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Teaching teenage felons

06/30/2010

by **Karen Brune Mathis**
Managing Editor

Their first assignment last week was a short speech.

Their topic: "What I am going to do the first week I get out of jail."

Their answers varied, but shared some themes. Take a shower. Eat at McDonald's. Buy new clothes. Visit family, including baby and toddler sons and daughters. Spend time with the girlfriend. Enroll in school. Apply for a job.

And chill. That was a common plan. Chill.

The speakers were the 15 teenage inmates at the Duval County Jail taking "Power, Polish and Purpose," an eight-week course inspired by Toastmasters led by businesswoman Peggy Johnson.

She teaches the class in partnership with martial arts expert Kirk Farber and motivational athlete, speaker and author Almon Gunter.

Their mission is to help the young men, who have been charged as adults with felonies, learn to speak clearly, make presentations, show respect, display manners and conduct themselves publicly with dignity and gratitude.

For 11 years, Johnson and her colleagues taught the eight-week class three times annually, meeting one night a week with the teenagers who were sentenced or awaiting sentencing. The teenagers will eventually be released, and Johnson wants them to be prepared to find gainful employment.

After more than a year without funding, she started the 12th season of Power, Polish and Purpose.

"I just couldn't stay away any longer," said Johnson. "You do what's important to you."

Johnson estimates she's worked with more than 500 teenage felons and inmates in the jail, not including students in other classes around town aimed at youth and teenagers.

Most of the students who have attended Power, Polish and Purpose are charged with felonies, although a few are charged with misdemeanors who have been convicted as adults on prior felony charges or who had their felony charges reduced to misdemeanors, according to Jacksonville Sheriff's Office Jails Division Chief Tara Wildes.

She said that once convicted as an adult, a teenager is considered an adult, unless the court rules otherwise.

Johnson said the program had been funded by the Sheriff's Office before budget cuts. She continues to seek funding, and is thankful for some support from Communities In Schools. CIS is providing \$200 this year from to help buy supplies.

"The Power, Polish and Purpose program that Peggy and her colleagues are presenting this summer is exactly the kind of message that all these young people can benefit from to help them recognize that now is the time to turn their lives around," said Bill Hodges, director of the CIS student enrichment program.

Johnson and her partners resumed the class three weeks ago and are absorbing the costs, estimated at \$2,400 for each eight-week period. Tonight is the third class of the current session.

Johnson, a clothing boutique owner and former model, is the "polish" in the trio. Farber is the "power" and Gunter is the "purpose."

The current class consists of teenagers 15 to 18 years old. Many have multiple charges, but their main offenses include armed robbery, home invasion robbery, burglary, possession of a firearm by a convicted felon and sexual battery.

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Photo release ▲

Martial arts expert Kirk Farber, the "power" in the Power, Polish and Purpose program, demonstrates the discipline required for success. He typically shows the jailed teenagers how he breaks boards with his hands. ▼

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However, they don't talk about that. They talk about whatever Johnson tells them to present. In fact, Johnson prefers not to know their crimes so that she can focus on their potential, not their past.

"I don't want to be prejudiced. I want all of them to be the same. I want them all to start with a clean slate," she said.

Power, Polish and Purpose is inspired by Toastmasters International, the nonprofit that guides its members in practicing and honing communication and leadership skills. Johnson has long been a Toastmaster.

The Power, Polish and Purpose class runs from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Students earn the privilege of attending through good behavior. Johnson makes it clear that if she has to ask them to leave, they cannot come back.

There's structure and expectations at each meeting.

The students take turns serving as the timer to make sure fellow speakers stay within the time limit. There's the "ah" and "um" counter, the leader of the invocation and pledge of allegiance, the sergeant-at-arms and the meeting leader, along with other leadership roles.

Farber challenges the young men with some mild endurance exercises as well as showing his martial arts skill of breaking boards with his bare hands.

Gunter provides motivational messages.

