



CHANGING LIVES THROUGH LITERATURE

AN ALTERNATIVE SENTENCING PROGRAM

Changing lives through literature Fremont County Library System, Riverton Branch

In my twelve years as manager of the Riverton Branch, I have lost count of how many young people I have had to involve with the police department and the court system after various crimes were committed. In the spring of 2011, I had the opportunity to participate in a Justice Conference involving three young girls. I was impressed with Probation Officer Patty Grandland and the County Youth Services' efforts to keep these girls out of the courts. Serendipitously, I came across a national program, *Changing Lives Through Literature*. I believe that this program fits in very well with efforts being made by local youth services and the justice system to keep juveniles out of the courts. There are many sound financial and emotional reasons for doing so and we are excited about the potential that *Changing Lives Through Literature* offers for achieving this goal.

Why does this program work?

This program was begun by those who believe that bringing carefully selected works of literature and juvenile offenders together can help the youth gain insight into their lives and behavior, while learning that they are not alone with their problems.

- literature is empowering
- discussions enhance that power
- the process of reading leads to reflection
- reflection leads to change

How does this work?

This program involves the participation and support of a juvenile judge, county youth services including probation officers, and a young adult librarian.

Your role:

Judge:

- Gives judicial authorization/validation. Without the judge's approval, a traditional CLTL program can't take place. Because judges who participate in CLTL start out by believing that literature can be a means to changing offenders' behaviors, they are important in supporting the involvement of the probation officers.
- At the end of the eight week program, the judge will sign a certificate of completion for the juvenile participant.

Probation Officer:

- The probation officer (PO) connects the court to the Library (Manager and Young Adult Librarian).
- The PO determines if a particular juvenile offender is appropriate for CLTL. Can the youth handle the literature? Will there be job conflicts? Is the youth motivated to take on CLTL? Does he or she have too many personal issues that could be a distraction during the discussion.
- Juvenile participants must be offenders of non-violent crimes between the ages of 13-18.
- Preferable class size limited to 6-10 juveniles.
- Your involvement in this program is crucial for its success; by attending sessions, and participating in discussions, you serve as a role model in the best possible way.

Our Role:

- The Young Adult Librarian will choose one young adult book to be read and lead an 8-week series of discussions.
- Each youth participant will receive their own copy of the discussed book & writing journal to keep.
- The discussions will be held at the Riverton Branch Library.
- After completion of the eight week program, the juvenile will receive a signed documentation of completion to submit to the court system.

These programs are very well established and demonstrate verifiable success. Their impact has altered lives in a positive fashion and proven to be extremely cost effective. The websites listed below can provide more detail and data on the success of Changing Lives Through Literature programs that have been initiated across the country.

Testimonials:

"Staff who have participated in this program have enjoyed watching the students, diverted juvenile offenders ages 12 to 18, grow throughout the 10-week group."

Amy Sommer Keating, assistant director of Juvenile Intake Services, Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court

"This book taught me to open up more instead of holding things in."

Female student in Fairfax County, age 16

"The girls begin each class with wariness and distrust, but as time goes on, the walls crumble and the group melds into a coherent whole, with each member willing to respond in real and unguarded ways."

Wendi Kaufman, facilitator, Fairfax County

Program Facts:

- Operates in 12 states and the United Kingdom
- Has involved more than 5,000 offenders with dramatic impact on reducing recidivism rates –more than 50%
- Has demonstrated cost-effectiveness

Sources:

<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/library/cltl/>

<http://cltl.umassd.edu/AboutHome.cfm>

http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/VALib/v55_n4/fessler.html

