

Caring for Youth in Juvenile Detention Centers: A Story of Hope

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ABSTRACT

During the past 3 years I have been visiting youth detention facilities to provide instruction on basic life skills. Two events discussed here encouraged me to get involved to help make a change. During my visits I continue to be struck by the discouragement and hopelessness of each of the youth. It touches my heart. I encourage them not to feel sorry for themselves and tell them they are not alone; there are people who want to help them. I emphasize that their lives can change, that they can have hope.

Kareem (not his actual name) is a typical adolescent in the Department of Juvenile Justice system. He is 15 years old and has never known a father. As is the case with many other inmates confined to this institution, Kareem's father is either dead or in prison—Kareem does not know. Most residents do not even know their father's name. Often their mothers are addicts. Kareem is like most of the youth in these institutions; he has had absolutely no parental supervision or support. As a child, he never learned or experienced the basics of life. For that reason, many of the residents joined gangs for support and protection. Their "life of crime" commonly is started with something that we as Americans take for granted—food. They have little or no food. They are hungry. Their siblings are also frequently without food. The result is that the stealing of food is a common reason for being sentenced to these facilities.

Can the average person even imagine what youth like Kareem are experiencing in the Department of Juvenile Justice system? Is there anything a person can do to reverse this destructive cycle?

I am a college adjunct professor at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, GA. For 25 years I was a computer software salesman. I enjoyed that career until 7 years ago, when my life dramatically changed. My nervous system became severely compromised. After countless tests and procedures, the cause is still unknown. I have been left with substantial scarring on my spinal cord. I was in the middle of a PhD program; however, because of the illness, I was unable to continue. Despite my illness, I found another career path.

During the last 3 years, I have been visiting youth detention facilities to provide instruction on basic life skills. Two events encouraged me to get involved to help make a change. First, I was invited by a coworker to visit a Youth Detention Center (YDC). Before that time, I had never even heard of a YDC. Second, I met a woman who was teaching English to state prisoners. She told me how the inmates were very prepared for each of her classes and how enthusiastically they received her teaching.

I can still remember that first time I entered a YDC and encountered the kids. How sad and hopeless they appeared. Surprisingly, I found myself angry. How could all these young kids be in prison? Clearly our juvenile correctional system is not working.

I felt I had to do something, and for that reason I started an educational program in detention facilities. As a sociologist, I have been aware of the many studies that demonstrate that the best way to break the cycle of recidivism is education. So I thought, Why not teach the kids while we are able to have an impact on their lives?

The training I have done so far has taken place at YDCs around Georgia, where the youth are typically incarcerated for months. Each group has typically been 12 kids, mostly African American boys age 13 to 16 years old. The last group I had, however, was all girls; one girl was only 11 years of age. The demographics seem to be changing; I am having more Hispanic youth in my classes today.

The 2-day program I teach includes the following content:

Day 1: Thinking. I present sociology theories that are appropriate for these youth. The objective is to encourage them to think about the world around them. I use interactive games to make them think about issues that affect their lives and the choices they can make. If the class is large enough, I break them into groups. Typically, it gets pretty spirited and fun. Frequently several of the guards join in.

Day 2: Leadership Skills. After providing them with some basic understanding of the world, I challenge them not to be followers but to be leaders.

The last day is called "graduation day," a name given by a YDC guard. I present each of the students with an individual certificate recognizing his/her accomplishment—a rare happening for most of the youth, who probably have never been recognized for accomplishing anything positive. After the certificate presentation, the kids clap spontaneously. Almost every student comes up to me, looks me in the eye, shakes my hand, and says "thank you." This expression of gratitude has been shocking to most of the guards who are with the kids every day.

Sometimes I hear stories that encourage me to continue with these visitations. Recently, I attended a Christmas party for the YDC kids. There were about 200 people present. One of my students was honored because he had earned his GED (General Educational Development) credential. It was mentioned that out of 7000 kids incarcerated, only 50 have received their GED or high school diplomas. After the party, my student and his mother came up to me and thanked me for the class I led. His mom mentioned that he had told her about the class, how he

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really enjoyed it, and how he learned a lot that he feels will help him in the future. He then said that when released, he is going to try to attend a technical school.

When asked why I am involved in YDC training, I usually give these 3 reasons:

1. Each inmate costs the state approximately \$1 million. This cost clearly reflects a fundamental societal problem.
2. Morally I feel called to do this; without intervention, nearly all these kids are doomed to fail!
3. Most importantly for me is my faith. I feel called to care for others.

I view myself as an instrument of hope. Most of these kids never have any visitors, so I can be their visitor, a father figure, a hope giver. I can be someone in their lives who cares about them.

During my visits I continue to be struck by the discouragement and hopelessness among the youth. It touches my heart. I encourage them not to feel sorry for themselves and tell them they are not alone; there are people who want to help them. I emphasize that their lives can change and to not give up. They can have hope.

I tell them this from a wheelchair. If I can make it through my “new life” as a person confined to a wheelchair, without losing

hope, then I am confident that they can too! I challenge them. Yes, they are trapped (in the YDC), but I tell them, “Guess what, so am I. I am trapped in my body; most likely I have a life sentence in this wheelchair, and I will never walk again.”

The essence of my message to the youth in these detention centers is to not give up, to not lose hope. If I can help change the life of just one of these kids, it is worth it.

I can only imagine the number of youth in similar facilities around the country, so there are plenty of opportunities for other *hope givers* to get involved. How about you? ❖

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Stars

Only in the darkness can you see the stars.

— Martin Luther King, Jr, 1929-1968, American Baptist minister and Civil Rights activist