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Article published Oct 9, 2006

Volunteers make effort to help juvenile offenders

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The Marion Star

MARION - Dance instructor Quiana Dixon was nervous the first time she entered the Marion Juvenile Correctional Facility as a volunteer. The Marion woman said she expected to find a group of boys in their early teens, but instead she found herself confronted with kids 16 and up.

"I thought, 'What did I get myself in to?'" Dixon said, laughing. "Never in a million years did I think I could go in and teach dance to 16- to 21- year-olds."

Two years later, however, Dixon said her volunteer work with the young men has become one of the most meaningful aspects of her life.

"It's just always been my passion to work with troubled youth," Dixon said, adding she also grew up with much turmoil in her life. When Trecca Thompson, fellow church member and social worker with MJCF, approached Dixon with the idea of teaching dance, she thought she would give it a try.

Dixon, who owns Diverse Moves and specializes in mime, interpretive and hip-hop dance, found herself teaching more than just moves.

"Just because you are in these four walls doesn't mean that you are bound. You are still free," Dixon has told her students. "I try to get in there one-on-one and just get to know each one of them on a personal basis."

Dixon is one of nearly 100 volunteers who make visits to the facility on a regular basis. Some teach creative arts. Others teach music. Others simply go in and talk to the young men about whatever is on their mind.

The time that these volunteers spend at the facility is invaluable, staff members said.

"The process of re-entry - getting the kids back into the community - begins the day they enter the facility," said Andrea

Kruse, public information officer for the Ohio Department of Youth Services.

The facility is constantly trying to prepare the kids for life in the community, teaching them relationship skills, skills that enhance their employability and helping them to put together portfolios and resumes. Because the juveniles are removed from their family, friends and community, the ODYS has determined that community volunteers are critical for the reentry process.

"The volunteer program allows kids to stay in touch with the community on a positive note," said Joan Sill, program director at MJCF.

The ODYS developed its Community Saturation Initiative to encourage volunteers at its eight

facilities statewide. The goal of the initiative is to retain the volunteers already working in the correctional facilities and to attract more volunteers.

"The kids appreciate the volunteers so, so much. They kind of see them as an adopted family," said Joan Sill, program director at MJCF. "(Volunteers) touch the lives of the kids in some ways that we as the staff can't."

Volunteers are required to complete an application as well as a background check, to ensure that the applicants will prove to be positive role models for the kids. Some volunteers may not know how they can help, but the staff said all volunteers will be put to work.

"We've got artistic kids, we've got kids who like to read," Sill said. "We are always in need of volunteers and would like to have as many as possible."

Sill said that while the facility concentrates on getting their kids get a high school education and vocational skills to prepare them to enter the workforce once they're released, volunteers allow the young men a chance to broaden their horizons.

"It gives us the chance to do something different," said 19-year-old Jeryll, an inmate at the facility who has participated in Dixon's mime class. "It's good to see people on the outs look at you as a human being."

Not being judged is important to the young men who acknowledge they have made mistakes and are trying to better themselves for the future.

"When I look at them I look at them like babies. They are so young to be caught up in the system," Dixon said. "They're just looking for someone to show them the path."

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