

Serving Communities, Changing Lives—Youth Court Success Stories

Volume I



OJJDP



TSA
People Saving People

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Forward

This year the theme of the 3rd Annual National Youth Court Month, *Serving Communities—Changing Lives*, addresses two very important aspects of youth court. First, thousands of youth volunteers in youth courts (also called teen, peer, or student courts) serve their communities by becoming participatory members—alongside juvenile justice professionals, school personnel, and community members—in identifying problems and developing solutions for community and school issues. This ‘hands-on’ lesson in civic education can provide immeasurable benefits to young people in adulthood by helping them explore future careers in the legal and justice fields and by facilitating the development of sound problem-solving, decision-making, and critical-thinking skills. Second, youth court offers youth who have committed minor delinquent and status offenses or who are engaging in problem behaviors a timely and cost-effective alternative to the traditional juvenile justice and school disciplinary systems. Youth court dispositions are determined by the respondents’ peers and tailored to respondents’ needs. Through their involvement in youth court, respondents are given an opportunity to improve their behavior; repair the harm they caused to their families, victims, and communities; and learn to make better choices so they may become better citizens.

Every youth court can relate a favorite anecdote or two about how its program has had a positive impact on individuals and their communities. Maybe it’s a story about a former respondent who joined youth court as a volunteer after completing his youth court disposition, and later in life became an attorney. Or, maybe it is a story about a shy young girl who never felt confident enough to speak up in class before she volunteered for youth court and had an opportunity to learn and practice public speaking skills on a regular basis.

The National Youth Court Center wanted to provide a forum for sharing these types of stories with others. The “success stories” included within this document are heartwarming and a joy to read. They remind us of the wonderful benefits that youth court programs offer to our nation’s young people, families, and communities.

We hope you will enjoy this document and share these stories with others to help illustrate what youth court is all about. Where appropriate, names and other identifying information were changed to protect respondents’ confidentiality and privacy.



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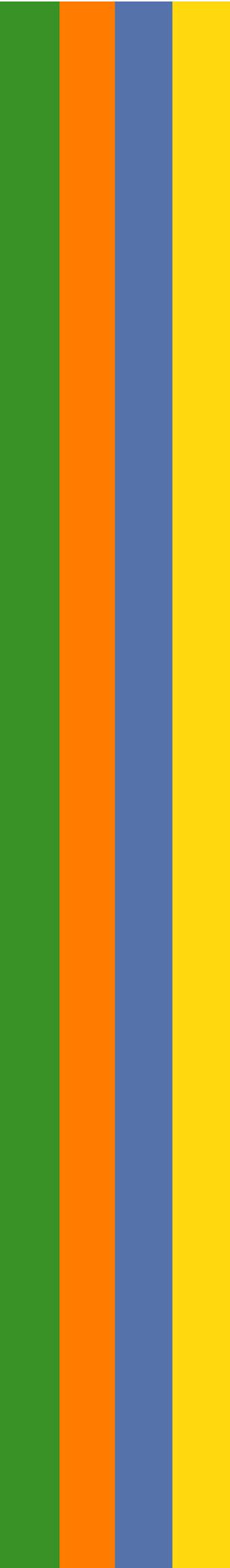
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VOLUNTEER PERSPECTIVES

My years with youth court

By Matthew Tymann, youth member of the Bethlehem Youth Court in Delmar, New York

My father is an attorney, so I developed an interest in the law at a very early age. For this reason, I was very excited when I first saw the fliers announcing the youth court training sessions when I was in ninth grade. I joined that same year, and am now in my fourth year of membership. During my time with the youth court, I have had a variety of experiences, from participating as a judge or attorney during actual hearings, to sitting as a student representative at the youth court board meetings, to going to Washington, D.C. for the National Youth Court Conference. I believe I have taken advantage of most every opportunity afforded me during my time with this great organization. By far the majority of the time I've spent working with the youth court has been related to actual youth court hearings. This is what drew me to attend those eight two-hour training sessions in the first place. I loved (and still love) the idea that I could not only act as an attorney and argue my case in front of a group of people, but also have a tangible effect on the sentence of an actual offender. Whether as a prosecutor or defense attorney, I take pride in having a noticeable influence on the sentence returned by the jury. Just as satisfying is seeing a witness of mine answer a question exactly as I hoped he would. Perhaps for most people this doesn't qualify as much excitement, but for me it most certainly does. This is why youth court has been such a rewarding experience for me.

As I said above, I have also had the opportunity to sit in on the meetings of the Youth Court Board of Directors as a student representative. It really makes me feel important to walk into the Town Hall at 7:25 in the morning and have a meeting to attend. It's even better that I get to sit in a room with prominent local attorneys, Bethlehem police officers, and even the Town Supervisor. I feel like my role as Student Representative is a very important one. Not only do I have the opportunity to present my own opinions to the board, I also have the responsibility to try to speak for the majority of my fellow members. There are some meetings at which there isn't much for me to say; there are others when my thoughts on an issue are asked for and given respect.

Perhaps the most exciting door opened to me through my membership in Youth Court came in April of my sophomore year. I, along with a few of my fellow members, traveled to Washington, D. C. with the director for the National Youth Court Conference. This was a truly amazing experience. For one thing, I had never been to our nation's capital before,

and we were able to devote a fair amount of time to sightseeing. Viewing such landmarks as the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial is something I'll never forget. We also attended quite a few learning sessions, at which a presenter or presenters taught the group something about how to be a more effective trial lawyer. There were a large variety of sessions, and we could each choose what we wanted to attend. I took a lot out of these sessions, and have tried to implement everything I learned into my preparation for the cases I've had since then.

