



Bernard Griffin (left) and Yusuf Gudmalin raise their voices instead of their fists.

Behavior Modification

JUVIE TOASTMASTERS LEARN THE ART OF PUBLIC SPEAKING IN THE DUVAL COUNTY JAIL

Justin, 17, glances at his notes briefly, squares his shoulders and begins speaking.

"I have certain sentiments that desperately need an outlet," he says. "Me and God are like shadows — sharing the same space but never touching."

With all eyes in the room on him, the teenager in the brown uniform speaks for exactly two-and-a-half minutes. He ends abruptly, acknowledging a round of applause, and takes his seat.

Justin is a Toastmaster. An inmate at the Duval County Jail in Pre-Trial

You're locked up in a cell 24/7. You wake up and go to sleep when you're told, you wear the same clothes and eat the same stuff every day. There's no sunlight, no privacy. You do everything — and I mean everything — in front of people.

Detention, he attends a structured weekly meeting that includes an Invocation, Pledge of Allegiance, Word of the Day, Toastmaster of the Evening, Evaluation, Awards, Benediction ... activities recognizable to Toastmasters the world over, with one notable exception: Martial Arts.

Purpose Youth Leadership Program for juveniles in the Duval County Jail, the combination of Toastmasters and martial arts "has impacted a lot of boys over the years."

Johnson's partner in the jail endeavor for the past nine years is Kirk Farber, a fifth-degree black belt and martial arts sensei.

Shelley Taylor, Juvenile Program coordinator for the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, calls the pair "our most faithful volunteers."

She explains that the students are "kids who've been adjudicated as adults," typically on grand theft, drugs or murder charges. During the eight-week program, inmates explore topics like responsibility, sacrifice, freedom and teamwork. They present speeches on subjects such as "What I am going to do the first week out of jail" and complete assignments that involve designing their own business, filling out job applications and interviewing for a job.

In his day job, Farber holds leadership seminars for school students and corporate employees. In his jail sessions, he demonstrates the power of balance, discipline and determination through board-breaking, jumping rope, juggling and martial arts philosophies. Farber, owner of the Petunia Patch clothing store on Southside Boulevard, offers help with appearance and communication skills.

"The boys all know our purpose," says Johnson. "We want to motivate them to turn their lives around and become leaders."

working for Whittington Plumbing, a job he credits to what he learned in jail. "The program helped me get a job," he says. "I learned how to come properly dressed, look the man in the eye, have good posture and drop the ghetto slang." Gudmalin says the Toastmaster class was the only bright spot in jail. "It wasn't for everybody, though," he notes. "It only helps the ones that want to be helped."

At 15, Bernard Griffin was incarcerated for two counts of accessory to murder. He was in jail for two years, and his mother died while he was locked up. But Griffin, now 17, attends Grant Park Alternative High School and is working at St. John's Cathedral. He's determined to stay straight.

"We learned a lot about peer pressure with Ms. Johnson and Mr. Kirk," he says. "When I see someone from the old neighborhood, I just go about my business."

Gudmalin and Griffin live at Inside/Outside House, a residential facility opened by the State Attorney's Office for young offenders on parole.

"These kids are no different from any other kids," says Keto Porter, Juvenile Justice Department administrator for the State Attorney's Office. "They just made some bad mistakes. Rehabilitative programs like Power, Polish and Purpose help keep them from making those same mistakes again."

According to Porter, communication skills learned in the program reach beyond jail. "We see such a difference in their presentations to first-time offenders after the program," he says. "They have new confidence, good eye contact and can be very persuasive."

Gudmalin uses his new-found communication skills to speak to community youth at every opportunity. "I just want them to feel me — feel my experience — and never have to go through what I did," he says. When speaking to first-time offenders, Gudmalin paints a descriptive picture of life in jail.

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At the end of the recent meeting, the awards are announced. A 14-year-old named Samuel leaps into the air and almost dances to the front of the room to accept his. "My God!" he shouts. "I finally won a ribbon!"

After nine years, the program has finally received a small grant from the Duval County Sheriff's Office to cover expenses and expand the program.

"Kirk and I envision this program being adopted by Toastmasters International as an outreach program."