

TAMPA & STATE

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MONDAY, MARCH 11, 1996 ■ THE TIMES

New drug court for youths helps fill gap

■ Kids who visit this court are troubled, not hardened. In the past, they may have fallen through the cracks.

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TAMPA — On a soggy, dismal morning, the teenagers and their parents straggle into the courtroom. No one is smiling.

A sitcom-perfect family walks in: dad in a tie, mom in a navy blue pantsuit, daughter flipping a pretty ponytail over her shoulder.

Nearby, a slender boy studies his tie as his mother and father shoot clipped bits of conversation across him. A kid with a jockish brush-cut chews his nails. His father, an older version in a crew cut, does the same.

A row ahead, a multi-eared girl in a black dress, industrial boots and outrageous candy-cane tights impatiently bounces a red-and-white leg. As her mother talks in her ear, the girl sighs theatrical-

ly, as only a teenager can.

Through the courtroom doors pushes Assistant Public Defender Mike Peacock, a bearded fellow with an armful of files. He scans faces, beckons to Striped Tights and her mother, and they huddle outside the courtroom.

The 13 teenagers on the Juvenile Drug Court docket this day are not the savvy young criminals whose lengthy rap sheets have legislators vowing to get tough on crime.

Each child here is a first- or second-time offender arrested for a non-violent crime that is somehow drug related — such as getting caught smoking marijuana or shoplifting a bottle of wine. Each tested positive for drugs after his or her arrest and admitted to using drugs.

"There were kids that came through the system who clearly needed treatment, needed attention. . .," says Peacock. "They weren't bad enough. They fell through the cracks."

The idea in Florida's first Juvenile Drug Court is to fill that gap and maybe nip a drug problem in the bud. If a young defendant successfully completes,

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Times photo — KEN HELLE

Hillsborough Chief Judge F. Dennis Alvarez presides over Juvenile Drug Court. He carries a coffee mug that reads, "ME BOSS. YOU NOT."

Court from 1B

the program, the charge is dismissed.

But it's no free ride. The program lasts at least a year. The youths must submit to regular drug tests, undergo outpatient counseling and therapy and do well at school and home, all under the watchful eye of a judge. If they blow it, they could be rejected from the program and face the original criminal charge.

It is Peacock's job to meet the newcomers and answer their questions. The girl in the striped tights has a few.

His voice, deep and kind, echoes in the hallway.

"I want you to succeed," he says.

The girl borrows Peacock's pen to sign the Drug Court contract. Her mother signs, too.

"They're good kids," says Jim Downum, project manager for court operations. "They're everyday kids whose parents had no clue."

At 9 a.m. sharp, Hillsborough Chief Judge F. Dennis Alvarez walks into the courtroom, a diminutive powerhouse whose robes billow behind him. He sets down his coffee cup, its not-so-subtle message in plain view.

ME BOSS, it reads. YOU NOT.

Though Hillsborough's highly successful adult drug court has graduated 143 people since it began in 1992, the juvenile version has only just begun. In its first session in February, there were eight defendants; by the third there would be 21.

The judge peers over his reading glasses at the 14-year-old girl before him.

"Morning," he says to her. "How's everything going?"

So far so good, reports Eleanor Labart from ACTS, or the Agency for Community Treatment Services, a non-profit drug and alcohol treatment center.

This girl, charged with possession of marijuana and paraphernalia, already has completed her detox session, a three- to five-day stay at a 20-bed facility in north Tampa, a chance for her to start getting clean and for officials to assess her case.

She is beginning the required outpatient sessions. In each week of the first 12 weeks of drug court, each child must attend two group sessions, one individual session and one family session.

"Her last two (drug tests) have been negative," Labart tells the judge.

Alvarez looks pleased. He talks with the girl a bit, learns that she started smoking pot when she was 10. The judge promises to bring her a recent study on the long-term effects of marijuana use and then cuts her a break because she is doing well. She can come back to court in four weeks instead of two.

"Good luck," he says, and, under a mass of black eyeliner, she grins.