I believe I have gotten everything I hoped for out of my membership with youth court, and so much more. I wanted the opportunity to argue a case in front of a group of people, in a situation that really mattered. Not only did I get that, but also the chance to represent my fellow members as a Student Representative on the Board of Directors. Finally, an experience like the one I had in Washington, D.C. is something that will carry with me my entire life. I am very grateful to everyone involved with the youth court, especially Stacey Whiteley, the Board of Directors, and all those who helped out with training four years ago. Thank you for this wonderful opportunity, and I hope the program continues for many years to come.

I decided to give youth court a chance

By Nina Sousa, youth volunteer, New Bedford Youth Court in New Bedford, Massachusetts

My name is Nina Sousa, and I am 17 years old. I have been a New Bedford Youth Court volunteer for approximately two years. I have had the privilege of watching our youth court grow right before my eyes. When I started in the program I was unsure of what I wanted to pursue as a career. I decided to give youth court a chance to see if I would enjoy it. After my first night of acting as a lawyer I fell in love with youth court. I had to stand up in front of a judge and jury to represent youth court as a prosecutor. I had the ability to give facts and present them in a way that would attract the jury to what I was saying. The only word that can truly describe what I was feeling at that very moment is that it was a rush. I felt alive, competent, and intelligent and for the first time in my life I knew that I belonged there. I felt like I would belong in front of that jury as a lawyer for the rest of my life.

Youth court also showed me a different side of the system that I had not really taken a look at before. I had the opportunity to witness respondents go through the program step by step and actually see them begin to move in the right direction. As a prosecutor, I was probably the person they hated the most in the beginning. However, as time went on, I was able to be with them through community service, and they realized that my main goal was to help them. To see a child move from the wrong path to the right path and to know that you helped them is one of the best feelings in the world.

This program changed my life because it gave me an experience that no other program ever could. It showed me the compassionate side of the system; it gave me experience as a lawyer in a courtroom, and above all opened my eyes to a career I have a passion for. Thanks to this program, at the age of 17 I know exactly what I want for my future, and because of this program I know that the youth can make a difference.

Teen court helped me improve my communication skills

Written by a longtime youth volunteer from the Lewisville/Flower Mound Teen Court in Lewisville, Texas that graduated in May, 2004.

Teen court is designed to encourage respectful behavior for authority, and community rules and regulations, and to stop potential delinquent behavior in teenagers. It also creates a great forum for non-offending youths such as me to learn about the court system from the inside. Since I will be attending law school, teen court has provided me with the opportunity to learn the rules of evidence and courtroom procedures. Furthermore, teen court has enabled me to improve my speaking and communication skills in an intellectual and a constructive environment.

Representing juveniles in teen court has been an educational and inspirational experience that has consumed a great part of my life over the past five years. One of the most rewarding aspects of teen court, from the volunteer perspective, is the opportunity we have to truly impact the lives of our peers and those younger than us every other Tuesday night.



Teen court helped me become a better leader

From a former volunteer for the Duncanville Teen Court Program who is a recent high school graduate in Duncanville, Texas

My name is Christi Casey and I served in the Duncanville Teen Court Program for about five years, completing 400-plus hours of service. During my experience with this program, I learned many skills that followed me throughout my high school years and into my life in college. When I started with the program, I was a very shy, quiet person. With the skills I learned in the courtroom, I became more confident and began to open up and speak out. I learned courtroom procedures, leadership skills, and how to deal with the real world. Working with some of the defendants can really show you a different view on life.

In teen court I learned that choosing the right words in a case makes a big difference on the outcome, and that things don't always go as planned. I also had the honor of being a team captain. This is a big deal and meant a lot to me. I learned most of my leadership skills in this role. As a captain you must make sure that everyone is prepared and knows what to do

The skills I learned in teen court also helped with other activities I was involved with during high school. I served as a student council officer and as co-captain of the cheerleading squad. Without the skills I learned in teen court, I don't think I could have done as well in those activities.

Our program educates youth about the dangers of drinking and driving

By Erin Andrejcak, Niagara Police Athletic League Representative, Niagara Falls Youth Court in Niagara Falls, New York

My name is Erin Andrejcak, and I am a 2004 high school graduate and was a five year charter member of youth court and its other spawning programs. Now I am currently working for the Niagara Falls Police Athletic League (PAL) and youth court as a mentor, as well as organizing cases, interviews, etc. I am writing to tell you of our greatest success story—educating 2,000 high school seniors about the dangers of drinking and driving.

The Niagara Falls Youth Court was born in 1999. In 2000 we attended a National Youth Court Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico and learned about a drinking and driving prevention program called “Every 15 Minutes.” It’s called this because every 15 minutes someone in the United States dies as a result of drinking and driving. Living in an area where normal teenage activity includes partying and drinking, we knew we needed this program. At that time, youth court was really soaring. We were getting amazing cooperation from the community, and we were thriving with members, so it was only logical to have Every 15 Minutes as a youth court based and supported program. From my freshman to senior year, I have helped organize and run Every 15 Minutes, and have seen the dramatic change in not only seniors, but in teachers, administration and underclassmen as well.

Particularly, there was a very popular class clown student who was notorious for being the life of the party, and unfortunately drove home many times from parties. After going through this dramatic, proactive, and at times morbid program, this student has sworn and stuck to his conviction of never drinking and driving again. Niagara PAL/Youth Court feels that if even one student decides to never drink and drive again, or never get in a car with someone who has, we are a complete success.



