

Local Youths Graduate From Unique Juvenile Diversion Program

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EDWARDSVILLE — With an air of celebration, courtroom 351 held a different group of attendees on the evening of July 28, 2022.

Seven local juveniles accepted their graduation certificates after hearing presentations from local supporters and volunteers of the Juvenile Diversion Program. This was no small accomplishment for these seven young men and women. Rather than face a court-

ordered consequence, they chose to give the six-month commitment to the program and follow a different path. Their parents and the program volunteers applauded each one as they accepted their certificates signed by Madison County State's Attorney Tom Haine, Circuit Judge Amy Maher, and Pastor Greg Morrison.



“Second chances matter, especially for juveniles who want to get their lives back on track,” said Haine. “These diversion programs provide a great service, leading these young people towards happy, productive, law-abiding lives and careers. Congratulations to these graduates, and the many hard-working individuals who assisted them on their path!”

Assistant State's Attorney Cara Tegel has been one of the devoted volunteers and co-administrator in the program for twelve years. "Madison County is so fortunate to have had the Juvenile Diversion program in our community for more than a decade," said Tegel. "Through this program, students have the opportunity to have a fresh start, but more than that, they gain valuable skills, learn to value themselves, and give value back to our community. It is truly an honor to be a part of the lives of each and every one of our students and their families that have gone through the program over the years."

The Madison County Juvenile Diversion program was started in Collinsville, IL in 2006 by Tim Stark, Dewayne Love, and Odell Mitchell at what is now Navigation Church. These men saw a need in the community to help students struggling to make healthy choices. They felt this could be accomplished through creating a diversion program to prevent young people from entering the criminal justice system and assisting them in learning life skills to become productive members of our community.



In 2009 the program meetings moved to Gateway Family Church in Glen Carbon, IL, and added several new volunteers. In 2015, Tim Stark and his family moved; the reins of running the program transferred to Carol Morrison, Greg Morrison, Barb Tegel, and

Dewayne Love, who stepped up and took on the responsibility of keeping the group going with help from about a half dozen volunteers.


SIUE Criminal Justice program partnered with the program approximately six years ago. Dr. Matthew Petrocelli supervises this partnership and an intern each semester helps the program to stay current and relatable to its audience.

The approximately two-hour meeting consists of speakers and activities designed to address the issues that brought the students into the program. This goal is accomplished by connecting with roughly twenty community service providers and community professionals to address pertinent topics:

- Drinking and driving
- Alcohol & drug use
- Positive interaction with law enforcement
- Anger management
- Building healthy relationships
- Domestic violence prevention
- Employment
- Business and financial management
- Decision-making and goal setting
- Self-esteem building
- Internet Safety

Students are also required to participate in various community service projects to impress upon them the positive impact they can have by giving back to the community.





Meetings start with time to socialize over pool, ping pong, foosball, or air hockey. Then, after the sessions, the participants are welcome to stay and have a meal with the volunteers. These before and after gatherings also go along with the program's aim of feeding hearts, feeding minds, and feeding stomachs.

Referrals to the diversion program come from local police departments, school resource officers, the juvenile court system, or parents. When students complete the program, the referring agency agrees to a dismissal or reduction in charges.

Hundreds of students have come through the program since 2006. Success stories include one student who went from feeling lost to becoming a Fulbright Scholar and working in the mental health field. This student sent a thank you note to Cara Tegel.

"...I am reaching out to say thank you for the program that you, your mother, and so many others volunteer through. It truly does change the lives of young people.

When I first entered the program I was abusing different drugs and drinking quite frequently. From an outside perspective, however, I was doing well. I had a job, graduated high school early, and had a loving family. The truth was I was hurting, and I used substances to help me cope with feelings of depression, anxiety, and anger. Juvenile Diversion, however, taught me coping mechanisms that I never learned. I learned how to manage my anger, open up, and seek help when I needed it. I learned that sometimes it truly does become necessary to remove toxic individuals from your life. While I am not for sure (and I try not to think about it) I have a feeling that I probably would have eventually gone to jail if it were not for the program."

These successes and responses from those affected fuels the volunteers to have some farther-reaching goals. They would like to continue building relationships with local law enforcement agencies within the communities and add meeting options to serve the area's youth better. One of their most significant barriers is students getting to the program meetings each week. Therefore, making additional sessions available to students in Alton/Wood River and Granite City in the next three years would help break down that obstacle and allow them to offer this program to more of these deserving youth who, as Pastor Morrison stated, recognize the value of a second chance.

For more information about the Juvenile Diversion Program, contact them at Diversionservices4@gmail.com or get more information at www.gatewayfamilychurch.com/juvenile-diversion-program.