

Marin Voice: Celebrating Marin's Youth Court

By Ann Morrison

The Marin YMCA Youth Court celebrates 10 years of providing restorative justice opportunities for youth with the Hon. Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye, chief justice of California Supreme Court, presiding as keynote speaker at an anniversary luncheon to be held at the Meadow Club in Fairfax on Nov. 7.

Youth Court provides an alternative to the traditional juvenile justice system. This innovative program has diverted more than 900 youth from the juvenile justice system in the past 10 years, with a 95 percent completion rate.

The Youth Court's transformative power is derived from its non-adversarial, peer-to-peer restorative practices. It empowers teens to take an active role in addressing and supporting their peers when they have made a poor choice and broken the law.

Restorative practices focus on learning from mistakes rather than being punished. The goal is to repair harm and relationships impacted. Youth return to the community more reflective, wiser and without a juvenile criminal record.

Substance violations constitute 90 percent of Youth Court referrals. Current data confirm Marin students are dangerously experimenting with alcohol and drugs. Marin teens consume marijuana at twice the national rate, and their use of dangerous pharmaceuticals such as Ecstasy and OxyContin is on the rise.

Current data show that 48 percent of high school students are drinking alcohol and 30 percent of 11th-graders are binge drinking.

In response, the Youth Court developed the Decisions Under the Influence Alcohol & Drug Prevention and Safety Skills Training. In 2008, the Marin training was lauded by the state Administrative Office of the Courts as the "program to emulate" throughout the state.

The goal of the training is to help young people successfully navigate their risk-taking years. Students

gain the knowledge and tools to protect themselves and others, empowering them to be each other's first responders. A Marin grand jury report stated, "The Youth Court's Alcohol & Drug Prevention Safety Skills Training fills the role of the parent in educating kids about alcohol and drugs. The workshop content could be shared with all children, not just those who have already begun drinking or using drugs. Their parents need the information too."

Although Marin is one of the wealthiest counties in the country, too many children live in poverty. Students of color, mostly low income, are at risk of not graduating from school and are vulnerable to trauma, drugs, crime, violence and incarceration.

As much as affluence drives substance access, poverty impedes education.

Five years ago the Youth Court, through its Peer Court program, began deploying restorative practices in schools providing alternatives to suspension. The YMCA is currently leading restorative, collaborative peer-to-peer suspension diversion programs in nine public schools throughout Novato, San Rafael and Marin City.

The Board of Supervisors commended the program for keeping kids in school and out of the juvenile system. It received the 18th Annual Heart of Marin Award for Excellence in Innovation.

Thank you to the volunteers, teens, staff and Don Carney for your innovation on building a history of success.

We hope you can come and help support Marin Youth Court's 10-year anniversary celebration and volunteer recognition luncheon. Please call the YMCA at 415-492-YMCA for further information.

Larkspur Mayor Ann Morrison is a Marin YMCA board member.