It is a wonderful feeling to know you've done something important in someone's life

By Julie Shefchik, former volunteer with the North Star Youth Court in Fairbanks, Alaska

The five years that I spent volunteering for the North Star Youth Court (NSYC) were years of growth and learning. During my time in youth court, I served as a chief judge, the bar association president, and on the board of directors. I am truly grateful for the experiences the NSYC has provided me. In addition to fostering my leadership skills, volunteering with a youth-oriented program has helped my social skills and public speaking abilities immensely. With the guidance of those involved with the NSYC, I went from a shy and soft spoken follower to an opinionated, self-assured young adult. I have met some wonderful people, some becoming my closest friends and mentors through volunteering with this organization. The NSYC has also helped me see the impact people can have on their community by caring enough to give their time and energies to the youth of their city. It is a wonderful feeling to know as a kid you've done something important in someone's life.



How I became involved in youth court

by Ryne Kitzrow, youth volunteer with the Bethlehem Youth Court in Delmar, New York

I had been relatively oblivious to youth court until one evening after school when I saw a youth court pamphlet on the edge of the kitchen table. Being in my sophomore year, the first thing that hit me was, “Could it be used on my college applications?” As I looked the pamphlet over, I saw a few of my friends in some of the pictures, and the whole concept of the court became interesting to me. I sent a few E-mails, got some more information concerning youth court, and decided to join. Although I had missed the training sessions for some of the more advanced positions, I could still participate as a juror.

I have to say joining youth court this year is one of the few decisions I haven’t regretted. I’ve done four or so cases, each one inspiring me to do another. Currently I am also enrolled in the advanced training sessions next year. There’s just something about being crammed in a small room, debating over sentences, that draws me to the program. Of course the program is not just about sentencing peers, it’s about improving the community by trying to get peers to understand the consequences of their actions. Sentences include special classes, such as peer pressure classes and drug abuse classes, whose purposes are to try to deter any repeat offenses. Court positions also give the participants some knowledge and experience with the justice system, possibly leading them into future careers involving the law, criminal justice, or other similar fields. I recommend youth court to anyone who is uncertain about signing up. It’s not just a memorable experience, but it also can be used on college applications (as I’m sure so many high schoolers are delighted to hear) and provides a break during the week away from homework, studying, and tests. I know I’ll continue in the program as long as I can.



Teen court prepared me for college

By Belinda Sonnamaker, former volunteer with the Lea County Teen Court in Hobbs, New Mexico

I just wanted to take a moment to thank you [David Garcia, Coordinator of the Lea County Teen Court] for the opportunities that have been shown to me through teen court. I realize that you see hundreds of kids come through the program every year and that you work incredibly hard to help all of them better themselves through this program. I feel like teen court has been especially good to me as far as preparing me for college and for life in general.

I know that it was a struggle for our coordinator to make college credit available to those of us who spent time in the courtroom every week preparing and trying cases. But, he succeeded, and now I am a step up from my classmates with extra credits on my transcript. But even more than that, the time I spent in the courtroom helped prepare me for my majors here at New Mexico State University. It must be obvious how this past experience would impact my criminal justice studies; however, I think I learned more about psychology from my time under my coordinator's guidance. We all came into contact with so many young people who had essentially made small mistakes but now had to face up to the law. It was eye-opening and sometimes heart-wrenching to see their faces when they saw that they were going to have to face their peers and tell them word for word what they had done and explain it all. It was through these small mistakes that I was able to help my peers through a difficult time. I was able to help guide them, as an equal rather than an adult, through a criminal justice procedure.

Not only did volunteering for teen court advance me academically and help prepare me for what was to come in my college career, but it gave me a sense of satisfaction in being able to help others. Through this I learned how to lead others both in a professional and in casual capacity. This alone has and will prove invaluable to me academically and personally. I have learned and grown so much from my time as a volunteer attorney to my time on the board of directors for teen court and the board of directors for the Every 15 Minutes program. It has really made an impact on my life.

I overcame my fear of speaking in front of a crowd

By Michelle Harris, former volunteer with the Lea County Teen Court in Hobbs, New Mexico

I came into this program as a sophomore in high school. I could not speak in front of a crowd without breaking out into hives and stuttering. David Garcia (the Lea County Teen Court Coordinator) encouraged and supported me through my problem. I eventually became someone I never thought I could be. Overcoming my speaking problem helped me in school and also on the debate team.

Teen court also helped me to determine what kind of career I wanted to pursue. I am currently going to college to get my paralegal degree. Ultimately, I want to go to law school to become a prosecuting attorney. Teen court gave me a head start in college by making this program a college-level course and giving me four hours of credit to apply towards my degree.

I had the opportunity to travel to several different places with this program. We taught a Navajo Indian reservation what teen court was all about. It was truly an honor to be a part of that. We also traveled to Washington, DC for a national teen court conference. That was an unforgettable experience.

David Garcia helped develop a New Mexico Teen Court Board, and I was elected as the secretary. I was able to use this title to help me get a job with an attorney's office as a legal secretary. The position as the New Mexico Teen Court secretary taught me how to set up a board and what should be accomplished during the meetings. I am now developing a children's board at my church.

I came into this program with just the eagerness to learn, and I came out of it with skills, confidence, and self-respect. Thank you.

Giving youth a second chance

By Francine Morrissey, former volunteer with the Lea County Teen Court in Hobbs, New Mexico

I would like to start out thanking David Garcia (the coordinator for the Lea County Teen Court) for all of your time and effort you have put into creating the teen court program. Many youth, including myself, have benefited from this program. It gives our youth a second chance. I joined teen court as a junior in high school in 2000. The program was just starting, but the people involved were so welcoming and caring. I made friends immediately. I was active in the teen court program until May of 2001, when I graduated. During my time with teen court, we went to a conference in Albuquerque and met other teen court members from all over the United States. Being in this program has been such a positive experience. I am now starting my fourth year of college, and am getting my degree in nursing. My plan is to work as a nurse while I go to medical school to become a physician. Thanks, David, and all the staff for welcoming me into teen court and for believing in me.