Weekly, the teenagers are each given a word to research, define and use in a sentence as well as in their speeches the following week. Those words include "responsibility," "quandary" and "vacuity."

They are given weekly speech topics, such as tonight's "A hero or person that has had the greatest influence in my life" or "Who do I admire the most?"

Other speech topics include talking about the greatest obstacles to overcome, what makes a good employer and a good employee, designing a business and goal-setting.

The students win coveted ribbons for their performances and keep the paperwork, including their prepared speeches, in personal folders.

Each week, Johnson and her team recognize "best" participants in speaking, word presentation, martial arts and preparation.

Each week also features a community speaker, such as Goodwill Job Junction Employment Specialist Kendal McCoy, who talks about obstacles and opportunities.

McCoy said some of the inmates, when they are released, come to the Job Junction to look for work. He said they remember him.

Johnson wants to invite a chef and a world traveler to broaden the students' views of careers and the world.

At the end of the eight weeks, the students graduate at an event that includes brought-in chicken, pizza and brownies.

Johnson said she considers Power, Polish and Purpose "a calling."

She looks forward to "the thrill of discovering the talents and treasures within" the students and letting them know they can develop those talents "to become a productive member of the community."

"I love to see the results," she said. "It's working on the crime problem one student at a time."

The program earned support over the years from the State Attorney's Office and the Sheriff's Office. They have considered it a rehabilitative tool for jailed juveniles.

Jails Chief Wildes said the program can be productive.

"Since all these inmates will be returning to society, and most within a few months, it is part of our responsibility as a public safety agency to provide them with opportunities to improve their behavior while they are spending their time with us," said Wildes.

She said that some people might consider the program a reward as opposed to punishment during incarceration. "But simply leaving them in the cells to learn from each other better methods of engaging in criminal activities is counterproductive to our goal of developing restorative programs to stop the revolving door of crime," said Wildes.

Power, Polish and Purpose "provides direction and builds confidence in areas they are usually deficient in," said Wildes.

"Most have few appropriate social skills or understand how they appear to others. This program actually teaches them self-awareness and improves their chances of gaining employment once released," she said.

Johnson doesn't keep in touch with the students, although she is considering setting up a Power, Polish and Purpose e-mail account so the students can remain in communication. She keeps track of some of the students through law-enforcement avenues.

Tonight, she intends to follow her routine of packing her Power, Polish and Purpose case, parking at the jail, exchanging her driver's license for a name badge, passing through security and being escorted to the classroom, where she is in view of police officers.

She will set up the room with tablecloths, materials, the podium and an American flag. She will arrange the desks and prepare the paperwork for the evening.

Then the students will file in, take their seats and do whatever "Miss Peggy" asks.

After more than 500 students, she's still never had a problem student.

"Not one."

"The first week I get out of jail..."

In their first prepared speech of the current series of classes, teenage inmates taking the Power, Polish and Purpose public-speaking class at the Duval County Jail shared their views about their first anticipated week out of jail. Among their comments:

- "I'll search for a school or job instead of being on the street."

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- One will share with family "what I did while locked up" and find a paying job "so I don't fall back into the belly of the beast."
- One will enjoy the basics because "I think the smaller things in life matter the most."
- Many said they would avoid friends who are bad influences and "tell them I don't feel like getting into trouble."
- Further, "don't tote guns or take drugs. Start an education."
- One plans to stay out of trouble because "it's easy to get into, but hard to get out."
- "Tell my little cousins not to get locked up."
- Hop in the shower immediately, then later "take another shower and get real clean."
- One doesn't "want to be a deadbeat or a dead husband."
- "Stop being the jailbird" and "be a good role model for my brothers."
- Connect with the mother of his child and become a provider. "I am going to be in their life. I don't want anybody else to be their daddy."
- "Talk to my little brother that what I did is not good to be doing."
- Eat some home-cooked food.
- "Think how blessed I am to have a second chance. Some people face life in prison."

- Karen Brune Mathis

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