



REDUCING JUVENILE RECIDIVISM

The Work of Judge Daniel B. Garrett

Judge Daniel B. Garrett, District Judge in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., employs a unique approach with juvenile offenders in his courtroom. “As part of alternative sentencing, I sentence juveniles to read [*The 7 habits of Highly Effective Teens* by Sean Covey] and submit a report sharing how this book has personally affected them. I do not want a rote regurgitation of what is in chapters 1, 2, 3, etc. They are on initial probation for 3 months during which time they are to read [the] book and submit their report. I then schedule a follow-up hearing during which we discuss their

report. This is a minimum of 30 minutes, sometimes lasting over an hour. My staff knows not to schedule too tight for these meetings. I emphasize that these changes in thinking and behavior are still fresh and will take time until they become habits! I will extend probation for individuals that I feel need some monitoring, such as for school attendance or fighting, as well as under-age drinking. I then meet with them every 30 days for about 6 months. The recidivism rate for these juveniles has been **zero!** (emphasis in original).”

Since this initial comment in 2007 Judge Garrett has had a few juveniles (4 out of 35) return for second offences, but the recidivism rate as of 2009 in his courtroom is 2.5 times lower than Lancaster County overall: 11 percent compared to 28 percent, and over 3 times lower than other counties such as Fayette (Pittsburgh) where the recidivism rate is 36 percent.

The juveniles in Judge Garrett's courtroom are usually between the ages of 15 to 17; some of them are single parents; many of them are in trouble because of underage drinking or driving while under the influence of alcohol; others are in court because of drugs. One girl, arrested and in court for her third underage drinking violation, started to read *Effective Teens* but "didn't think the book was going to do anything for me." However, by the time she wrote her book report for Judge Garrett she apparently had changed her mind: "The book truly helped me. I used everything I read as a remedy for all the things I now admit I was wrong for doing." ...I am done with underage drinking."



The recidivism rate in Judge Garrett's courtroom is 2.5 times lower than the rest of Lancaster County.

Another juvenile who had struggled with low self-esteem and then had fallen into drinking to try to feel better about herself wrote a 12-page report and concluded with these words: "This book is one of the best books that I have ever read in my entire life. Reading [other] teens' stories on what they do when they feel depressed or upset helped me search and find other ways to control my emotions."

The reports are due on day 75 of their 90-day probations, and Judge Garrett reviews each written report carefully, correcting spelling

mistakes, circling fragment sentences, and asking the writer to say more about this or that point. He also freely peppers the reports with his own hand-written comments: "Wonderful!" or "You are way ahead of most kids," or "Wonderful observation," or "OK, give me an example." He asks each juvenile to describe how the book relates to their personal lives, and then he spends time with each juvenile in his courtroom with parents present, reviewing the report and getting the youth to verbalize their feelings about their past behaviors and future plans.

Judge Garrett strongly encourages the parents to read the book at the same time. "I always question the parents as to whether they have read the book and their child's report. I have been known to chastise those who have not."

Juveniles must also submit the book along with their report so that Judge Garrett may read the pages in the book that need to be filled in. He tells them that if their parent is also reading the book and they would like to keep their answers confidential, they can put their responses on a separate sheet of paper.

If such efforts were made state-wide, it is likely the youth crime rate would be substantially lower.

Sources

David E. Kalist, Ph.D., and Daniel Y. Lee, Ph.D., "Measuring and Analyzing Juvenile Recidivism in Rural and Urban Pennsylvania," Department of Economics, Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, January 2009.

Letter from Judge Daniel B. Garrett, January 4, 2007, telephone conversation, 2008, and email with Dean Collinwood, May 28, 2009.