In adult drug court, Circuit Judge Donald Evans has gotten to know many defendants well, sharing in their stumbles and successes. Alvarez hopes to have that with the kids, but for now, they are just getting to know each other.

"Ever been to W. T. Edwards?" he asks each of them, using the common name for Hillsborough's juvenile detention center.

They haven't, but they know the place anyway. A cold, hard place. Jail.

"You can hear about how bad a place will be," the judge says. "But until you see it..."

And they will see it. He orders a field trip for each new defendant to tour the place where they could wind up if they mess up too many times.

"It's a bad place to spend the summer," he says.

One by one, the cases are called. There is a girl charged with stealing from her mother to pay for crack, a boy caught smoking marijuana in a school bathroom.

They come from country towns, comfortable suburbs and points in between. There is a girl with a French manicure and a tiny designer handbag. There is a boy in jeans whose father has the roughened hands and sun-browned skin of a working man.

Parents are essential to the process. He will quiz them about their youngsters' behavior, attitude, cur-

fews and school attendance. They will be his eyes and ears at home.

Alvarez asks one dad how things are going with his son.

"Normal," the father says. He pauses, then adds, "For 14."

"I think we caught him early," the dad says.

Despite the arrests, some parents are certain their children don't have a problem with drugs. But in a day's session, more than one stands before the judge with arms spread, palms up, a gesture that says, "I don't know what to do."

A mother and father flank their son, who hangs his head as they tell the judge how they caught him smoking pot at home after he returned from detox. They sent him straight back.

"He's aware that we're playing by your rules," the mother tells Alvarez. "And that there's no safe haven in his home."

The kid peeks at the judge from below blond bangs.

"Um," he says. "I messed up."

"What did I tell you would happen?" Alvarez asks.

A few kids who have been slouching in their seats in the audience lean forward to listen. They know the drill: Mess up and you could be headed for a stint in W. T. Edwards.

"Do you think we've got his attention?" Alvarez asks the parents. They do.

"All right," Alvarez says. "Your parents just talked me out of putting you in W. T. Edwards for 10 days." Next time, the judge says, plan to go there.

The kid, who has heard about Alvarez's famous field trip, looks at the judge uncertainly.

"You mean, like, to just walk around, right?" he asks.

The audience titters. That is definitely not what Alvarez means.

The cases roll on. Many of the young defendants are doing fine. A few stand there looking bleary-eyed.

One 17-year-old boy says the day he got arrested was the first time he tried marijuana.

"Never did it before? You're sure?" Alvarez asks, eyebrow raised. "Crime should not be in your future plans if you got caught the first time."

Labart reports that one boy is doing well except that he refused to give a urine sample. This is a problem, because these kids will have to give several a week for at least the first 12 weeks.

"I've got this thing about using the bathroom in front of other people," the boy says.

"We want one today," Alvarez says, not unkindly.

Slowly, he is getting to know the kids. He wants them to know him too, to be able to talk to him, to know he means what he says.

By the third session, he finds himself taking a hard line with a few. He tells the bailiff that next session, there should be a van ready to transport all the teenagers he may have to send to the juvenile detention center.

"We'll get HARTline," the judge says. No one in the audience laughs.

A boy named Robert knows he is in trouble. He admitted to a counselor that he had been partying.

The judge asks the last time he smoked marijuana.

"Four days ago," he says, and starts talking, swearing he's tired of it, swearing he has quit for good.

Alvarez gives him a look over his glasses.

"Have I got a clown suit on?" he asks.

"All I can give you is my word," Robert says.

Alvarez considers. "Is it worth 30 days to you?" he asks.

"Yessir," Robert blurts. Anything.

"Okay. That's an agreement between me and you. If you violate, you're going to serve 30 days."

"I'm not gonna violate," the boy says, positive.

"I hope you don't. I don't want to put you there," the judge says. "It's in your hands."

Robert leaves as if he can't get himself out of there fast enough. Alvarez looks around the courtroom.

"Any wagers?" he asks.