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Mock trials give Portsmouth youths sobering lessons

PORTSMOUTH

In a courtroom full of peers, the 17-year-old stood silent.

A judge replayed all the things that went wrong the night the boy decided to drink and drive. Details of the accident. The serious injury to another person.

All of it could get the teenager 12 months in jail, Judge Johnny E. Morrison said.

"I need to get your attention," he said. Morrison told the boy he would be taken into custody until sentencing. A deputy walked the youth through the doorway that begins a defendant's separation from the rest of the world.

"OK, you can bring him back before he starts crying,"

Morrison said as the courtroom relaxed into laughter.

The judge was real. So was the courtroom and the deputy. But this was a mock trial, a final session in a fall workshop aimed at curbing underage drinking.

An outreach ministry of Brighton Rock AME Zion Church began offering the six-session program in early October. With the help of a \$10,000 grant from the Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control, about two dozen youths, along with some parents, gathered for dinner every Monday night to hear about the pitfalls of drinking.

Jarrod Knowles, 12, said he learned that alcohol could harm his health, destroy his brain cells, and cause him to injure himself or someone else.

The night of the mock trial, he was further convinced of another thing: He wants to be a judge one day.

Like other youths in the courtroom that night, Jarrod listened to Morrison talk about the lives he has seen torn apart because of alcohol.

Over the weeks, Jarrod and others heard the warnings about alcohol use from others, too. They met law enforcement personnel and behavioral health care workers.

The Rev. Clifford Barnett, pastor of Brighton Rock, said he heard about the grant and thought it was an issue the church's outreach ministry should take on. He pulled together a coalition of civic

leaders, health experts and public safety representatives to help create and conduct the program.

"One of the things I really believe is if kids make decisions early, they can stick to those decisions," Barnett said.

"If we can just give them knowledge."

The church targeted elementary and middle school students. Barnett was surprised at the number of high school students who also signed up.

The state grant will pay for another six-week session, which will begin in February. Still, the minister hopes to keep it going beyond that.

"We really think it's going to make a difference," he said.

Barnett described alcohol and smoking as "gateway drugs" for young people, opening the "door to so many other problems."

Barnett said he tells young people that if they don't have a plan when they are teenagers, then they might end up with someone else's plan that is not in their best interest.

The prevention effort is one of many that Barnett and his church offer to local youths, including before- and after-school programs and homework assistance.

One thing Barnett said he has learned is the exponential impact of such programs. One youngster learns something and passes it onto others, he said.

Brighton Rock's alcohol prevention program was one of seven across the state selected for the grant. Becky Gettings, a spokeswoman for the state department, said the committee liked the idea of incorporating a mock trial into the program. It seemed a good way to drive home the consequences that can come with drinking, she said.

The young participants took the trial seriously, the minister said. Talking and laughter quickly turned to silence as soon as the judge walked in, he said.

The youngsters told him later that they were nervous as the trial unfolded.

"In essence, they felt like they were the kid that was being charged," he said.

"I think they really got a sense of what it might be like."

Now, Barnett is counting on them to remember that feeling and to pass it on to friends.

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