

By Beverly Jenkins

Indianapolis juvenile court magistrate Judge Danielle Gregory told me: “We have to believe that children can change; that’s why juvenile court is separate from adult court.”

I respect her beliefs, but after seeing several kids in the Indianapolis Juvenile Courts, I *have* to wonder if changing kids is plausible. Kids have consciences, free will and fully-functioning brains just like any adult. Kids in juvenile court should be dealt with just as adults are. Can children really change like Judge Gregory claims? Or are we just letting them go with a slap on the wrist?

My perception of the courts drastically changed when I spent a day observing Indianapolis’ juvenile court. I used to think that court was like what you saw on TV, like Law and Order. I thought people who commit serious crimes go to prison... right? But when I went to a *real* court, I learned what *actually* happened. There were initial hearings, required statements, and *lots* of legal terms. I learned that many of the kids in juvenile court often get off easy, at least to me. A sentence in juvenile court almost always includes community service and sometimes counseling.

13-year-old Brandy in the juvenile court waiting room stood out; she wore a simple white shirt and jeans, along with shiny silver eye shadow, dark black liner, and black mascara smudged around her eyes. Brandy missed more unexcused days of school in one year than I can count on my fingers and toes. She was charged with truancy.

She said that she was nervous, but was also pretty apathetic. She didn’t seem too worried about her court time. Kids in the waiting room provided the evidence that soft sentences *do not work*. According to Gary Chavers, another juvenile court magistrate, most kids in juvenile hall are repeat offenders. Indianapolis records show recidivism rates for youth in juvenile court is between 10 and 23 percent – the more serious the crime, the higher the rate.

However, even the repeat offenders seemed to receive light sentences.

One particular case stands out in my mind. Alan, in his late teens, was involved in a school fight, which got so out of control that another teen was hospitalized.

Alan sat in the defendant’s chair, motionless, wordless, as the state reviewed his charges. He stared straight ahead when asked what he had to say for himself. He was silent.

Alan received a sentence of 40 hours community service, counseling and had to write an apology letter to the boy he injured.

I thought Alan’s sentence was pretty light. If he had been an adult, he could gotten had some serious prison time. Instead I think kids like Alan should instead go to juvenile lock-up or to boot camp.

I believe these camps take juvenile crime seriously, and the kids get that. They understand that they must change.

While Indiana is one of 10 states that still uses boot camps, the camps are not used nearly enough because of their bad reputation. If the juvenile sentences are made harsher, these kids might finally grow a conscience and be scared into transforming their lives.

For Y-Press, I’m Beverly Jenkins.