My experience as a youth court attorney helped prepare me for the future

By Eric Montgomery, former volunteer with the Lea County Teen Court in Hobbs, New Mexico

For two years I served the Teen Court of Lea County as an attorney. During my time as an attorney, all that I experienced helped prepare me for all that I have now accomplished. I was able to meet and talk to several area attorneys and judges to get an idea of what type of law I would like to specialize in when I received my undergraduate degree and attend law school. I was also able to develop many skills that helped me with my studies and my employment at the university I now attend.

During my sophomore year in college, I entered the university's student government as the assistant attorney general. One year later, I was the chief justice of the judicial branch. I will hold this position for another two years. In addition to the student government work, I have also had the opportunity to volunteer as a court-appointed special advocate (CASA), in which I work closely with neglected and abused children in the judicial system. Teen court showed me that I could do these things with confidence.

If I could say one more thing about my experience with teen court, it would have to be a word of thanks. My success at my university would not have been as significant without the skills I received and honed in teen court. Programs such as these are vital resources and outlets for teens across the country, and I hope these programs continue far into the future.

Our teen court benefits the community

By Paul Montgomery, volunteer with the Lea County Teen Court in Hobbs, New Mexico

My name is Paul Montgomery, and I live in the city of Hobbs, New Mexico. I am 17 years old and am currently attending Hobbs High School, where I will soon be in the 11th grade. I have lived here for about seven years, and the first time I was introduced to the Teen Court of Lea County was when my brother, Eric, was in high school. It was the summer of 2001, and because I had absolutely nothing to do for the summer I went looking for something to do. My older brother was in this program called teen court, so I went to see what it was all about. David (the coordinator for the Lea County Teen Court) showed me what people do in teen court, and I observed the program. I served on the jury too. After a few times, I was hooked, and I kept going back. I joined the program soon afterwards.

The reason I like teen court so much is that I get to see and hear defendants' cases, and actually meet these people in person and try to help them. I really think the best part about the program is the fact that I meet new people and make new friends. Another thing I enjoy is when our group attends state and national conferences.

I cannot help but stress the fact that this is a volunteer program, and that we would not succeed as a teen court if it were not for all of the volunteers and our supporters. They see our program as a positive benefit to the community when we deal with the youth in our own way, which is "justice for youth by youth".

I have no plans to take law as a major in college, as I have another career in mind. I still have received benefits out of the program, and David Garcia and my friends have helped me so much. If it were not for teen court, I would not be as confident and comfortable with other people.

Lansing Teen Court volunteers talk about what they enjoy most about teen court

Submitted by Mike Botke, Director of the Lansing Teen Court in Lansing, Michigan

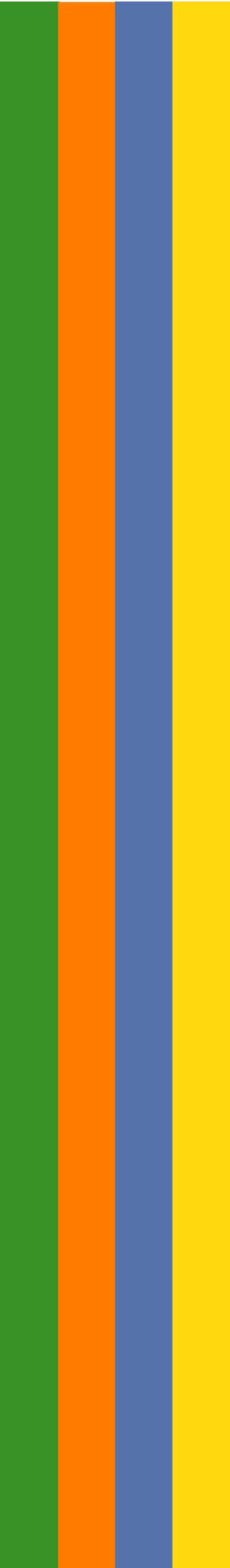
The following are statements collected from youth volunteers with the Lansing Teen Court in Lansing, Michigan when they were asked to complete an end of the year satisfaction survey.

“The assault case we heard in teen court is what I liked. It showed how serious fights in school can get and the true harm it causes people. I really liked the experience of being in the courtroom setting. I also liked being able to help my peer group.”

“The thing I liked most about my experience in teen court is that it made me feel part of my community.”

“I got involved because I like helping young people. I also needed courtroom experience, and I like the way teen court officials guide juvenile offenders and their families to make better choices. It was also very interesting to get the chance to observe how the teen jury members complete the deliberation process, use restorative justice principles to repair the harm, and address underlying issues that may be going on in the offender’s life.”

“I got to voice my opinion as a member of the peer jury and affect someone’s life in a positive manner. I liked everything about teen court.”



RESPONDENT STORIES AND PERSPECTIVES

Youth court was a good experience for me

By a respondent with the New Bedford Youth Court in New Bedford, Massachusetts

I am a 13-year-old male, and I am a former respondent in New Bedford Youth Court. I enjoy baseball and basketball in my spare time and would like to play baseball professionally some day. I got to youth court because I was trying to act out. I was trying to be down with the other kids in the school, showing that I was one of them, which led me to trouble. I was involved in intimidating others and damaging property. However, the kids that I wanted to be part of did not go to youth court. I was the one that got into trouble.

