



# ...and assets for all

## A New Verdict for Juvenile Offenders • By Todd Melby

**Why**, in a fit of anger, had 15-year-old Raymond grabbed a sharp knife from the kitchen and chased his older sister through the streets of Lansing, Mich.? When probation

officer Michael C. Clark met Raymond (not his real name) at his family's apartment, he had no illusions about trying to discover what had led up to Raymond's arrest on charges of felonious assault. (Fortunately, local police had intervened before the tall, broad-shouldered teen caught up with his sibling.) Not only might such information prove difficult to ascertain, Clark didn't believe it would prove particularly useful.

Instead, Clark asked Raymond how he had acted at other times in his life when he'd been angry. He even used Raymond's words to describe that fury of emotion.

"When you felt like 'blowing off,' what did you do instead?" Clark wondered.

"I worked on my bikes," Raymond replied and led Clark to the small backyard where rusted bicycle frames, chains, tires, and other parts lay scattered about. Raymond told Clark how people in the neighborhood brought him their old, disheveled two-wheelers to bring back to life.

Once he uncovered Raymond's yen for bikes, Clark took action. The probation officer asked a nearby bicycle shop owner if Raymond could sweep floors without pay as part of his probation. The man agreed, but with the caveat that if Raymond caused trouble, he would be forced to leave.

"The phone stopped ringing about that kid," Clark said. "His passions were touched. When I had his passions, I had everything." And Raymond eventually had a job at the bike shop, where he was hired at minimum wage.

### Between villain and victim

Although this method of using a teen's strengths as a tool for positive change seems promising, it's far from the most popular juvenile justice model. After 18 years as a probation officer, Clark knew that was the case. That's why he called it quits last year and started The Institute for Strengths in Juvenile Justice in Mason, Mich. His goal is to alter the way adults view troubled teens. Judging

from his experience in the juvenile justice system, that's not going to be easy.

Many probation officers still adhere to a punitive model of juvenile justice that's best summed up by the colloquial phrase "trail 'em, nail 'em, and jail 'em," Clark says. Some social workers, meanwhile, remain transfixed by the "problem-solving" model that attempts to discover the source of a child's misfortune.

Both the probation officer's "villain" and the

### When a Youth Takes a Wrong

**A** teen gets in trouble at school or commits a crime. How do you help this youth find her or his strengths? Michael C. Clark, a former probation officer, has adapted Insoo Kim Berg and Scott Miller's 1992 "useful questions" as an interviewing aid. See [www.drugs.indiana.edu/prevention/assets/asset2.html](http://www.drugs.indiana.edu/prevention/assets/asset2.html) for a more in-depth account.

#### What's changing already?

"After being arrested...many people notice good changes have already started before their first appointment... What changes have you noticed in your situation?" Family thera-

social worker's "victim" representations do contain some elements of the truth. After all, Raymond had tried to stab his sister, and he wore hearing aids in both ears, most likely the result of having been beaten as a youngster. But those characterizations fail to reveal Raymond's assets, his strengths at bicycle repair, his willingness to warm quickly to the attention of a caring adult, and his mother's strong desire to keep her family together.

"You don't expect much from villains and victims," Clark says. "There's a third lens we need to use in viewing kids, and that's one that looks at their strengths as individuals."

## Court Alternatives

Two Pennsylvania Healthy Community • Healthy Youth initiatives have embraced that third asset-based lens as a way to help at-risk teens and create alternatives to juvenile court. Pottstown's BUSY Initiative (Building Up Strength in Youth) is pairing with the Pottstown YWCA, Chamber of Commerce, and district courts to create a teen court in that city of 21,400.

"Rather than treating kids as the problem, we want to give kids the opportunity to take responsibility for what they did wrong," says John Winslow, BUSY initiative coordinator. "It's constructive and not simply punitive."

Quakertown is exploring another court alternative. Instead of sentencing teens in the relative seclusion of juvenile court, why not bring family members and affected citizens into the process in a positive way? That question motivated Lee Rush, executive director of justCommunity in Quakertown to champion Community Accountability Circles, which are based on a framework that's been successful elsewhere.

One of the first cases "tried" involved a fire

set by two boys, ages 13 and 14, who had been playing with matches in woods not far from some suburban townhomes. At the Community Accountability Circle, firefighters explained how they had to leave their jobs to rush to the scene, parents described their worries, and a neighbor told the young teens how much her two-year-old daughter misses the sounds of owls in the woods. Since the fire, the owls have taken their distinctive call elsewhere. At that, the boys became weepy.

"This is the kind of stuff that never happens in a court of law," Rush says.

Realizing the consequences of their actions isn't the only point. The boys agreed to help the neighbor plant trees to replace a few of those destroyed by the fire. That positive reintegration into the community helps the

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teens avoid being stigmatized as "bad kids." The circle also gave the boys the opportunity, Rush says, to experience family support, caring neighborhoods, and neighborhood boundaries—developmental assets 1, 4, and 13.

## Assets against Crime

Though the main emphasis of the developmental assets framework is to build up supports, the result can also reduce problems. Thomas English, executive director of the Oregon Council on Crime and Delinquency, believes HC • HY initiatives are inherently anticrime, even though most asset builders,

he says, "have never really seen or realized that what they are doing is crime prevention."

Making the connection between strengthening the developmental assets of youth and preventing crime is not only reassuring, it can also prove to be a funding resource. Congress has increased funding of juvenile anticrime programs during recent sessions, boosting the influence of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), a branch of the U.S. Department of Justice.

"We're taking a balanced, comprehensive approach to juvenile justice issues," says Adam Spector, OJJDP spokesman. "Schools, nonprofits, mental health agencies, and faith-based organizations are all joining this effort. We want the whole community to become involved."

To encourage action, the OJJDP is offering organizations about \$95 million in Title V community prevention grants to provide "communities with the framework, tools, and initial funding necessary to initiate comprehensive and sustainable strategies that address juvenile delinquency."

While these efforts focus on risk reduction, they can be complemented by strength-focused efforts around asset building. As English says, asset builders "are already doing crime prevention; they might as well access the dollars." ●

Todd Melby is a Minneapolis writer.

## Step, Ask about What's Right

pists see that many patients begin making changes as soon as they set up their first appointment. It's important to "ask to find these changes or they remain obscure," says Clark.

### The miracle question

"What if you went to sleep tonight and a miracle happened and the problem(s) that brought you into the court are solved? How would your life be different?"

### Scaling questions

"On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the day after the miracle and 1 is when you were arrest-



ed, where are you today?" Clark says, "Scaling questions help establish a baseline against which future progress can be measured."

### How did you?

Ask "How did you get into this?" or "How did you end up here?" Posing these queries "conveys the tacit opinion of the adolescent that they are better than whatever their current state of trouble might seem to infer about them." Adds Clark, "It's vitally important that this question only be asked after several strengths or past successes have been brought up and reviewed."