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Searching for a better life Teens in detention meet dignitaries

Rachel Brown

rachelbrown@daltoncitizen.com



“The smallest things” are what the 16-year-old Hispanic boy said he misses most since he’s been incarcerated at the Elbert Shaw Regional Youth Detention Center in Dalton for three months.

“Like saying ‘hi’ to your mom whenever you want to,” he explained, “telling her you love her whenever you want to, opening a door whenever you want to — the smallest things.”

The boy, who agreed to the alias “Ricky” because juvenile offenders’ identities are kept confidential, said he realizes he’s made some serious mistakes. He said he wants to turn his life around, get back in school, join the Marines and become somebody he can be proud of.

“Ricky” was among about 30 boys and girls that met several state dignitaries who toured the facility Wednesday and visited with students to learn more about the juvenile justice system and the education programs it offers.

After the tour, the teens stood in a half circle, hands behind backs, feet in front of their plastic chairs as their visitors entered the lunchroom.

They had been told they could ask prepared questions of Georgia first lady Sandra Deal, schools state school Superintendent John Barge and Department of Juvenile Justice Commissioner L. Gale Buckner, who is from Chatsworth. Straight-faced, they sat and posed their queries.

“Do you think our children forgive us for the things we did?” one of the girls asked Deal, who is a former schoolteacher.

“I think they would depending on how you straighten out your life afterwards, because they will evaluate your life as they get older just like you will evaluate your parents’ life,” she said, “and if you change your life and try to make it better and provide them a better home environment you will change their attitudes.”

“Are you a religious person?” a boy asked.

“I am.”

“Will you keep us in your prayers?”

“I will.”

A few minutes later, the girl began again.

“Do you believe that we can change?”

“Do I believe you can change? Of course!” Deal said emphatically. “Everything is a matter of choice, and so if we make a bad choice one time and we analyze it then we ought not to do it again.”

Some of the students admitted earlier in the day to making bad choices more than once. “Ricky” has been in juvenile detention before, once in a large Augusta facility when he was 12, more recently after his involvement as a leader in a Dalton gang with “like 20 Mexicans.” He said his life spiraled downward after he faced some other family issues, including the death of his grandfather. He began using “hard drugs,” he said, and even though he liked school, he became so involved in other things he stopped doing the work. One thing led to another, and while some of his friends are serving 30- or 60-day sentences, he’ll be in detention another two years.

“I had a party with some of my friends and decided to rob some places,” he recalled. “It’s the worst (mistake) I ever made.”

Yet getting caught was also “a good thing,” “Ricky” said. He believes God put him in detention to help him get his life straightened out. Now he dreams of joining the Marines. “They come back,” he said, “with honor and respect. They look at life more like a gift.”

While education is a factor in keeping kids out of trouble, it isn’t the only thing that comes into play.

“Ben,” a 15-year-old Hispanic boy who said he was in trouble for several infractions including using marijuana, said he liked his teachers and was making good grades at a Dalton school, but he fell in with the wrong crowd.

“My first time (in detention here), I was real scared,” “Ben” said. “I didn’t think what to expect but some of the JCOs (juvenile corrections officers) told me not to worry, nothing’s going to happen... I was, like, afraid of the kids.”

Yet nothing happened to him, he said, and he’s learning a lot from his JCOs. “Brent,” a 16-year-old Chatsworth boy with blond hair, said he too is learning a lot while he awaits placement in four-month “wilderness camp” for juveniles who have committed lesser infractions. He stole from his stepfather.

Now, he leads a structured life. He rises at 6 a.m., cleans his room, and eats breakfast at 7 a.m. School begins at 8, and the day is filled with classes, outdoor activities such as working in an on-site greenhouse, and “leisure” spent in groups of four where he can talk or watch television. As a “gold card” resident, the highest color awarded for good behavior, he can stay up until 9:45 p.m. Lesser-behaved residents are assigned earlier bedtimes. Each is locked inside a one-person bedroom and let out again in the morning.

“If they never would have sent me here, I would have kept getting in trouble, doing what I was doing,” “Brent” said. “I came here, and I got saved two months ago.”

He said he used to play sports in school, and he misses it now and wants to go back.

“The only thing is I picked the wrong crowd to be around,” he said. “That’s the only thing that got me in trouble is the wrong crowd and the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Inspirational sayings encouraging students to make right choices are plentiful at the Dalton detention center. Inside one of the classrooms is a poster that reads, “If there is a better solution ... find it.”

Barge said he is interested in bringing Georgia Virtual School into YDC classrooms. The state-funded school provides online high school classes to any student in Georgia and can be accessed anywhere with an Internet connection.

Barge, who said he grew up in an abusive home and had an alcoholic father, described education as “the great equalizer” and said it gives students who have come from bad situations a chance to make their lives into what they want them to be.

“I know firsthand that education levels the playing field for everyone,” he said.

Buckner said that while education plays a role in how students’ lives turn out, it isn’t the only factor.

“There are so many dynamics that go into it,” she said.

During a stop at The GreenHouse, a Dalton advocacy center for child abuse victims, she said tending to the needs of victims early on can help stop what social workers often refer to as “the cycle of abuse,” the fact that many people abused as children grow up to be abusers themselves because they don’t know how to cope with what they’ve been through.

When Deal and Buckner visited the Department of Juvenile Justice office in Chatsworth, the first lady spoke with young people working on a service-learning project that involved hand-stitching a blanket.

Margaret Cawood, regional administrator for Department of Juvenile Justice, said the service projects have a dual purpose — teaching skills and helping the young people learn of needs in the community.

“It helps them have ownership, a feeling of ‘I did something for my community,’ ” she said. “When they have ownership, they are less likely to re-offend. They feel good about being successful, because some of them have not had success. It helps them to be valued, and it’s better than picking up trash on the side of the road.”

The juvenile justice locations were among several stops Deal made during the visit to Dalton and Chatsworth. She said that while the Dalton facility was the first Youth Detention Center she’s visited, she plans to visit others in Georgia.

“You know, it’s just a shame that they made maybe one bad choice,” she said, “but our hope is that with proper intervention and counseling and guidance that they can turn their lives around.”

Reporter Mark Millican contributed to this story.