Youth court was a good experience for me. It taught me lots of things I would never have thought about doing, like jury duty. Jury duty was one of the things I liked. It gave me a chance to see why I received the sanctions I did to make up for what I had done. Community service was another thing I liked, especially the “paint your heart out” program, where we helped paint and fix people’s houses that couldn’t do it themselves. This was different from the things that I had been doing, and I really like that I was helping others. Volunteering your time is not only good for others, but it teaches you a lot of things.

After youth court I plan to stay out of trouble. I am not going to be a follower anymore. I will be a leader. I will concentrate on my schoolwork, so that I can go to college and do what I dream of doing everyday. Lastly, I want to apologize to my parents for putting them through all of this.

Youth court inspired me to help other at risk youth

Submitted by a teen court coordinator in Florida

Brad (not his real name) and two of his friends were referred by area law enforcements officers to teen court for criminal mischief. The three juveniles attended teen court and were exemplary in their completion of all sanctions. All three returned to volunteer. Brad, however, stayed active with the teen court as an attorney until his graduation from high school, at which time he entered the US Air Force. Now 22 years old, Brad stops in at our sessions whenever he can to say hello. He also volunteers to speak to our counseling group which is required of all defendants. Brad's message has always been inspirational, explaining what an opportunity the youth have received being referred into teen court. Brad has been stationed in Japan for two years, much of that time in combat in the current war, is now married, and recently became the father of twin daughters, sisters to his two-year-old son. Home on emergency leave for their births, Brad stopped in after hospital visitation with them. He told us that he has established, based solely on his teen court experience, an intervention/diversion program for delinquents on his military base. Brad openly credits his experience with teen court as his inspiration to help other at-risk youth, and remains a constant reminder of the many advantages of having youth courts in our communities.

I'm so thankful for getting a second chance

Submitted by Rhonda Leiffer, Coordinator of the Onslow County Teen Court in Jacksonville, North Carolina

The following is a letter from one of our first time offenders.

To begin, I just want to say that I think the teen court is a wonderful program! I am so thankful for the program giving me a second chance, a chance to start over and do it right. I am someone who went through the teen court due to a stupid decision on my part. I was 15, four days before my 16th birthday, when I became “eligible” to go through the program. It was either teen court or jail. Hard decision right? At first I thought that teen court was just a smaller punishment for what I did, but it was more than that. They were there to help me and encourage me to make better decisions in my life. They really wanted to help me, and they did. Teen court taught me many things including how to make better choices, not just good choices but MY choices, not to just go with the flow.

Part of my “punishment” was that I had to attend learning seminars. I put punishment in quotations because, although it was supposed to be a punishment, it was a big help in teaching me how to look at things, situations, and myself and make good decisions. They also helped us learn how to help ourselves. At the seminars we learned about things like communication, self-image, anger and many other important subjects. They helped me search myself and understand that I didn't want to live the way I had been. By going to the trials (my own, and when I was a jury member) I learned a lot of good lessons. I learned that it's no fun being bad, or being made to look worse than you are. Sure I made a mistake, and I am sorry for it. But let me tell you, it may be people your own age on the jury and prosecuting, but they don't take pity on you. In there it's just like you're in a real court. Being on the jury gave me a different perspective on things.

I learned how to read people. I had to look to see if they seemed sincere, or not. That is a good thing to look for in your friends and peers. It really shows them that they are out to help you. It's what people call tough love.

Teen court did a lot for me, not just keeping me out of juvenile, but taught me good life lessons, and I truly believe that I and everyone I influence and am around benefit from it. I would just like to thank the teen court of Jacksonville, North Carolina for helping me become a better person.

Former respondents tell what they liked about teen court

Submitted by Anne Dubinsky, Coordinator of the Lewisville/Flower Mound Teen Court in Lewisville, Texas

The following are feedback received from youth respondents when asked what they liked about teen court.

“I don’t want to be part of the school violence that we hear about on the news, nor do I want to be a ‘problem teenager.’ I do care about people and I care about my family and myself. I’ve learned a lot over the past several months. I never thought about fighting at school as being a big deal. We see it every day but I think now I understand, especially seeing what goes on in teen court-that little fights at school can become a bigger thing down the road.”

“I had no way of paying the fine. I think it would be unfair for my parents to pay it. Teen court provided the way to take care of my consequences myself.”

“I wanted something that could help me throughout life. One way teen court helped me was that now I know everything I do has consequences and so will everything else I do later on in life. Next time you’ll think twice before doing something that will get you in trouble.”

“I like that our community provides a way to teach us a lesson about the laws. It holds the plaintiff accountable for their violations. This teaches the lesson.”

“I had to pay for what I did wrong, not my parents.”

“I wanted to listen to other defendants’ stories, so I could learn from their mistakes. It is not the easy way out; it truly is beneficial.”

“Teen court is an alternative that allows you to learn, save money, and keep your record clean.”



Former youth court respondent becomes youth bar association president

Submitted by Sharon Leon, Executive Director of the Anchorage Youth Court in Anchorage, Alaska

An 8th grade girl, Laura (not her real name), came to youth court as a defendant. She took Anchorage Youth Court's 16-hour basic law class as substitution for part of her community service, and passed the youth court bar exam. She served conscientiously and with dedication over the years, rising to appointment as presiding judge and representing Anchorage Youth Court in community and state presentations, among a host of other volunteer activities. Through her service and teamwork skills, she gained the respect of her peers in the youth court bar association, who elected her to serve as president. Near the end of her term, she moved to another town, joining their youth court. We hear from them that she served equally well there before moving on to college.



