

Crimestoppers' Teen Ambassadors honored at lunch

By Christine Bordelon
Clarion Herald

A yearning to learn more about the inner workings of crime solving brought approximately 20 students from Catholic, private and public high schools recently to Federal District Court Judge Jay Zainey's courtroom.

The students witnessed an arraignment of two brothers convicted of drug dealing and learned the harsh penalties – at the federal level – for breaking the law.

"It seemed interesting to me finding out about different drugs and stuff," Alexis Julia, 15, a sophomore from Ursuline Academy, said.

Since September and continuing through May, approximately 38 teens meet twice monthly in the first Teen Ambassadors Against Crime (T.A.A.C.) leadership program through Crimestoppers of Greater New Orleans. By participating, the young people are learning to be "crime prevention role models" for their peers and becoming empowered young people to stop crime.

New initiative

"This is a whole new venture for us," Darlene Cusanza, president and CEO of Crimestoppers said. "By the end of the year, we hope we have a program students can bring back to their schools and share with their fellow students."

So far this school year, participants have visited the New Orleans Police Department Crime Prevention Unit, teamed in the Ropes Challenge leadership course with the Louisiana National Guard in Slidell, met with the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office undercover narcotics division, members of the Drug Enforcement Agency and met the drug dog, engaged in a teen crime forum with leaders in the criminal justice field that aired on WWL-TV in December and, in January, participated in a mock trial with Judge Robin Pittman of New Orleans Criminal Court.

"We saw a live taser. That was cool," Alexis said.

Recognized at luncheon

Program participants were recognized March 17 at the 26th annual Crimestoppers luncheon at the Hilton Riverside (see photo, page 13).

Other planned activities include a teen peace summit in April at the University of New Orleans, visits to the Louisiana Attorney General's office, the St. Tammany Parish Jail and Juvenile Center and organizing a service-learning project in May that produces a campaign to encourage children to speak out against crime and make a positive impact on community safety.

Catholic school students who are participants include Julia and Natalie Cusimano, Ursuline Academy; Chris Huffman and Jarvis Reynolds,

Holy Cross; Jacob Kisse and Joshua Parham, Brother Martin; Ashley MacPhaille and Katie Sepcich, the Academy of the Sacred Heart; Amy Puente and Mary Ryan, St. Mary's Dominican High School; Ashton McRae, Archbishop Rummel; Sarah Morere, Archbishop Chapelle; and Jordan Plaisance and Francesca Tusa, Mount Carmel Academy.

Students cited several benefits of the program.

"We learned how to recognize crimes as they take place and, if we see a crime, we can call Crimestoppers," said Natalie Cusimano, 15, from Ursuline.

Learning the process

While visiting Judge Zainey's court, students heard from attorneys Robert Early and Mike Ciaccio in the public defender's office – representing the brothers against the United States government – that they were witnessing a re-arraignment for the siblings to enter a guilty plea. By pleading guilty in federal court, the students discovered that the criminals waived their rights to trial. If they pleaded not guilty, they had a constitutional right to trial and appeal. They both pleaded guilty to all counts against them. Their guilty plea was more than a confession, Judge Zainey said. "It is a conviction."

"This is the real deal," U.S. Marshall Genny May told students before the two criminals



Photo by Christine Bordelon | CLARION HERALD

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Ed Rivera and Duane Evans with U.S. District Court Judge Jay Zainey, Eastern District of Louisiana, Division A, speak to participants in Teen Ambassadors Against Crime leadership program through Crimestoppers of Greater New Orleans. The students took a field trip in January to Judge Zainey's courtroom to watch an actual re-arraignment.

– one with an eighth-grade education and the other a high school graduate – entered the courtroom. She explained differences between federal and criminal courts. They rose, in respect, as Judge Zainey entered the courtroom.

Careful questioning

"Do you have an objection to being re-arraigned together with your brother?" Judge Zainey asked the brothers independently before he read the counts against them. They took an oath to tell the truth, he advised them of their constitutional rights and proceeded to ask questions to make sure they understood the charges in their indictments.

"Sir, did you, in fact, commit the crime charged in the indictment I just explained to you," Judge Zainey asked them independently. "Yes sir," they both replied to Judge Zainey.

A five-page plea bargain agreement from the federal government was presented to the judge, but he mentioned that he was not mandated to accept the sentence recommended.

"My job is to impose a sentence on you that is considered under the law to be reasonable," Judge Zainey said.

Once the re-arraignment

was completed, students were allowed to ask questions of the judge and the attorney who represented the criminals and those defending the national law.

"You listed 12 things the guys were charged with. How do you remember? What if something was wrong," asked one student.

Public defender George Chaney, representing one brother, said he had reviewed the indictment several times with his client before their court appearance.

"We've gone through this a number of times for an acceptable resolution of this case," he said.

Cusanza thinks this new program opens students' eyes to crime beyond talking to students at school about issues and new laws that affect them, encouraging them to be aware and prevent crime by calling Crimestoppers and the Safe School Hotline (822-1111; 1-877-903-STOP).

She thought that starting Teen Ambassadors Against Crime might be a more concrete way to demonstrate how law enforcement works.

"We initiated the leadership program this year to reach out to a diverse group of kids," she said.

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