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# Reclaiming kids who have fallen by the wayside

Alice Popovici | May. 27, 2009

Payton and Yadelska Wynne hold their sons, 3-year-old Josiah and 5 month-old Isaiah, outside their home at Boys Town in Washington. (Alice Popovici)

WASHINGTON -- Sloane, 16, has a firm handshake and a polite smile. ?Nice to meet you,? he says, opening the door to the brick house that sits in a well-tended cul-de-sac behind the office of Boys Town of Washinggon, D.C. Jazz plays softly inside the living room, and the air carries a fresh floral scent.

For Sloane and 15-year-old Kevon -- a soft-spoken boy who also extends a polite greeting -- the arrival of a visitor to the house is a chance to practice new skills.

Communication. Self-expression. Respect. The boys said they always knew the basic rules of good behavior, but before entering the juvenile justice program at Boys Town and moving in with family teachers Payton and Yadelska Wynne, no one had expected them to act accordingly.

Their days are busy and governed by routine. After the 6:30 a.m. wake-up, the boys eat breakfast, complete chores, read and discuss a biblical passage (a step that is optional but encouraged) and prepare for school. In the evenings they do homework and participate in self-government meetings with the Wynnes. They head upstairs for the night by 9 p.m.

Both Sloane and Kevon, whose last names were left out at the request of Boys Town, came to the Wynne household after staying briefly at the district?s Oak Hill juvenile detention center. So far, the arrangement is working out.

?It?s calm, it?s quiet, nothing happens,? Kevon said, in contrast to the noise and late-night car crashes he had gotten used to back home, where he lived with his mother and siblings. Here he stays in, while at home he went out on a regular basis.

The teenager, whose older brother is serving time in jail, ended up at Oak Hill after a recent arrest on robbery charges. ?It was just some things,? he said, not going into details. He was already on probation for assault on

police officers.

For Sloane, the trouble started about two years ago, when he was arrested on charges of attempted vehicle theft. That night, he had been drinking and arguing with his father.

?I went a block away and attempted to steal somebody?s car,? he said. By the time he realized this was a bad idea, he was surrounded by police, who had been called by a neighbor watching the street.

For the next couple of years he was in and out of the Youth Services Center facility and spent some time in drug rehabilitation for treatment of marijuana use. When he would come out of the institutions, he stayed away from home to evade police, who had a warrant out for his arrest.

Now that he has turned himself in to authorities, he is starting to take responsibility for his actions and trying to turn his life around.

?Since I?ve been here I?ve been working on a relationship with my father,? he said. Before, when his father said no, Sloane didn?t listen.

?I just, kind of, didn?t respect my father as my father because of his drinking,? he said. ?I just didn?t think I had to listen to him.?

But here, there are no arguments. Rules are rules. Payton Wynne, 29, who has worked as an assistant youth pastor at several Washington churches, said he and Yadelska, 27, try to bring consistency into the boys? lives by being positive role models. They treat the boys with kindness and respect and expect the same in return.

Wynne said he doesn?t have reservations about his 5-month-old and 3-year-old sons being in the company of teenagers with a criminal record, adding that he and Yadelska keep a close eye on their children. Still, as a matter of policy, the household is manned around the clock by assistant teachers who have a desk near the bedrooms upstairs.

Boys Town began in Omaha, Neb., in 1917, founded by Fr. Edward Flanagan, a Catholic priest who once said that there is ?no such thing as a bad boy,? said Jeff Peterson, executive director of the Washington organization. Flanagan believed that young people will turn their lives around if they have access to a good education and are taught life skills in a supportive, family setting. Boys Town was never a Catholic organization, but was founded on the belief that spiritual development and worship -- regardless of faith -- was a significant part of a child?s education.

Peterson said, ?Fr. Flanagan truly was a visionary,? whose work is continued by 14 organizations serving boys and girls across the nation.

Boys Town hires couples like the Wynnes, patient and tenacious people who receive intensive training prior to entering the program, and are paid a salary of $60,000 per year to live in one of the four residences on-site and provide the guidance, discipline and encouragement that many young people lack in their own homes. On average, the children spend about 6 months with the surrogate parents.

?A lot of these kids, nobody?s watching them,? Peterson said, ?telling them ?no? periodically. A lot of those skills have just fallen by the wayside.? He sees a great deal of risk-taking behavior in young people, small offenses that gradually lead to more serious crimes. He and other staff members said they have noticed an increase in violent crime among young people.

Juvenile arrests in the district have seen a significant increase in the last several years, climbing steadily from

2,706 in 2003 to 3,762 in 2008, according to statistics from the Metropolitan Police Department. The number of juvenile arrests made in the first four months of this year already marks a 5 percent increase over the same time period in 2008.

By comparison, statistics for juvenile crime published by the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention show a nationwide decline in violent crime and property crime from 2003 to 2004, followed by a slight uptick in crime in 2005 and 2006, which is reversed by a slight decrease in 2007. In the last decade, the national figure for juvenile arrests saw a gradual decrease to about 2.2 million per year, after peaking in the mid-1990s.

No one disputes that there is a problem. But lawmakers, law enforcement representatives, juvenile justice advocacy groups and community outreach organizations often disagree on the best solution. Two of several juvenile justice bills introduced this year in Congress take aim at the issue by very different means.

The Gang Abatement and Prevention Act of 2009, sponsored by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., would increase law enforcement resources for investigating and prosecuting violent crime and gang crime, increase penalties for criminal activity as well as expand some gang prevention programs. The Youth PROMISE (Prison Reduction through Opportunities, Mentoring, Intervention, Support and Education) Act, sponsored by Sen. Robert Casey, D-Pa., would fund prevention and intervention programs for at-risk youth through schools, law enforcement agencies and community-based organizations.

Law enforcement representatives disagree with the Youth PROMISE Act.

?We feel [that] having harsh punishment is a good deterrent against crime,? said Andy Mournighan, director of governmental affairs at the National Association of Police Organizations, which represents rank-and-file law enforcement officers. The bill ?doesn?t provide enough enforcement measures for gang crime.?

Mournighan added that the organization is working on a compromise bill.

?We?d be willing to compromise a bit on the mandatory minimum sentencing? of the Gang Abatement and Prevention Act, she said. ?It would be great to have a bill that everyone in the juvenile justice community supports.?

The Rev. Donald Isaac, executive director Washington?s East of the River Clergy-Police-Community Partnership, said he understands communities are concerned about public safety. But stricter punishment and incarceration will not fix the problem, which has roots in the District?s low-performing schools and lack of structure within family units.

?One of the things that I can?t help to think about is that prison planners use fourth-grade reading levels to determine institutional needs,? said the Baptist minister who partners with police, community groups and clergy of varied faiths to bring educational programs to at-risk youth in Wards 7 and 8, two of the district?s poorest neighborhoods.

Isaac knows the juvenile delinquency problem is greater than the resources of the organization, and he gauges progress on a case by case, family by family basis. Many positive stories have come out of the neighborhoods in the nine years since the organization began, but alongside the people who went on to college and successful careers, there were plenty of others who resisted change. It is an ongoing effort.

But to ?lock them up and throw away the key? is not the answer, because prisons are breeding grounds for more hardened criminals, Isaac said. ?If we throw the key away, we have to go find it.?

*Alice Popovici is an* NCR *contributor who writes from the Washington area.*

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Boys Town
www.boystown.org

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