My youth court experience

From a former respondent in New York

If there is one thing that youth court taught me most of all, throughout my personal experience, it was that there is always a helping hand to guide you along the right path, no matter what. Entering the courthouse for the time I was arraigned, when I got in trouble, was an extremely nerve-wracking experience; but when [the coordinator] calls you out to let you know there is an alternative, the weight is lifted off your shoulders, and you prepare to give back a little.

I did not know what to expect, but my first community service hours were attending a CPR class and working at a mini carnival at the Town Park. I soon learned that this was a great way to give back a little. Helping out with community service projects can range from just helping with office work to helping with party-type events, to participating in charity walks. Every community service event you help out with is always with your peers, and you make new friends almost every time.

Even after I completed my assigned community service hours, I came back to the youth court for more volunteering these past few months, for my participation in government class.

My town should be very proud of this program. A second chance is necessary for a youth who messed up once. Youth court gives this opportunity in a very rewarding manner.



I joined teen court to help others like it helped me

By a former respondent and current volunteer for a youth court in Wisconsin

When I was 14, I was caught out past curfew with possession of a cigarette and I had two options: one was to go in front of the judge and have a record, or go to teen court and have this mistake wiped from my record. When the police were explaining to me what teen court was, I remember them telling me that there would be people that I might know or have seen around who were involved in teen court. They were the ones who would decide what I needed to do to make up for what I did.

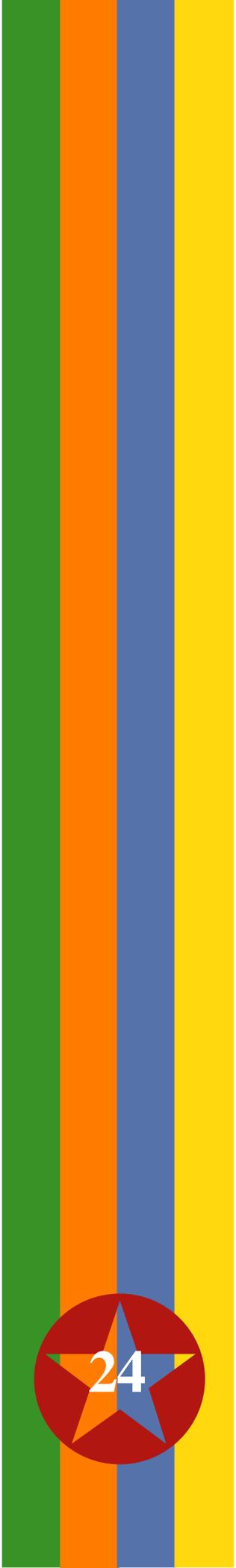
That long-dreaded day arrived when I had to go to teen court. I walked into a crowded room with long aisles. When I sat down at the table with my mom, I was scared. The group of five people asked me what seemed to be at the time very long and confusing questions about what happened. I answered the questions to the best of my ability. Then I was sent out in the hall, and the group deliberated. The sanctions as I can remember were:

- ★ 25 hours community service
- ★ Write an apology letter to my mom, and send a copy to the coordinator
- ★ Attend a smoking-cessation class (which cost \$20)

I wrote my apology letter and sent a copy to the coordinator, as they told me to do. Then it came time to do my community service. I can remember going to the Cranberry Fest and the very cold Klondike Days, picking up disgusting garbage. I never really knew how messy some people are until I had to clean up their mess. Since then, I haven't littered.

Then I had to go to smoking class, which, let me remind you, cost \$20 at the door, and at my age I didn't have a job yet. So I had to do chores and different things to pay my mother back. The class was very interesting. I remember watching movies and seeing pictures of people who had nasty cancers. They told me about the effects of cigarettes. Did you know that things they use for rat poison are in a cigarette?

After all my sanctions were done, I was still having some problems. My mom called the coordinator, and they set up a little trip to a correctional institution (another name for a "prison") with other teen court kids. Now that was an experience that helped change my life. I remember walking into that place, and it was huge! At the age of 14, everything is huge, but this was way different! We got a chance to talk to the inmates at the prison face to face across a table from one another. These people earned enough points to have the privilege to talk to us about their story



and how to not repeat the same mistakes. Well, the guy I talked to was big and scary. His story and questions really touched me. That was an experience I will never forget. It was a real eye-opener. The stories they told me they really lived through, did, and or saw. It wasn't like a television program, and that opened my eyes to a world I didn't want to live in.

Now the year is 2004, and my coordinator asked me to write this little letter to you all to let you know the experience of being in front of teen court and now participating in teen court as a trained panel member. Being on the panel is an excellent experience. Not only is it a good thing for college applications, it helps put people on the right track, like it helped me. I joined teen court to help others get on the right track like those special people did for me. By being on the panel, I have to keep everything confidential, which isn't easy at times, but I have to do it, and I do to protect the program.

I would really like to thank my coordinator and those kids for giving me the opportunity to change my life for the better, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to also help others. Being on teen court after being in front of a teen court panel has really changed my life.

What Lansing Teen Court respondents like about the program

Submitted by Mike Botke, Director of the Lansing Teen Court in Lansing, Michigan

The following are responses received from respondents when asked what they liked about teen court.

“As a result of being involved in teen court, I got a second chance and was referred to a counselor, where I got therapy. This is what I liked the most about the Lansing Teen Court.”

“I learned a lot when I was ordered to participate in the Ingham County Jail Scared Straight Program. The officer that showed me the jail really showed me how bad it is, and, because some of the people in the jail agreed to talk with me, I learned how they got in jail and how bad it really is. I also got to see how bad the food is and how bad the beds are. I know now that I want to do everything I can to stay out of trouble, and never want to go to jail.”

