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Program looks to take at-risk youth from trouble

By DAVID HUNT
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The case of a stolen red Huffy bicycle had become a true whodunit of mixed witness statements and debatable physical evidence.

What unfolded in a Duval County courtroom became a lesson in criminal justice, albeit a fictitious one portrayed by a group of trouble-bound Jacksonville youths.

The mock trial was one of the final segments of Public Defender Matt Shirk's "Vision for Excellence" summer camp, a program that grew from a successful pilot in 2010.

"We have kids here that are on the edge. We push them back to the middle," said organizer Kendall Anderson.

About 40 boys ages 10-14 participated in the four-week camp, which wrapped up recently. A \$12,000 grant from the Jacksonville Children's Commission paid for four instructors, learning materials and several field trips. Food donations enabled organizers to serve the boys meals.

To Anderson, a Jacksonville Sheriff's Office veteran who now works as a defense investigator for Shirk, the program has been a natural partner for the Police Athletic League. He used the phrase "classrooms, not courtrooms" to describe the general mission.

"I like it. You learn new things," said Kavon Robinson, 10, a Long Branch Elementary School student.

Robinson said the group read a book called "The Lightning Thief," which piqued his interest in Greek mythology. He talked about his newfound dreams of joining the Army and traveling through Egypt to explore pyramids and learn about ancient history.

"What you find out on this side of the fence is kids get themselves in situations and need help. It's because of choices," said Tommy Tyson, another defense investigator who's worked with Anderson to get the program moving. "The job is to encourage, not push."

The camp took place at a Police Athletic League building on Franklin Street in the city's Eastside.

Police Athletic League Executive Director Derrick Mitchell commended Shirk, saying the camp has helped take the pressure off his program to service that section of town.

It was perhaps the perfect venue for state Sen. Tony Hill, D-Jacksonville, to give a talk to the boys about how to respect themselves, walk away from fights, make good grades and listen to their parents.

Hill said he grew up just a couple blocks away.

"It's not where you come from. It's where you're going," he told the boys.

Hill gave some grave insight into the minds of Tallahassee lawmakers, saying that they are already planning the prisons needed to lock up kids their age.

"You have an opportunity to prove them all wrong," Hill said.

At least everyone except Jeremiah Jackson, that is. That's the made-up name of the defendant the boys created for the mock trial. After the defense attorney's best efforts - even calling in Jackson's father, who'd just bought his son a new bike - the jury rendered a guilty verdict.

Shirk said he's trying to establish a nonprofit entity to raise funds and keep the program running indefinitely. That way, a mock trial may be the only type needed.

"We're trying to reduce our caseload," he said. "If we save one kid, that's one less client and less burden on the taxpayer."