

By Reginetta White

When I walked into juvenile court, I expected it to be dirty and disorganized, but I was impressed on how it looked. The floors were clean, and it was quiet. I'm an editor with Y-Press, and we wanted to observe what it was actually like to be a juvenile offender.

I knew juvenile court wouldn't be like TV, but still there was drama and conflict. For example here's one court scene I witnessed:

A mother glared at the child and asked: "Why did you do it?"

The tall, stocky boy in his mid-teens with a black T-shirt was silent. He glared at the woman and then flashed a smirk. I had to remind myself – again – that this was a COURT case in front of a juvenile judge. It wasn't a playground scene where a mom confronted a boy who had bullied her son. I watched other cases that day in which kids were in fights, shoplifted, and even a case where a boy stole a car.

In this case of the teen-age aggressor, the judge told the boy to write an apology to the young man he injured. She set another date for him to come in to receive further punishment. And I hope it was a lot more harsh than just writing an apology letter, which seems more fit for a kid who told a lie to his mom.

Some of the other kids in court seemed to get off easy too, but then Judge Danielle Gregory made me think. She said: "I would like to think the kids can change and get their lives back on track."

It was a fascinating day for me, in particular, because I want to grow up to be a criminal lawyer. I paid special attention to the lawyers in the courtrooms, which were small and looked like typical cluttered offices with lots of desks and piles of paper I watched the attorneys' faces – They looked angry, frustrated and tired. It seemed to me that they didn't want to be there. They didn't seem to interact with the kids in the courtroom much at all.

This is not the kind of lawyer I want to be. The kids these attorneys are defending already feel like the world is against them. So they don't need a grumpy lawyer -- they need an involved, encouraging one.

However, I did find one person like that -- Judge Gregory. She's strict, but compassionate and reasonable too. When I become a lawyer, I will try my best to help my clients and have a positive attitude. I will take my time to learn what my clients are doing wrong, why they are there, and how I think I could help them turn their lives around.

I've even thought about how I might handle the cases I witnessed. I'd sentence the car thief to spend time in juvenile detention and give him community service and house arrest after that. As for the young man who was involved in a serious fight, I would have sentenced him to house arrest and community service.

I would want to make sure that they learned from their mistakes and wouldn't commit crimes again.

Spending the day in the juvenile detention center made me realize how complicated, dramatic and risky a life of crime can be. It helped me see how juvenile crime isn't just a bunch of statistics but involves real people. And I am even more sure how much I want to be a lawyer and help those people who are in need of guidance.

For Y-Press Reginetta White