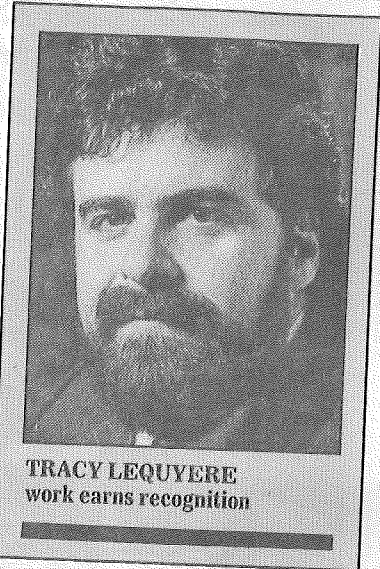
Lequere, with the help of Toronto's Frontier College, started a literacy program called "Beat the Street" in which street people who can read and write teach other homeless people who cannot. This helps them become employable and make a better life for themselves off the streets.

Lequere was born in Mississauga and lived in the Cooksville area until he was 11 years old, attending what was then the Cooksville Trade School. Because he was put in a trade school, he said, he walked out of school with what was considered a Grade 2 or 3 education, but he remained functionally illiterate until he was 33. He was in and out of jail throughout his life and often found himself homeless.

In 1983 he registered with Frontier College, a 95-year-old institution that once took education to the most remote areas in the country. He was taught to read and write by Dr. Marsha Forest and soon began to fit himself in with Frontier's philosophy.

"Once I was educated I was more employable and I grew into the job at Frontier College," he explained. By last year he had risen to the position of assistant to the president.

In 1985 he took Frontier's philosophy and resources to the streets and "Beat the Street" was born.



TRACY LEQUYERE
work earns recognition

"For the first six months of Beat The Street, a lot of people didn't believe the problem existed," said Lequere. "If it wasn't for the media coverage, we wouldn't have gotten off the ground."

"The people that are on the streets today lack the basic skills to get off the street," he continued. "Instead of looking at them as a problem, I saw them as the solution to the problem."

Lequere attributes the success of the program to a method which focuses on a student's strengths rather than weaknesses, and the fact that students feel more at ease learning from people who understand their plight. The program now has offices in Regina and Winnipeg, as well as two in Toronto.

Lequere now lives on a farm in Chesley, a small town near Owen Sound. He spends most of his time speaking to groups across Canada as well as in several cities in the United States, acting as a consultant to many similar programs springing up across North America.