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Young people and juvenile justice in Illinois



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Juvenile Probation: A Day on the Front Lines

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By Linda Paul

All this week we're digging into the world of young people in trouble with the law. We figure, if people understand better who the kids are—there's a much better chance they can be helped.

Rodney Purdy is a Cook County Juvenile Probation officer. His job kicks in after a young person is found delinquent, or guilty, by a judge. Probation officers, or P.O.s, are, in a way, the eyes and ears of the court, making sure the kid follows through on the judge's orders. Maybe to go through drug rehab or do community service or attend anger management class. The P.O is supposed to make sure the young person's getting what's needed, to stay out of prison and get a new footing in life.

Officer Purdy says the pulse of probation is out in the streets.

PURDY: I'm gonna pull over. Want to show you this...Right over here...Come outside...I hafta begin here.

I've only known Officer Purdy about 5 minutes when he stops the car and says we need to jump out.

PURDY: Now, right behind you is what we call out on the streets, The Pyramids.. or the Robert Taylor Homes Housing Project. You want the real story? I'm gonna give you the real deal. I'm gonna cut it loose.

Purdy thinks to understand his job, I need to understand his territory.

PURDY: All these – this whole space that's empty – these were projects! This was the heart of our area – it's gone, it's gone. But, here's the problem—where did all the people go? They're in Englewood, they're in Roseland, what they call the wild hundreds. They in Altgeld Gardens and they in the south suburb. So cuz I assigned to this area and all the clients are gone from this area, that doesn't just mean we just, 'Oh, let 'em move on, somewhere else. We stay with 'em! We keep 'em!

That's important to Purdy. On any given day there are about 4,000 youth on

probation in Cook County. And Purdy has 30 of them.

Juveniles are usually on probation for a year or two, for a felony, it's five years. So Purdy gets to know his kids well. When his clients and their families got displaced from the Robert Taylor Homes, conflict moved with them.

PURDY: And all the people who came from here are in different gangs too. So you from 43rd street and you about to move into 79th street. You a Vice Lord and you movin' in to the Gangster Disciples neighborhood. What you think going to happen? It's gonna be friction.

It's early afternoon and we get back into Purdy's 2003 Altima. This is the car he uses for work because it's not flashy so it's not a target. Purdy has to think about safety. Sometimes, when the drug dealers are out, a building can be too dangerous to enter.

We're on our way to see one of Purdy's newer clients. She's a 15 year old we're calling Shironda. (And by the way, we're changing the names of the young people in this story.) Shironda got probation because of a fight at school.

PURDY: One of her girlfriends got attacked by another student, a male student. And my client at the time, who was pregnant, decided to try to intervene and assist her friend.

A teacher jumped into the fray and grabbed Shironda.

PURDY: And my client just out of rage or whatever, grabbed the teacher and pushed her.

Getting in trouble at school is one portal into the juvenile justice system. In 2009 the Chicago police arrested a little over 18, 000 juveniles citywide. Over a quarter of those arrests were made at Chicago Public Schools.

Not all the kids arrested, end up in the juvenile justice system. But many do. Just like Shironda. She was charged with aggravated battery and the judge placed her on probation.

PURDY: Eighteen months anger management, counseling and parenting classes, community services

Other kids may end up on probation if they threaten a teacher or a principal. Verbal aggression can be considered an assault.

Purdy deals with it all. And sometimes with his clients, he has to play the heavy.

PURDY: I want to apply theories and practices of a social worker, but also they've got to know, 'Hey, I'm an Officer of the Court' and I got to let this guy know I'm not playin' with him. Do what you supposed to do or you gonna get locked up, or go to the Department of Corrections

But that's only for the most difficult cases. When a kid repeatedly violates the conditions of probation. Today, Purdy has on his social worker hat.

GIRL'S VOICE: Yeah, he boo hoo in '

Shironda is showing off her newborn and Officer Purdy asks if he can look around.

PURDY: Can you show me where your baby sleeps? Have you got a crib?

SHIRONDA: I don't have a crib, but...

PURDY: Can I see?

SHIRONDA: This is the room he sleeps right alongside of me on that blanket right there.

PURDY: You don't want to do a crib?

Purdy is making a list of items Shironda can get for her baby through an emergency fund. He scans the room and his eyes pause at the dresser.

PURDY: Ohh, that's the ultrasound. You kept it?

SHIRONDA: Yeeaaaahh, I kept it.

PURDY: Dang, your worse than me. You got it framed!

SHIRONDA: (laughs)

Before Purdy leaves here today he makes sure that Shironda knows how to enroll in a parenting class.

PURDY: And I still want to invite you to my college tour program.

SHIRONDA: Gooooodd! I wanna go!

PURDY: If you continue to do what you supposed to do.

Shironda: Okay.