“Beyond learning what I did wrong, I also learned from teen court that there is hope to restore the wrong someone produced. After this experience, I have a closer relationship to my family than ever before. Not only have I taught myself to be a better person, but I also paved a path for my little sister. Once again she can look up to me. I am grateful for teen court. Not only was it a learning experience, it was something that will change me forever.”

“The thing I liked the most about teen court was not being treated like a criminal and getting a second chance to take responsibility for what I did. I know now that my offense hurt a lot of people, the store, and the community. I am sorry.”



Youth respondents in Wisconsin talk about their teen court experiences

Submitted by Walter Hitt, Advisor for the Marinette County Teen Court, Marinette, Wisconsin

Marinette County Teen Court asked 17 respondents between the ages of 12–17 to answer questions about their teen court experiences upon completion of their sanctions. Most of the offenses were for possession of alcohol.

Some respondents expressed how difficult the experience was for them:

“It was probably the hardest thing that I ever had to do—to appear in front of my peers.”

“Teen court is hard, but it is worth the extra effort.”

“Paying a fine would have been much easier.”

Other respondents reported that they had learned a lesson from the experience:

“It has taken a long time to build up my parents’ trust in me again. I don’t ever want to put myself or them through something like this again.”

“I learned that those that I thought were my friends weren’t. I have better friends now, and life is great.”

“I don’t want anyone else to go through what I did, but I’m glad that teen court is available to them.”

Respondents were asked how teen court affected their families:

“I want to be a good role model for my brother and my friends. This helped me.”

“This helped me realize that I am strong enough to stand up to peer pressure. I can have a mind of my own. If they are going to do something stupid, I just go home.”

“Things are much better at home now. Maybe this has been good for all of us.”

“Our family talks more now.”

“My family couldn’t afford the fine, so I am glad you gave me this chance to clear my record.”

Respondents also expressed appreciation for the value of the community service experience:

“I enjoyed doing my community service, and will probably keep it up.”

“After doing my community service, I realize how good I have it. Thanks.”

Several respondents expressed gratitude for the patience and support given to them by teen court personnel:

“Thank you for believing in me. There were times I didn’t think anyone cared, but now I know they do. What you are doing is great.”

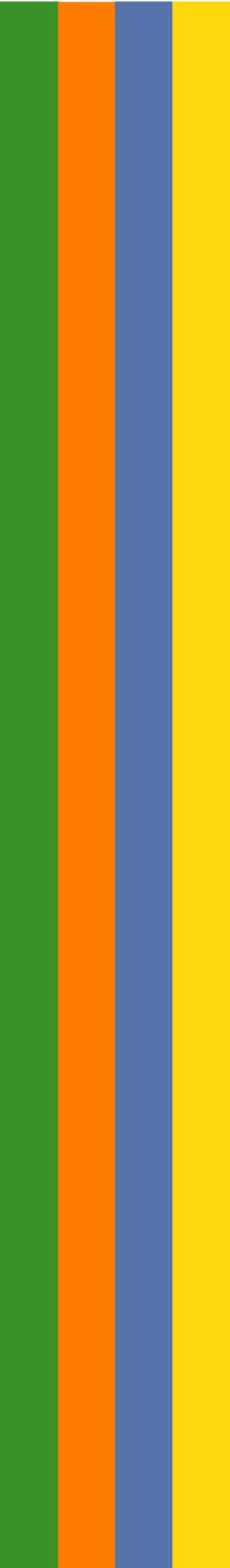
“Thank you for not giving up on me when I was late getting some of my work done. You stuck with me and helped me make it. I have learned my lesson.”

“Thank you for being so patient with me and for helping me to get back on the right track. You are the greatest.”

“Thank you that I don’t have a record, as it may have made it difficult for me to go into my career. It would have made it hard for me to get my summer job.”

“I just want to thank you for helping me with all this and being so great to me. Thank you so much.”

“Thanks for all the time you put in on my case.”



**YOUTH COURT
STAFF AND
PARENT
PERSPECTIVES**

Teen court receives commendation

Submitted by Eduardo F. Cue, Teen Court Project Director for the Santa Barbara Teen Court in Santa Barbara, California

Santa Barbara Teen Court has been in existence since 1992. Superior Court Judge Thomas Adams introduced Teen Court to the City of Santa Barbara as an innovative approach to the juvenile justice system. He stated “Teen court ... puts an end to the “revolving door” and empowers our young people to take responsibility for their actions and the actions of their peers.” Twelve years have passed, and 3,500 cases have been processed through teen court in Santa Barbara County.

In 1998 teen court found a new home with the Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (CADA). Since then the program was replicated in the communities of Lompoc, Santa Ynez, and Santa Maria. Through the leadership of CADA Executive Director Penny Jenkins, teen court has grown to become a leader of intervention services associated with the juvenile justice process in Santa Barbara County. In 2001 teen court adapted the “peer review” process to deal with early offenders referred by school administrators from educational code offenses. The purpose of the program is to keep kids in school, by providing interventions in lieu of suspension for students who otherwise are put on the streets.

We continue to strive towards innovative approaches to help our youth and families contend with delinquency and addiction. The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependency reviewed papers submitted by intervention programs from across the nation. The Prevention and Education Awards Review Committee selected the “Santa Barbara Teen Court” program to receive the 2004 Prevention and Education Commendation. The award will be presented on September 10, 2004 in Washington DC.

What do parents think of teen court?

Submitted by Anne Dubinsky, Coordinator of the Lewisville/Flower Mound Teen Court in Lewisville, Texas

The following were received from parents of volunteers and respondents when asked to complete a satisfaction survey.

