

CAMPAIGN FOR
YOUTH JUSTICE

BECAUSE THE CONSEQUENCES AREN'T MINOR

GET ORGANIZED

A Monthly Column by Grace Bauer – November/December 2009

The Lessons I Learned

When my son was arrested and adjudicated delinquent in the state of Louisiana in 2001, I embarked on a journey that I was, to say the very least, unprepared for. Sadly, my ignorance and naiveté allowed the system to perpetrate a crime against my young son far worse than the crime he was guilty of. Now, at the end of another year and almost a decade of involvement with the system, I can say the only good things that came out of my experiences in the juvenile and criminal justice systems are the lessons I learned and have shared with others. Here I will share them yet again.

Juvenile Court Lessons:

- Never plead guilty; get an attorney, protect your child's rights.
- Remain silent; get an attorney and protect your child's rights.
- People in suits with long, impressive titles and college degrees do not know more about your child than you do.
- You are the best judge of your child's strengths and challenges.
- Children usually do much better at home with services than locked up in a correctional institution.
- People running institutions and juvenile courts do not necessarily have your child's best interest at heart; get an attorney, protect your child's rights.
- People in suits with long, impressive titles and college degrees sometimes make mistakes.
- Get an attorney and protect your child's rights. This is not the job of anyone in the system; it is solely on YOU as the parent.

Adult Criminal Court Lessons:

- Never plead guilty; get an attorney, protect your child's rights.
- Make the state prove their case.
- Visit your child regularly. If you can't visit, write frequently.
- Stay in touch with the prison chaplain.
- Encourage your child to prepare for a day when he/she is free.
- Keep your child updated on family issues and happenings.

Overall Lessons:

- Never give up!
- Document everything.

- Never go alone to meetings with attorneys or probation officers, you may need someone to help you take notes or keep a cool head.
- If the court and prison systems in this country actually worked we would not have over 2 million people locked up (which is more than any other country).
- If the systems worked we would not have high crime rates and even higher recidivism rates.
- Locking the wrong people up costs money and affects everyone.
- Race is an issue when it comes to prisons in this country. Whites and people of color commit crimes at almost exactly the same rate, yet look inside the walls of any prison and the faces you see there do not reflect this.
- We are not alone in our struggle for justice! With so many behind bars and their families numbering in the millions, together we should demand change and hold these systems accountable for the harm they do our children, our families, and our communities!

At the Campaign for Youth Justice, we believe that one of the most important voices in reform conversations are the voices of families and youth. We invite you to contact us to get involved and make your voice heard. So, take a minute and let us hear from you! I can be reached at gbauer@cfyj.org or 202.558.3580. If not you, then who?