The college tour program is something Purdy put together years ago. It has nothing to do with the probation department. He and other POs hold bake sales and skating parties to raise the money. Then they rent a bus – use their vacation time – and probation and other at-risk kids – many who've never been out of the city – on a week-long adventure.

PURDY So April 21 we're goin to Florida, Atlanta, Clark, Morehouse, Spelman, all that...Would you like to go?

As we're getting ready to go, Shironda, almost as an afterthought, drops some good news on Purdy

SHIRONDA: Oh, did I tell you I talked to the teacher? We was just talkin'. I told her I really do apologize for talking to her like that. And she's like, 'Okay, I accept your apology, just don't do it again. So ever since then –now we cool, we close. We talk to each other. I'm her baby now... (laughs)

As we leave Shironda's apartment and head for the car, we get to talking about what kinds of kids end up on probation.

We're back in the car now. We get to talking about what kind of kids end up on probation.

PURDY: Okay, here's Purdy's philosophy.

He deals, he says, with three types of kids. First, basically good kids like Shironda who just made a really stupid mistake. That's like half his caseload.

Then there are the kids, he says, who are influenced. These kids make up about 40percent of his clients. They break the law because they start hanging with the wrong crowd. Or they crave things they can't afford.

SHIRONDA: They go sell weed, or break into someone's home. It's still wrong but, 'Hey- cuz I gotta do this, I gotta survive. There's no food in the house. All my friends at school got the new Air Jordan.' But when you sit down and talk to 'em, these some really good kids, getting decent grades in school. 'Hey man, why you rob the pizza man? I'm hungry.' I know it sound stupid, but yeah, that's what these kids do .

And then -- there are the hard heads, the knuckle-heads, Purdy calls them. They make up the last 10percent of his caseload .

PURDY: Then you have those kids, I'm sorry. They probably been been taught, maybe they haven't, but they don't have no respect for life. They don't care.

They gonna do what they wanna do. And those the type of kids a little bit harder to work with but I love working with them. I loooooove working with the hard heads 'cuz if you can kinda change that hard-head way of thinking then that person won't go out here no more, trying to hurt somebody or hurt themselves.

And I don't even have to throw jail in their faces, because a lot of these kids, they don't care about getting' locked up. Hell, a lot of these kids don't even care about dying or getting shot, so what? But those kids -- I like to come after them. I want them to understand, there is value in their life. And somewhere, somehow someone musta told them that there wasn't.

ambi: (door slams)

PURDY: Hey, Officer Purdy, how are you doing?

We've come to visit Audtrie, the mother of 3 brothers, who have all been on probation with Purdy. I explain to her that we're doing stories about kids who intersect with the juvenile justice system and she says:

AUDTRIE: Yes. That's my boys. Yes.

We're at a community center on the South Side where Audtrie works as an after school coordinator.

AUDTRIE: My boys, they used to call me "the library lady ." We used to go to the library every day. My boys were on honor roll in elementary school. I was a parent volunteer for 10 years at the elementary school, I was involved.. When my boys went to high school, they did the 'flip' on me.

I know what it was-because they saw money. They saw the little boys on the corner doin' this. And they saw them with this on. They saw them with that on. And CHACHING, thass what my boys, see?

Purdy is here today to talk about Audtrie's youngest boy. Fifteen-year-old Vishon recently completed probation. But about a month later, he caught a new case.

AUDTRIE: He's in jail again. For possession of a gun.

Every year in Cook County kids between 15 and 16 years old, but charged with serious crimes, have their cases automatically transferred to adult court where they're eligible for much harsher penalties. It happens to 100 to 150 kids each year, and that's what happened to Vishon.

PURDY: We way ahead of ourselves, but should he get probation, you know he's expelled from Chicago Public Schools.

AUDTRIE: Oh, I already got that letter.

Audtrie and Purdy are both hoping that the new judge in adult court will send Vishon back to juvenile probation so that Purdy can keep an eye on him.

PURDY: If they ask me to come in, I'll say 'Hey, I think he's a good kid. It's just the environment he's in, but I don't think he's a killer gonna shoot up a whole school.'

AUDTRIE: I don't think that was the case neither Purdy, but, I just think he made a dumb choice. I think he made a stupid, stupid choice.

Audtrie is glad that her son got caught at school carrying that gun. And she says Vishon is glad, too. Because if he'd left school with a gun that day, he cudda been shot .

AUDTRIE: Yes, that's exactly why. Or he cudda hurt somebody..

Vishon says he's not gang banging any more, but old rivals may not care. Or believe it. The day before he brought a gun to school some guys shot at him, but instead hit his friend, sending the friend to the hospital.

That's why, Vishon claims, he carried a gun to math class that day. He'd heard that he would be next.

Audtrie has no idea whether the judge in adult court will believe that story, or even take it into account.

And Officer Purdy has no idea if Vishon will be locked up, go to adult probation, or perhaps, as he hopes, be put back on juvenile probation with him.

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