

Full Court Press

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Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for

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About Full Court Press:

CFCC's Full Court Press focuses on research, policies, and practices affecting families and children who come into contact with the family and juvenile justice systems.

"Reflections on my experiences as a mentor for CFCC's Truancy Court Program"

By Anthony "Bubba" Green

Let me introduce myself. My name is Anthony "Bubba" Green, a retired professional football player, formerly with the Baltimore Colts. I have been the Mentor for the University of Baltimore School of Law, Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) Truancy Court Program (TCP) for 12 years. CFCC has operated the TCP in Baltimore City public schools since 2005. The TCP uses a team-based, holistic approach to truancy by identifying and addressing the root causes as to why children are not coming to school. Each week, students meet with a volunteer District or Circuit Court Judge to discuss their attendance, schoolwork, and classroom behavior. Students also meet with the TCP Team, which consists of myself (the TCP Mentor), a TCP Social Worker, a TCP Attorney, a TCP Coordinator, and school representatives (e.g., teachers, counselors, attendance monitors), to receive guidance and support so that they and their families can re-engage with school and be successful in life.

I mentor the children in the program while they are waiting to meet with the TCP Judge. Within a group setting, I try to change one life at a time. I know I can reach at least one of the students, but maybe I can reach all of them. This is not work; it is my passion to help students see themselves and their self-worth through imagery and metaphors, without



looking in the mirror, because, in most cases, change comes from the inside out. The only thing these children see on the television are images of how one should look. What counts more is your character on the inside and not the show you put on for others to see. The old statement, "beauty is only skin-deep," is true; "beauty may only be skin-deep," and it is certainly not a good indicator of character.

My job over the years has been to mentor students and to build their character. After I read an article by William Shearer, "Character Building in the School," I realized that taking care of the little issues that are so often forgotten are among life's most important lessons. I have made these "little issues" some of the main topics in my character building classes. In 1904, William Shearer wrote that character building lessons should be frequent, persistent, and urgent, and that we must focus more attention on teaching morality in our schools. He also stressed that, "although public schools have no right to teach sectarianism, ... it is their duty to provide proper moral training; as the life of prosperity of the country depends upon the moral training received by its embryo citizens who will soon be called upon to shape its destiny." While I do not believe in public school prayer, I do support a quiet moment before school when students can reflect on how great they can become if they focus on the day ahead of them. I started conducting character building sessions so students could feel a sense of self-worth and could see their value to society.

When I first started as a Mentor with the TCP, I worked with elementary school children. I realized that lecturing young children does not work. After watching the movie "Our Friend, Martin" an animated feature depicting the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. with my children, I said to myself, "Keep it Simple, Stupid." So I decided to go for it. I developed a PowerPoint presentation that showed the students how they could develop good character that would help them in everyday life, in the decisions they make each day. I divided my points into discrete lesson topics:

- Listening skills
- Goal setting
- The importance of choosing your friends
- Positive self-talk
- Believing in yourself
- Stretching your comfort zone
- Leadership skills, and
- A well-balanced approach toward life.

"Our Friend, Martin" shows two sixth-grade boys who are friends, a young African-American male and a young Caucasian male. The boys go on a class trip to the home of Martin Luther King, Jr. While touring the house, they stumble upon young Martin's bedroom, where they find a watch. Curious, one of the boys picks up the watch. The tour guide sees this and asks him not to touch anything because doing so can change history. Needless to say, they do it anyway. The two boys learn the history of Dr. King, right up to the time he was assassinated.

What the boys do next is very interesting. They do not like the outcome of Dr. King's life, so they try to change it, in the hopes of creating a better outcome. The boys return to young Martin's bedroom and pick up a magical watch. In so doing, they turn back the hands of time, travel back in time, and change history. The animated movie, sprinkled with true historical footage celebrating the life and work of Dr. King, shows his fight to effect change. The two boys do not understand what the outcome might have been if Dr. King had not been murdered. By bringing Dr. King to the future and saving his life, he is precluded from making the contributions to history that the movie depicts. The boys witness what life would have been like without Dr. King's achievements and gain a better understanding of how his

contributions changed the country. When I show the movie to the TCP students, the lesson is that it is important for them to know who they are, where they are, and how not to return to their former (truant) pattern of behavior.

Once I developed my lesson topics, I took every opportunity to seize the moment to change the students' mindsets while drawing from my own life-changing experience. Sometimes my lessons worked immediately, and sometimes they appeared to backfire, with positive results that were not evident until years later. I believe, however, in making things happen "by any means necessary" because life is hard and even harder when you do not have insight. When I took the TCP Mentor position at CFCC, I had just lost my daughter 6 months earlier to a tragedy called "contact voltage." My daughter was electrocuted while playing softball at Druid Hill Park. Our family has turned her tragedy into a mission to provide safe playing areas for all children.[1] My daughter, Deanna, had dreams and goals of becoming an opera singer. She was a practicing lyric soprano at the age of 14, and she had a chance to fulfill her dreams, right before her tragic death.

My goals are to see that these children have the opportunity to live their dreams to the fullest while they still have a chance, no matter how big or small. It is always heartwarming to hear reports from students that they are doing great, even if sometimes they are still struggling. Therefore, I pose this question: Can you spell the word SUCCESS without the letter U? It may be time to look at that person in the mirror. A mentor's work is never done.

[1] See <http://deannaslyric.org/>.

About CFCC

The Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts promotes policies and practices that unite families, communities and the justice system to improve the lives of children and families and the health of communities. CFCC advocates the use of therapeutic jurisprudence, the understanding that the legal system has an effect on behavior, emotions and mental health.

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