

Shortstop shows teens error of crime

LAW ENFORCEMENT:

The program gives first-time juvenile offenders a second chance.

By IBON VILLELBEITIA

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From Santa Ana

It was Randy Ramirez's first brush with the law. Police caught the Garden Grove High School student and some friends with beer in a car.

But law-enforcement officers decided to give the 17-year-old with shaved head and baggy pants a second chance and sent him to Shortstop, a crime-pre-

vention program aimed at keeping first-time juvenile offenders away from the criminal lifestyle.

"Now I know I want a life. I don't want to end up in jail like those people," said Ramirez, who plans to join the Navy next year. "I got to straighten up and do things right."

Ramirez was among the 17 offenders ages 9 to 17 who attended their first Shortstop class last week in Orange County Superior Court in Santa Ana.

The program was established in 1980 by the Orange County Bar Foundation to offer alternatives to the congested juvenile criminal system, said Jane Martin, executive director.

"The idea of the program is to give kids a dose of reality therapy," Martin said. "They under-

NEWS FOCUS

stand what their life is going to be like if they keep on with what they are doing."

Shortstop classes are held in Orange County courthouses, and parents of the offenders are required to attend.

Referrals come from Juvenile Court, the probation department, the District Attorney's Office, police departments, school boards, even parents.

At the beginning of each session, youths are stripped of their personal belongings and are given a number.

The group is then taken to a littered with orange peels and garbage bags.

As their stone-faced parents

watch, youths are met by prisoners from the California Youth Authority, who explain in graphic language the kind of life they will face if they wind up in prison:

Fear. A continuous struggle for survival. No Thanksgivings or Christmases with Mom and Dad. No more hanging out with friends. Just watching their young lives slip away in a jammed cell shared with other criminals, some twice their size.

After listening to the prisoners for about an hour, the youths are herded back to the courtroom for the "hot seat" session, where an attorney instructor calls them to testify in front of a room filled with other offenders and their parents.

Please see **SHORTSTOP** Page 4

SHORTSTOP: Juveniles get a second chance

FROM 1

Christopher Strobel, a Shortstop attorney instructor, said one of the goals of the program is to make young people understand the consequences of their criminal behavior by creating a harsh environment.

"I want these kids to be scared and to feel uncomfortable so they know they did something wrong," said Strobel, a deputy public defender who handles juvenile cases. Like all Shortstop instructors, he is a volunteer.

"They need to know that at the juvenile criminal system they will be treated without love or kindness and that they will be only a number," Strobel said. "Ninety percent of the battle is to get these kids to think."

Getting parents actively involved in educating their children is the best tool to prevent crime, Shortstop officials say.

"A lot of parents feel helpless and clueless about what is going on with their children," said program coordinator Alisa Ginex. "We try to open up the communication between the family. A lot of times parents realize they are spending too much time working and are not spending enough time with their sons."

As part of the two-week program, the youths have to complete a series of assignments under their parents' supervision.

They include keeping track of the time the family spends together, interviewing a community leader, writing a letter of apology to a victim of their crime or even penning their own obituary, Ginex said.

A recent study by the Orange County Probation Department says 92 percent of the offenders who go to the program never end up back in the juvenile justice system.

About 17,000 youths — and their parents — have graduated from Shortstop, mostly for offenses such as shoplifting, possession of alcohol or marijuana, petty theft or truancy.

In 1988, program officials started the Spanish version — Programa Shortstop.

Deputy District Attorney Victor Quiros, another Shortstop instructor, said the secret of the program lies not only in showing the realities of criminal activity but more importantly in re-establishing a dialogue between parents and children.

"Some of these kids have never expressed their feelings to their parents before," said Quiros, a former Irvine police officer and an ex-Orange County Marshal's deputy.

"Kids normally commit crimes because they need attention."

Instructors talk with parents or guardians about their legal responsibilities and give them practical advice.

Strobel said some parents keep in touch with each other even after receiving their diplomas to share experiences and help raise their children.

Shortstop is funded mostly through private donations.

Recently, the program received a \$19,000 grant from the Irvine-based Orange County Community Foundation to expand its classes to North Orange County Municipal Court in Fullerton.

The program costs \$100 and parents are urged to have their children pay the fee.

"If they can afford CDs, they can afford Shortstop," Martin said. "Crime is expensive and we want kids to know it."

Professor Christopher Strobel