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Good to Know: Kiwanis Helps Kids in Juvenile Detention

By Rosemary Van Houten Sunday, February 06, 2011



"We have arrived!" That's how the first newsletter of the **Kiwanis Club of Toano** read in July, 2007.

The first meeting Tuesday, June 26 was held at the Candlelight Kitchen in Norge, and the group's first newsletter reported, "We have 33 members and expect to grow! What wonderful opportunities and challenges we have ahead of us as we reach out in service to the community." The club has held true to its first newsletter aspirations, growing to 50 members and completing countless projects fueled by an infectious spirit of generosity and an outreach especially to the younger community.

Their latest project, which indeed proves to be quite ambitious, has the group visiting and working with juveniles at Merrimac Detention Center in Williamsburg. The juveniles, both boys and girls, ages 14-16 have been sentenced to six months for "non-violent offenses," explains Gina Workman, Merrimac Center Program Director.

According to Pastor Mark Marrow from Crosswalk Community Church, also a member of the Toano Kiwanis, they had been visiting the young people detained at the center..."taking pizza, having meaningful conversations with them about character, good decision-making, but it was unstructured." Marrow explains that when Workman saw their interest and level of commitment, she suggested a curriculum that was available which would prove to be quite an undertaking for the group.

The curriculum, **C2 Character Challenge**, is a 24-week program and it cost the Toano club \$1,000 to purchase.

"Our club decided to make that investment into these kids' lives, thus fulfilling the Kiwanis mission - 'changing the world one child and one community at a time,' explained Marrow.

Club president Kristie K. Smith clarified, "This program has been shown to lower the re-incarceration rate in teens. We hope that we can touch these kids and make them want to change their lives. It is ultimately up to them."

Approximately 14 (rotating) volunteers from the club pair up and visit every week, utilizing the program in a secure classroom setup with a smart board. The curriculum is mentor-ready and each session is different, but the outline is already done. Materials such as movie clips with specific character traits are often used, with that as the focus of that week's curriculum. The website explains they use movies like Spiderman, Step Up and Dan in Real Life to illustrate 28 character strengths in an interactive group version and an independent study version.

Character strengths and virtues are a focus of the program. Virtues strived for include insight, passion, love, cooperation, discipline and transcendence. Strengths focused on are responsibility, awareness, respect and peace.

The program includes follow-up material already in place, or in exit interviews that are passed on to Workman. Smith noted, "It's still new to all of us, but we want to be able to show that we are making a difference, but with human behavior it is so hard to get exact answers."

Workman said this is the first time the program is being used at Merrimac explaining, "The Character Challenge (C2) Program was first introduced to Merrimac JDC during a statewide meeting of Post-Dispositional Coordinators. Virginia Beach JDC had reviewed sample materials sent to their program and thought that it was a quality resource that would speak to the youth in our facilities.

"When Kiwanis approached Merrimac looking to for an opportunity to engage the youth on a regular basis the implementation of the Character Challenge curriculum provided the prospect of positive community interaction as well as a vital growth opportunity for our residents," explained Workman, adding, "the Kiwanis Club of Toano has proven to be a very valuable resource to the youth served at Merrimac Center."

At the end of the program the juveniles are asked to sign a commitment. Smith explains, "The commitment is to themselves, not to the counselors or the mentors. They sign each week that they will commit to being more responsible or more respectful, etc. We reiterate that they don't change for us – we don't grade their questions and answers – we ask them to make the change for them."