

Youth Interrupted ... and Restored D.C. Superior Court Offers Ways to Abate Juvenile Crime

By Thai Phi Le



They are images no parents want to see: Their handcuffed child being led away by police officers in a squad car. Prison bars separating themselves from their son or daughter.

Yet similar scenes are playing over and over across towns in America as they grapple with a growing number of youth offenders. In Washington, D.C., the mother of 14-year-old D. H.* watched the same scene unfold before her at home. "She was, at the drop of a dime, ready to fight everything," says D. H.'s mother.

If things weren't going her way, there would be a scuffle. Hoping to scare D. H., her mother brought her to the local police precinct to have someone talk to her. Nothing changed. Her aggressive attitude continued. Her anger still boiled over.

D. H.'s actions soon had consequences. Although barely a teen, she found herself locked up in a D.C. jail and forced to go before a judge. (The charges are still pending, and the specifics of the case cannot be discussed.)

D. H. is just one of hundreds of thousands of juveniles in court systems throughout the United States. According to a U. S. Department of Justice report, *Delinquency Cases in Juvenile Court, 2007*, published in June 2010, the caseload at juvenile courts increased 44 percent from 1985 to 2007.

Aside from property offenses, which include vandalism and auto theft, all other types of offenses have risen during the same period.

To tackle the rising problem, the Superior Court of the District of Columbia has conducted countless studies to find new programs to address juvenile justice. Youths did not react like adults. Girls acted out for different reasons than boys. There would be no one-size-fits-all approach.

For D. H., the Superior Court's new approach meant that she would have to abide by a 4 p.m. curfew and enter the Leaders of Today in Solidarity (LOTS) program, which was created in 2006.

A Girl's World

LOTS was among the first programs created by the Superior Court after a renewed effort to revamp the way the courts worked with youth offenders. The all-girls program aims to decrease the number of juvenile offenders in the justice system, while providing them with life skills to prepare them for the future.

“In the lexicon of juvenile justice and delinquency prevention, the types of innovative programs that we’ve developed didn’t exist. A lot of it was typically bed-based care, training institutes in juvenile detention facilities, and there was very little work being done with girls,” says Terri Odom, director of the Court Social Services Division (CSSD) of the Superior Court.

Previously with the D.C. Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, Odom joined CSSD in 2005 and was tasked with researching different approaches to working with juveniles. Odom and her staff organized focus groups with staff from all CSSD satellite offices, which also are the check-in locations for offenders with their probation officers (POs). They asked the staff lots of questions: What made them happy with the job? What frustrated them? What type of programming might be beneficial for the kids? In addition to wanting bigger and more functional spaces, the resounding response to the questions was that the staff wanted to engage more with the youths, Odom says.

As Odom’s staff continued to gather information, the group also realized that case management needed a dramatic reform. Prior to 2006, there were three levels of case management supervision. Thus, a single juvenile offender would have three different POs. The intake PO interacted with the youth throughout the trial. After the trial, a diagnostic PO spent 15 to 45 days, depending on the case, examining aspects of the youth’s life to determine what the conditions of the probation should be. The third PO supervised.

“That just seemed to be a lot for a youth to keep up with. It was more of a stop and go, look but don’t touch, touch but don’t taste, taste but don’t enjoy,” Odom says. “We determined that it would be better to cross-train the POs and have them work the case from beginning to end. There would be more consistency. There would be more continuity.”

For youth offenders who often had transient relationships with adults, the new system would create a stability many had not experienced.

Not Just Pink

LOTS was the first program implemented during the court’s changes to the juvenile justice system that used one probation officer for one child throughout her journey in the court system. Unlike many juvenile programs, staff start engaging with the youth offenders before their cases go to trial, and then continue working with them as the girls go through probation.

LOTS’ creation was rooted in a surge of arrests among young girls around 2004 and 2005. There was increased gang activity and incidence of major assaults in the District. Odom recalls one instance where a group of girls assaulted another girl on a bus on Martin Luther King Avenue. Another time, a mother caught wind of a gang targeting her daughter, so she began leaving work early to drive her child home from school. One day, the gang surrounded her car as she was driving home. As the mother got out to try to talk to them, both she and her daughter were beaten up. Something had to be done.

"Typically you take the same [juvenile justice] model you build for boys and you'd paint it pink, or, in some instances, lavender, and say, 'Here's the female model.' We didn't want to do that. We really thought we'd be doing a disservice," Odom says.

But what made these girls tick? The girls said that the gangs felt like surrogate families. They felt safe. They felt protected. Strength in numbers. LOTS aimed to take that same mentality, but steer it in a positive direction.

"By working with the primary girl who got in trouble, we were able to penetrate the secondary and tertiary peer levels as well. There was a lot of gang prevention, a lot of conflict resolution, and we have not seen those numbers in that way with girl gang activity," Odom says.

While boys faced some similar emotional problems, the court's assessments also showed that girls dealt with greater instances of depression and sadness. Family dynamics played a key role in their behavior, especially if the father was absent. Many competed with their brothers for their mom's attention.

Some of the girls told Odom and her staff that they saw how their moms had responded to their brothers who got into trouble, stopping everything to focus on their siblings. The girls "realized that when they got in trouble, they got attention, too. That's how they were made to feel special," Odom says. "It was interesting to see what was driving their behavior."

