

San Jose Mercury Op-Ed Article

Opinion: Mentoring San Jose's troubled youth can make a difference for them and the community

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Special to the Mercury News

Posted: 09/25/2011 08:00:00 PM PDT

Where are we headed? Step back and notice the contradictions in our public debate.

We hear tremendous support for putting people away through costly policies such as Three-Strikes sentencing while, at the same time, defiant push-back at any suggestion of raising taxes, even as our schools languish near the bottom nationwide. At upward of \$75,000 a year to incarcerate a youth versus the \$8,000 a year we spend to educate one, we have to ask where this investment strategy is leading us.

According to the National Center for Juvenile Justice, allowing one youth to leave high school for a life of crime and drug abuse costs society \$1.7 million to \$2.3 million across that individual's lifetime. This is a community dilemma.

Fortunately, there is at least one community solution: mentoring.

As kids, we each had to find our way learning about the choices of right-wrong, good-bad, often relying on painful trial and error. Some had more help than others. Who were those special people in your life -- those friends, guides, mentors -- who helped you get to where you are today? Where would you be without them?

There are many good mentoring programs.

Admittedly, I am biased toward the agency I direct: California Community Partners for Youth, which is part of a global network with more than 30 years of success in dealing with challenged teens around the world. The San Jose Mayor's Gang Prevention Task Force reports that our

clients start out with some of the fewest developmental assets of children across the city.

Most of them know failure and setback, having no sense of a positive future.

Through a respectful, structured learning environment comprised of caring adults and youth, participants begin to experience small successes, trust and unconditional support.

Building each small success into the next allows a spark of hope to grow in our youth, and a fragile willingness to begin to trust themselves.

Mentoring holds that we are each able, and accountable for, creating the future we want - and we don't have to do it alone.

Three-fourths of community partners' participants blossom into positive peer role models for their families and friends, and many return to support and encourage other participants.

"I got caught driving a stolen car, and the police locked me up. I was on house arrest for three months," says 15-year-old A.J., who attends Yerba Buena High School. A.J. came to our agency with little hope that he could change his life, but through outings with his mentor, sessions with his life-skills coach and other activities, he realized he had choices.

"Everything we do in the program has a meaning. I realized that with what I have right now, I could be living the life I want without getting into trouble," he said.

Youths are not the only ones to benefit.

Many mentors have experienced personal transformation. Most say they have improved relationships with spouses, children and employers. Some have achieved goals they thought were impossible, like promotions at work. That's because effective mentoring requires us to walk our talk, role-modeling responsible behavior.

Mentoring offers a hopeful and productive future for our youth. It enriches the lives of mentors. It provides a cost-effective solution for an otherwise debilitating community condition.

But making it work takes volunteers. Mentoring programs in our county need mentors, tutors and other volunteers.

You may think, "Someone should help, but I'm too busy." Yes, we're all busy. Yet recognizing that this is an exponentially growing community problem with a proven community solution, I ask you to ask yourself, "If not me, who? If not now, when?"

JEFF BORNEFELD is executive director of California Community Partners for Youth (www.ccpy.org) in San Jose. He wrote this for this newspaper.