

P.C. Teen Court opens doors for troubled youths

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HELENA-WEST HELENA — "All rise," is the typical court setting welcome. Except this court has a new twist with a second chance because a jury of peers precedes it for troubled young people. Teen Court is directed toward offering positive alternatives to those who admit to being guilty of their actions.

"These teens who take full responsibility for their actions are really offered a "second chance" through corrective alternatives that are issued through a jury of their peers," says Montague Robinson, Phillips County Youth Diversion Coordinator.

Some of the "charges" that are filed in Teen Court include curfew violation, disorderly conduct, shoplifting, and criminal mischief. Each individual that is processed through Teen Court will face kids their own age, who have been recruited and trained for such hearings. They must attend 15 hours of the mandatory program called "Why Try", which offers motivational formulas such as 'Tearing off the labels' and 3 hours of law enforcement classes, where they can learn to make "smart choices for better chances.

"These lessons are aimed toward encouraging these troubled teens to start making the right decisions for themselves by opening up their minds to positive thinking and activities that will both educate and support their point of view as young men and women," stressed Robinson. His or her peers try each individual, and then ultimately, it is the peers who choose their form of corrective punishment.

"The prosecuting attorneys ask questions like, 'what goals do you wish to accomplish?' 'What do you want to do with your life?' and we have found that most of the individuals going through Teen Court want to return to be able to use their experiences to help others," said Robinson. "Positive reinforcement from their peers is allowing us to reach these certain individuals on their level, and get them back on the right track."

One of the corrective forms of punishment that is offered is community service where the offenders learn to tend to others who need help, to respect their authority and follow simple directions. Members of the community are encouraged to help these troubled teens by becoming positive leaders through the "Why Try" training program, a "vitaly important tool" adds Robinson, "that will help build a supportive and understanding alternative for our younger, troubled generation."