To address those issues, LOTS offers programming specialized for girls, including courses on pregnancy, suicide prevention, teenage hygiene, bullying, and how to dress appropriately. For D. H., the 14-year-old girl who was court-ordered to join the program, the all-girls approach in LOTS helped her to open up. "[There are] no boys in it so you're not really afraid to say what you have to say as far as girl stuff," D. H. says. The anger management classes have been crucial to alleviate D.H.'s outbursts. Kids in the program act out various scripted scenarios as the probation officer gets them to brainstorm different ways to approach a conflict. Since most of the classes are interactive, they are more fun to attend, D. H. says.

"I've really learned to, like, not let what people say get to me. I've also learned that you don't have to disrespect people to fit in with everybody," D.H. adds. Prior to entering LOTS, that mindset was unheard of for D. H. She remembers thinking the judge was wrong in ordering her to take anger management courses. "Then I started taking [anger management courses] at the LOTS program, and I felt like, 'Yeah, maybe I did need this. Maybe I *do* need this.'"

Although she's been in the program only a few months, the change in D. H. is noticeable. "She's calmed down a whole lot," her mother says. D. H. also has developed a great relationship with her probation officer. "We're like this," she says as she intertwines two fingers to represent their closeness. Her mom laughs and talks about how much D. H. calls her PO to talk. "We're not like kid friends. I just feel like I can tell her stuff. She's a real nice person when you get to know her,

[but] I can't run her over. She is still going to do her job. Whenever I cut up or act wrong, that all goes to the judge."

Engaging Both Youths, POs

In addition to LOTS, the Superior Court wanted to create a program where youth offenders could receive needed services—from mental health specialists to probation officers—all under one roof. The first roof under which these services were housed is called the Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ) Center, which opened in 2007 on V Street Southeast.

The Southeast BARJ Center is built to hold up to 30 boys on any given day and is open all day. Youths in the program are court-ordered to attend from 3:45 to 9:45 p.m., Monday through Friday, and from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturdays. During these hours, BARJ offers programs usually led by probation officers discussing a variety of subjects, including drug education, anger management, and life skills. The youths attend workshops to understand how their behavior affects the victim and the community. Tutors are brought in to help with schoolwork. Therapists are made available to the kids.

"We literally created this model where POs would operate totally different than they had previously in the District of Columbia and perhaps throughout juvenile justice," Odom says. Probation doesn't just mean check-ins and drive-bys to monitor curfew. The POs are hands-on, organizing trips to see the Washington Nationals play, teaching civics courses, offering "boys-to-men" mentoring, and teaching the kids how to cook. Recently, juveniles from the Southeast BARJ Center attended the Washington Redskins Training Camp in Ashburn, Virginia.

The center organizes "a lot of outings to give our kids exposure because we do have some kids who are filled with this notion that you should stay within [your] own neighborhood. We want them to see there is a world beyond their neighborhood," Odom says.

There are now three BARJ Centers in the District of Columbia—in Southeast, Northeast, and Southwest—with plans to build an all-girls BARJ sometime in the near future. All have a multipurpose recreational room with arcade games, ping-pong or pool tables, and big screen televisions. There are conference rooms to hold family meetings and office space for probation officers.

"What we started was a model that became a template, but you will see there are different iterations to this model because the staff has literally taken them and put their fingerprints on them," Odom says.

At the Northeast BARJ Center, which opened in 2011 and hosts up to 60 kids a day, court sessions can be held in the center's satellite courtroom and holding cell for the Superior Court. The Southwest BARJ Center is equipped as a vocational center, complete with computers to learn Web design, silk screening equipment, and a large food prep kitchen. Up to 45 boys can check in at the Southwest center.

At the original BARJ in Southeast, one of the most popular programs is “Real Men Cook,” run by probation officer William Beavers, who also leads the center’s drug education class. Youths learn how to clean and chop food, set a table, and make a meal from scratch. They’ve cooked for judges and can make omelets, French toast, and meatloaf, among many other dishes. They help with the annual Fourth of July cookout. For Mother’s Day, many youths cooked dinner for their moms for the first time.

At the same center, probation officer Corey H. Weierke holds lessons about civic responsibility. Before joining BARJ, Weierke worked for former Minnesota governors Tim Pawlenty and Jesse Ventura. The boys have written letters to their representatives in Congress, organized a straw poll, held mock elections, and analyzed both international and domestic news. On the anniversary of September 11, they visited the memorial at the Pentagon.

“They have a very narrow exposure to the world—not just in Southeast, but just in their neighborhoods,” Weierke says. “I can walk out the door [of the BARJ Center] and see the Capitol dome. We’re three miles away from the Capitol and the world is completely different. I want to give them a chance to be exposed to something other than court involvement, give them an opportunity to explore other things and have positive experiences.”

D.C. streets can be brutal, says D. H.’s mother, but programs like LOTS and BARJ are providing kids an alternative to detention and a chance to turn their lives around. “If you let go of your child, the streets will take them and they’re not giving them back. Half of them don’t want to come back because they are already used to the streets,” she says. “I want her to grow with her age and not with the streets ... As long as there is a program to help her, as a mom, I’m glad. I love it. I love it.”

(* Name is withheld for privacy reasons.)