

## Junior League project offers hope, inspiration to girls in juvenile detention



Stephanie Garris (second from left) and Shansae Pace of the Junior League of Greater Orlando pray with two of the young girls after their meeting at the Orange Regional Juvenile Detention Center. (AKLI-CASUNDRIA RAIBESS, ORLANDO SENTINEL / November 19, 2009)

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She is 17 going on 35, four months pregnant and doing time in a juvenile detention center for running away with her boyfriend.

"Forty-two days," she said, ticking off her time served to a woman she has just met. "It's a long wait. But this — this is the highlight of our week."

She is in a small dining hall with the aroma of disinfectant, and steel tables and benches bolted to the floor. With her are two dozen other teenage inmates and an almost equal number of Junior League women, many of whom are missing dinner with their families to be here this night.

It is part of the Girls Advocacy Project, an initiative to use what was once idle time for these teens to educate and inspire them. Started by a Miami juvenile-court judge in 1999, it spread to the Orange Regional Juvenile Detention Center in Orlando in 2005. Here, it was adopted by the Junior League of Greater Orlando, whose members have been the project's most enthusiastic mentors.

Anonymous questionnaires filled out by the girls show that the feeling is mutual.

"I never had so much fun and had so much love," one girl wrote after a recent session. "I felt special for once."

"It was the best day of my life. Hope you guys keep helping people," said another.

"When you get the chance to sit down at the table and share stories, you find out that we have more in common than most people might think," said Cherie George, 42, who leads the GAP committee for the league. "A few weeks ago, a friend of mine came in as the guest speaker, and she told her life story — which is an incredibly hard life story that she had never talked about in public before. She had been abused and thrown out of the house as a child. And the girls said, 'I can't believe you went through that and you're normal.'"

Although state funding for the 2010 program is in jeopardy because of the recession, the Junior League women plan to donate their time as long as the center will let them. A 2005 legislative analysis found that such programs can significantly reduce recidivism — an important point as girls commit an increasing share of juvenile crime.

Yet the contact is relatively brief. The Junior League sessions are conducted for two hours every other Thursday evening, and through good behavior, girls have to earn the privilege of attending.

The teens march in, single file, clad in prisonlike jumpsuits and attended by guards. Because they are minors, they cannot be named, and some are more eager to share their backgrounds than others. Many are runaways, some are petty thieves or involved with drugs, and others have committed violent felonies. Most have been physically or sexually abused — or both.

Typically, they are here only a couple of weeks while awaiting transfer to another program or facility, meaning they will have only a single exposure to the Junior League visitors.

It might seem odd, then, that the girls are so eager for these encounters, especially given that some of the topics aren't your typical teen fare. The most recent, for instance, was a lecture on how to use credit cards responsibly.

Yet the girls not only listen; they also pepper the lecturers with questions and personal anecdotes of family members' credit woes.

"I'm never getting a credit card," a 15-year-old vows after hearing of spiraling interest rates and predatory lending practices. "If they send me one, I'm chopping it up."

Other sessions have covered everything from grief counseling to the power of forgiveness to making gingerbread houses together.

"The problem with the girls is mostly that they don't think much of themselves," said Erin Smith, 36, an Orlando Junior League member who started coming to the GAP sessions in August. "They can't believe we're taking time from our families to be with them."

It helps that the women don't judge or condemn the girls. The relationship is more like a big sister and a little sister.

"They're sponges," said George, who spends her days as a marketing manager for a large entertainment company. "A lot of them only see that small slice of the community that they live in. They don't know what else is out there."

After the lecture and some one-on-one chats, the session closes with the group standing in a circle, holding hands, reciting a **Maya Angelou** poem: "I am a phenomenal woman. You are a phenomenal woman ..."

Before they return to their cells, though, two girls rush up to league president Stephanie Garris and beg her to pray for them. Both go to court the next day. "We made some really bad mistakes," one girl says. "And now we're going to have to pay for them."

They never elaborate. Garris, 41, has no idea why she was singled out, but as a woman of faith she grasps their hands, kneels and prays softly.

"Dear God," she begins, "please wrap your loving arms around these young women and let them know that they are loved..."

It may be the only time she will ever spend with these girls, and it's likely she'll never know what impact the exchange had. But before she falls asleep that night, Garris closes her eyes and prays for them again.

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