“I am very appreciative that there is such a program. It has been a great learning experience for my daughter and an opportunity for us to do community service as a family. I highly recommend this program for our youth.”

“The program gave my daughter good insight to the world at large, somewhere other than her own little world.”

“It made him feel confident in himself. I wish they offered this in other cities.”

“It was a good experience for him—glad we have this to help our youth.”

“Taking responsibility for actions is a very good lesson to teach children, especially young people who think they are invincible.”

“It’s a very positive program. Keep up the good work.”

Thank you for giving me my son back

Submitted by Sharon Leon, Executive Director of the Anchorage Youth Court in Anchorage, Alaska

A very grateful mom said, “Thank you for giving me my son back,” in her parent evaluation, in person to AYC staff, and on the Anchorage Youth Court video. She said coming through youth court was the best thing that ever happened. Bob (not his real name), who was 14 when referred to Anchorage Youth Court, changed his behavior and friends. Also, as part of the sentence he and his mom participated in parent/adolescent mediation, where they both learned to really hear each other. Mom said, “I thought I knew how to communicate with my son, but I didn’t. This really helped.”

You saved my son's life

Submitted by Sharon Leon, Executive Director of the Anchorage Youth Court in Anchorage, Alaska

Amy Miller (not her real name) likes the Anchorage Youth Court (AYC). Her 17-year-old son was arrested for breaking into a vehicle and causing damage to it. Going to McLaughlin Youth Center, her son felt very much alone, and Amy felt devastated and embarrassed.

Typical of defendants who come through Anchorage Youth Court, this story reflects a thoughtless act encouraged by peers. The consequences come as a very unpleasant surprise to both the defendants and their families. But the students who serve as AYC attorneys and judges do their best to help their peers, so the offenders think through their actions and take responsibility for them. The offenders must pay the fees themselves, as well as restitution, when appropriate. They also have to write essays describing everything that happened from the crime through completing the sentence, so they internalize the experience. Questions such as, "How did breaking the law hurt you, your family, the victims and/or others?" and "How would you handle similar situations in the future?" make the offenders think about their actions. Behavior modification classes and community service hours show them what they did affected the whole community. Amy said it was a tough process for the whole family, but her son "learned a tremendous amount. I watched my son grow into a responsible adult. I don't know what we would have done if youth court had not been available to us," she said. "We would have even sold our home to get our son a second chance." Fortunately that wasn't necessary because all the students who make youth court work volunteer their time. Now her son has a job besides watching his younger siblings and finishing high school.

Ninety-four percent of youth court defendants who go through the Anchorage Youth Court don't re-offend. The system works!

Teen court has made a difference in our lives

*Submitted by Michael Montgomery, the parent of two youth court
volunteers in Hobbs, New Mexico*

Teen Court of Lea County has provided a good, wholesome, supportive, structured environment for my sons. Both are honor students. One was an honor graduate from Hobbs High School, and, due to his exposure and work with teen court, he is currently pursuing a career in law and juvenile advocacy at New Mexico State University. He was a recipient of a college scholarship because of his dedication and work with teen court. He hopes to get his law degree and become a judge.

My second son will be a junior this fall at Hobbs High School, and he is a current member of teen court. He used to have trouble speaking in groups and socializing with his peers. The teen court program has helped him develop a positive self-image and has improved his confidence level. He now speaks freely when called on in class and makes good grades in all of his classes. I have seen the same results with other youth who are involved in teen court.

The effect of youthful offenders being sentenced by their peers is far-reaching. Teen court prevents these youth from becoming lost in an already burdened court system. Teen court defendants are sentenced to perform community service that will have a greater impact on their future than would probation or a monetary fine. I have seen several defendants, after serving their community service for their offenses, then become involved as attorneys in teen court. When I talk to others in the community, it seems to be a consensus opinion that teen court has a positive impact on all of us. Our future is vested in programs such as teen court which help strengthen and promote the growth of our teens.



Teen court taught my daughter about personal responsibility and community leadership

Submitted by Robert Reid, the parent of a youth court volunteer in Hobbs, New Mexico

Teen Court of Lea County has effectively engaged area teens in meaningful and productive activities for several years. I am personally aware of many young people whose lives have been profoundly changed through their experiences with teen court.

The very concept of teen court, and the skillful manner in which it is locally managed, has proven to be a refreshing and successful alternative to older, much less effective youth-oriented programs in our area. Teen court has involved my daughter in clarifying important values, intervening in inappropriate conduct of her peers, and in searching for productive community responses to issues that impact the lives of teens.

Teen court has given my daughter the opportunity to gain personal insight, contribute to the welfare of her peers and community, and develop a clear career goal. In addition to learning about personal responsibility and community leadership, teen court has provided my daughter with countless opportunities to serve her peers and her community.

My daughter has committed herself to going to law school and pursuing a life of public service as a direct result of her experiences in teen court. I can promise you that my daughter will make many lasting, important contributions to others in her future capacity as a lawyer—a goal that is clearly now within her reach.

Thank you for the wonderful, life-defining opportunities you have given my daughter.

Teen court gave my daughter a second chance

Submitted by Mike Botke, Director of the Lansing Teen Court in Lansing, Michigan

The following were collected from parents of respondents in the Lansing Teen Court when asked to complete a satisfaction survey.

“My daughter was caught stealing \$150 worth of merchandise from two stores, which caused a lot of harm. I think the teen court did a great job of holding her accountable, and also for listening to her plight, as she received some therapy as one of her orders. It helped her a lot.”

“I was very relieved that my daughter was granted a second chance and did not end up with this offense on her juvenile record.”