

TEEN COURT



By Bill Shaw

April 19, 2005, 6:30 p. m. The third floor courtroom of Judge K. Randall Hufstetler, 300th Circuit Judge, is quiet and filled with teenagers, parents and a few observers. The defendants, the attorneys and the jury are all teens, a jury of the peers of those whose cases are about to be presented.

This is Teen Court. The defendants have already pled guilty or no contest to charges ranging from traffic violations, school related offenses, minors in possession of alcohol and public violations (theft, curfew, graffiti and criminal mischief).

Teen Court is not drama or make-believe; it is a legitimate court. Justice of the Peace Milan Miller of Freeport, Judge Sharon Fox, the Boys & Girls Club and several local attorneys established Teen Court on Nov. 29, 1999, and began hearing cases in Angleton and the Brazosport area in March 2000.

"When I decided to run for justice of the peace in 1998, I had known of a Teen Court in Freeport, and it had folded," said Judge Miller. "One of my campaign promises was to start another Teen Court in Brazoria County. The executive director of the Boys & Girls Club wanted to get a Teen Court started also. She invited me to the first meeting at the Angleton Police Department. At some point, I was named chairman of the Teen Court and have been ever since."

Teen Court is a legally sanctioned program under the Texas Family Code and the Criminal Code to hold real cases as a form of deferred adjudication, which means the crime is off the defendant's record if he/she completes the requirements on time.

Here's how it works. After a teen appears before a justice of the peace or in municipal court and pleads guilty or no contest, he or she may request to be sent to Teen Court. The defendant meets with the Teen Court coordinator and, if approved, appears at Teen Court. Teens represent the state and serve as defense counsel, and a jury of teens determines the sentence on a basis of prescribed hours of community service and jury service for specific offenses. Once the teen completes the community service and jury duty, the case is dismissed by the justice of the peace or municipal court. If the teen

does not complete the sentence, his or her case is sent back to the justice of the peace or municipal court.

Judge Hufstetler, who grew up in Dickinson, has worked with Teen Court for six years.

"I know a number of folks in the Boys & Girls Club, and they set up a meeting with me to make a presentation about Teen Court," said Hufstetler. "I was excited at the prospects of being involved, and I was the first district judge to become involved and elected to have the proceedings in the court house."

Hufstetler sees a number of benefits for the offenders in Teen Court, including a opportunity to go through the court system at minimum expense without hiring an attorney, an opportunity to be involved in some community service, and the experience of serving on a jury, which is one of the ways defendants "do time" for their offenses. Hufstetler also sees the Teen Court as an opportunity to visit with the offenders and parents to discover the real problems and to work out solutions.

"The side benefits of Teen Court are huge," said Hufstetler. "It gets them involved with some kids who can mentor the offenders. Some may not have been involved in any school or extracurricular activities and want to volunteer to be a part of Teen Court and join in the program. We don't know all the benefits because we don't know what goes beyond Teen Court."

"The thing I enjoy is the interaction between the teenagers and the court system," said Miller. "The district attorney holds training sessions, and attorneys and judges do the same thing. The youngsters interact with the criminal side of the legal system while training as volunteers."

Zach Noblitt, a senior at Brazoswood High School, has volunteered in Teen Court for five years and has served in every position at one time or another.

"When I started, I wasn't involved with too many other things, so I dedicated my time to court," said Noblitt.

"Since it has provided me with so many opportunities I would've never had anywhere else, I continue to be an active volunteer. I've learned that we, as youth, can have a significant effect on our peers and on our community as a whole."

"It is a special program that continues to grow," said Noblitt. "It can only be successful if there is an active volunteer base, which we hope will continue to grow as the older members leave. To me, it has been such an amazing experience that I will miss as I head off to college." Renee O'Pry, Boys & Girls Club youth service director, is the Teen Court coordinator.

"I think it's an excellent way for the teens to learn to deal with the consequences of what they have done," said O'Pry. "They learn about the justice system, and they later come back to volunteer in the program."

O'Pry's job is not an easy one, and the volunteers appreciate her work.

"Mrs. O'Pry joined Teen Court fairly recently and is in her first year as Teen Court coordinator," said Noblitt.

"She has done an excellent job in keeping things on pace, despite having to handle dozens of new case referrals, dealing with angry or confused parents, coordinating the peer mentoring program for truant students, attending our school club meetings, meeting responsibilities as a Boys & Girls Club employee, and so much more. Obviously, she has to love this sometimes stressful job because she puts tremendous effort into seeing that the program is successful and goes beyond the normal office hours to ensure this. She has also been very supportive of everyone in the club, helping us establish confidence in our genuine talents and personality."

"Mrs. O'Pry is a wonderful mentor," said Bryson Byrd, 16, another Brazoswood student. "We as volunteers are so thankful to have such a dedicated coordinator. She always makes sure that we as volunteers have everything that we need and want."

The most recent statistics show the growth of Teen Court. In 2000, its first year of operation, Teen Court served over 2,300 county youths between 10 and 14 with school presentations, training sessions, mock courts and Teen Court Trials, processed over 54 Class C misdemeanors and trained 120 students as attorneys, bailiffs and court clerks. In the second year, Teen Court defendant referrals increased from 30 to 85. Teen Court began hearing truancy cases in July 2001. By June 2002, Teen Court processed 118 Class C misdemeanors and 60 truancy cases. Teen Court volunteers are also involved in the Texas State Wide Anti-Tobacco Campaign and alcohol education programs.

Teen Court in Brazoria County now serves the communities throughout Brazoria County. In addition to Judges Miller and Hafstatler, Judges Sharon Fox, Everett Stovall, Jerry Lee Mills, Marc Holder, and John Vadar volunteer their time as Teen Court presiding judges.

"The teen volunteers of Teen Court are from all areas of Brazoria County," said O'Pry. "However, a majority of our volunteers come from Brazoswood High School, Angleton High School and Alvin High School, with the recent addition of Danson students and plans to expand into Pearland."

Some Teen Court participants see the experience as a chance to explore future careers and to help their peers.

"I have been part of the jury as well as an attorney; I am mainly a defense attorney for the Teen Court system. This is the role that I enjoy the most because it is the role that I want to turn into a profession in the future," said Brazoswood student Bryson Byrd, 16. "I am also a peer mentor for the Teen Court program. In the peer mentor part of the program, you get to sit down, one-on-one, with a teen who has been convicted of truancy once a week. When you start to meet with them, they really do turn into someone that you learn from because you learn what things could be like in your life, and it really gives you a lot to be thankful for."

Byrd also sees Teen Court as an activity that helps him learn about himself.

"Teen court is the activity, out of all of the activities that I am involved in, that I enjoy the most," said Byrd.



Renee O'Pry, Boys & Girls Club youth service director.



Judge Hafstatler with teen court volunteers.

"It has taught me so much about myself, as well as how much I need to be thankful for in my life. Teen Court, as well as the Boys and Girls Club, truly has taught me how to be a leader."

For information about Teen Court, contact Renee O'Pry, Teen Court coordinator, at (979) 272-9658 or see the club web site at www.bgcbe.com. ▲