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Teen court program tackles bullying, hate crimes

A new offshoot of Los Angeles' teen court program focuses on hate and bullying — and tolerance and reform. Defendants face juries of their peers: fellow teenagers.

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Judge David S. Wesley talks to some of the 15 teenagers who served as jurors in a hate crime case Friday in downtown Los Angeles. From left, Martha DeLaTorre, Shyann Hale, Alexandria Hatfield and Ticia Francisco. (Al Seib, Los Angeles Times / July 20, 2012)



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By Teresa Watanabe, Los Angeles Times
July 22, 2012 | 11:14 p.m.

One by one, the three teenage girls took the stand and answered hard questions about their awful actions one night in April.

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When you defecated on her doorstep, what could you possibly have been thinking?

But it was not a prosecutor posing the questions in the hearing in downtown Los Angeles last week, which involved criminal charges of vandalism, vandalism as a hate crime and terrorism by symbol. The questions were asked by students

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launched the idea of the special teen court program, known as Stopping Hate and Delinquency by Empowering Students.

Having presided over countless criminal trials, Wesley said he often thought that some of the offenders could have avoided the criminal justice system if a caring person had worked with them at earlier ages.

"Just because a kid gets in trouble, it doesn't mean they're a bad kid," said Wesley, who also heads the California Assn. of Youth Courts.

Teen court cases typically involve relatively minor charges — such as vandalism, petty theft or battery — by first-time offenders who are seen as good candidates to straighten out through early action.

In Los Angeles, cases usually are referred to the program by the district attorney and Probation Department. The hearings are most often held on school campuses, although Wesley holds the hate crime and bullying cases in an imposing, wood-paneled courtroom at the Stanley Mosk Courthouse in downtown Los Angeles to underscore the seriousness of the acts.

Wesley said anecdotal evidence suggests less than 5% of offenders tried in teen courts repeat their crimes, a lower rate than that of juveniles tried in traditional courts. One reason, he said, is that those convicted in L.A.'s teen courts are required to come back to serve as jurors, giving them a chance to help others and connect with a caring community.

Other students volunteer to serve as jurors; many said they did so because of an interest in law — fueled, for some, by television shows. All receive training. But those selected to participate in the new offshoot program got some additional preparation.

In a five-day training organized by the Museum of Tolerance, they learned about hate crimes, effective questioning and other topics. They also heard real-life experiences: one from Holocaust survivors and another from a gay man and his reformed tormentor.

Elizabeth Hernandez, a 16-year-old Gardena High School student, called the training "life-changing." Hearing the testimony of the anti-gay perpetrator who turned himself around, she said, offered hope for healing others.

But the training, several student jurors said, did not prepare them for the raw emotions displayed at the hearing last week, the third case brought so far.

Some said they choked up as the victim's father read a powerful statement about his shock and disbelief that teenage girls could commit such a horrendous act decades after the mass murder of Jews in the Holocaust.

Teen court program tackles bullying, hate crimes - latimes.com taking part in one of the first cases focused on bullying, bias and hate crimes heard under an offshoot of a long-running youth court program.

In the teen courts that have operated for two decades in Los Angeles, trained high school students question their peers, determine guilt and recommend sentences. One of the founders, L.A. County Superior Court Assistant Presiding Judge David S. Wesley, said that he believed a special program was necessary for the growing problem of bullying and bias among students and that peer review would have a powerful influence on the accused perpetrators.

"It's really not about guilt or innocence. It's about minors being confronted about what they did by their peers," Wesley said. "It's so powerful when peers tell you what you're doing is wrong, rather than adults."

More than 70 high schools in California operate teen court programs, including 18 in Los Angeles, Wesley said. The idea took root here in 1992 in a quintessential Los Angeles way: real cases filmed for a TV show. Although a pilot was made, the show was never picked up.

But Wesley heard about it at the time and jumped at the chance to start a teen court at Wilson High School in El Sereno. Then he helped set up courts at other schools as well. He said he began to notice increasing reports of bullying and hate incidents about five years ago, so he and his colleagues



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The victim, too, expressed anger at the girls, two of them former friends of hers. "I don't think you saying you're sorry ... will ever fix this," she wrote in a statement read by her father. "I hope this stupid act haunts you forever."

Ultimately, the three girls admitted what they had done. The 15 student jurors found two guilty of all charges and the third guilty of vandalism but not a hate crime or terrorism by symbol.

Accepting most of the student jurors' sentencing recommendations, Wesley ordered the girls to attend a youth camp on human relations and, with their parents, a Museum of Tolerance remediation program. He also ordered an evening curfew, counseling, community service, an essay, no contact with the victim and no association with one another during the six-month probation.

Later, the victim's father called the sentence "fair and just."

"It was never our intention to ruin these girls' lives," he said. "I'm hoping all three can learn from this."

That, students said, is the aim of their program.

"It was shocking to find out this stuff is still going on at this time," said Veronica Monarrez, a 16-year-old from Van Nuys High School. "But if we help, maybe we can make a difference. We're working to heal them."

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JoeSexPack at 7:55 AM July 23, 2012

Small guy, as usual, you have no argument, & use insults instead.

JoeSexPack at 6:29 AM July 23, 2012

"Why would you deface your Jewish classmate's home with swastikas and the word 'Jew'?" Words & symbols are words & symbols, no more & no less. Weak people let these things hurt them. The word 'Jew' is not an insult, unless people take it that way.

As usual, kooky Lib's are using their emotions to write laws based on emotion, like 'hate'. These are adjectives, not crimes.

Crimes like rape, murder & arson are no more or less criminal due to any emotion the criminals might have. Whether OJ loved or hated Nicole, she's still dead. Bad laws like this should be repealed.

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