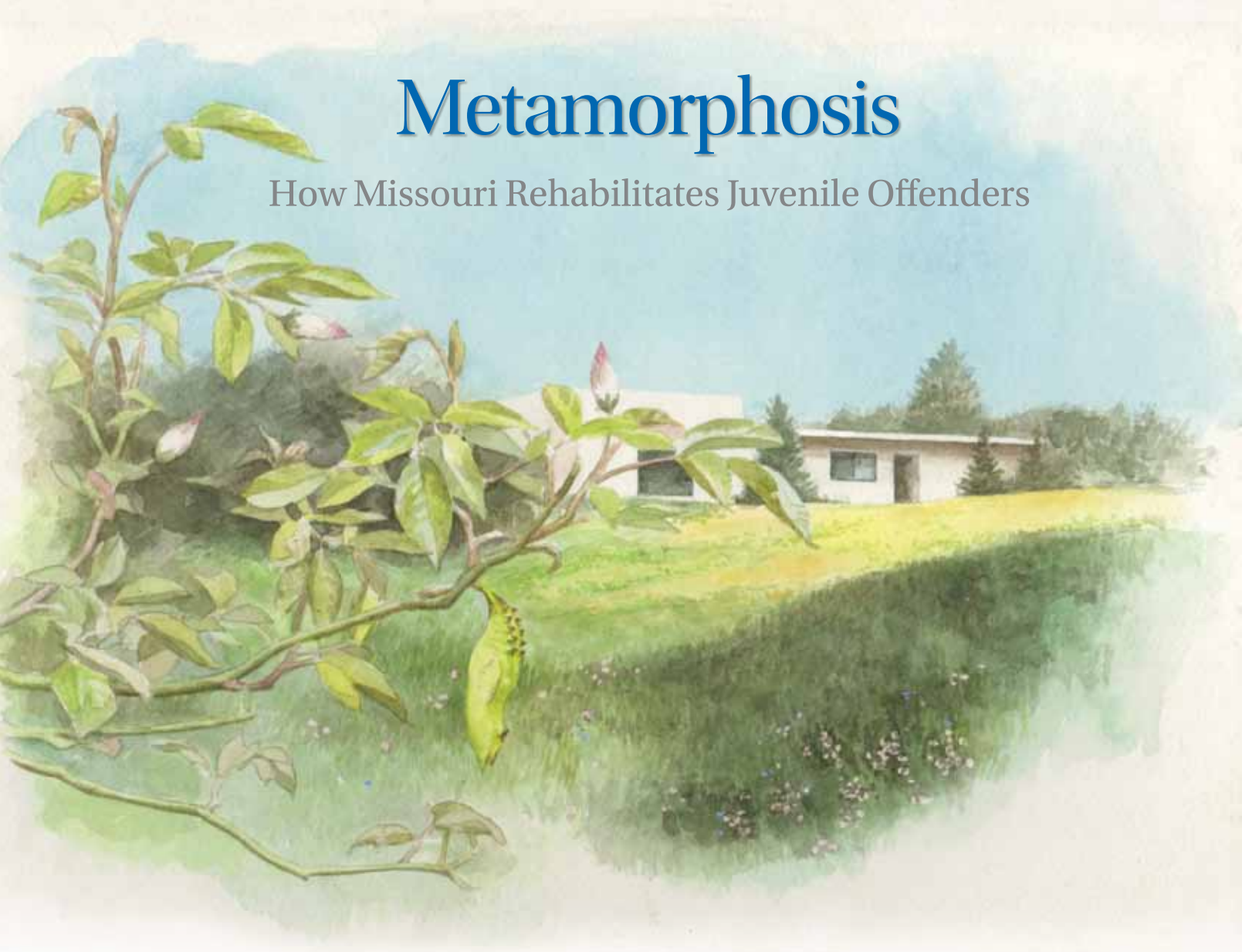


Metamorphosis

How Missouri Rehabilitates Juvenile Offenders



BY JENNIFER DUBIN

T Tyler, 15, was arrested for breaking into cars. Eric, 16, got caught burglarizing homes. And Jason, 16, left a party drunk and got charged with driving while intoxicated.

Despite their tender ages, all three had long histories of drug abuse and run-ins with the law in the state of Missouri. Had they committed their crimes anywhere else in America, they likely would have been sentenced to large correctional facilities for juvenile delinquents.

Often referred to as reform or training schools, such facilities tend to house anywhere from 200 to 300 youth. Inside, juvenile offenders spend several months—sometimes years—in concrete cellblocks or large barracks with guards. They wear prison-issued uniforms, like the notorious orange jumpsuit. They spend several hours—sometimes days—in isolation if they act out. A few hours

each week, they attend “school,” often nothing more than a review of basic math and reading skills in a classroom crowded with behavior problems and special needs. Reports have shown that some endure abuse from each other and even from staff. They often learn nothing from their mistakes or about how to improve their lives. They learn only that society wants to punish them and then expects them to rehabilitate themselves with tons of idle time.* (For more on the problems with common approaches to juvenile corrections, see “Juvenile Confinement in Context” on page 6.)

Missouri teaches youngsters like Tyler, Eric, and Jason a different lesson. In the early 1980s, the state closed its training schools and began to create a network of small facilities focused on

*The Annie E. Casey Foundation advocates for juvenile justice reforms and has documented the horrendous conditions of many juvenile corrections institutions in the United States. For the foundation’s work on juvenile justice issues, visit www.aecf.org/OurWork/JuvenileJustice.aspx. To learn more about specific problems plaguing juvenile corrections, see *No Place for Kids: The Case for Reducing Juvenile Incarceration*, available at <http://bit.ly/qOsV3U>.

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therapy and education, not punishment. Missouri's Division of Youth Services (DYS) runs the facilities, which include day treatment centers and group homes for youth who commit minor offenses, such as drug possession or theft, and residential centers with moderate to high levels of security for those who commit serious crimes, such as sexual assault, armed robbery, or arson. No facility holds more than 50 youth, and all staff members receive significant training.

Missouri's approach has helped thousands of juveniles (defined by the state as anyone 17 or younger) make better choices in their lives. Of the 2,200 youth committed to DYS each year, between 84 and 88 percent are productively engaged upon their release from the agency, which means they're working or attending school. Compared with juvenile offenders in other states, those in Missouri also have lower recidivism rates.[†]

Even in its residential centers, Missouri treats juvenile offenders as students, not criminals. Much like a well-run school, every minute is structured. Youth take classes in mathematics, science, social studies, English, physical education, and vocational education for six hours each day. They can earn their high school diplomas or GEDs. They can learn welding and woodwork. They eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner together with staff members, and they clean up after meals. In the mornings, they wake up and dress in their own clothes, usually T-shirts and jeans. In the evenings, they engage in group therapy to help each other understand personal problems and devise healthy ways to cope. They sleep in bunk beds with headboards that many personalize with pictures from home and inspirational quotes.

Tyler, Eric, and Jason committed crimes serious enough to land them in residential facilities. (To protect their privacy, I have changed their names.) During their confinements, they have shared past traumas with peers and have leaned on them for support. They have earned academic credits for school and renewed their interest in learning.

They may chafe at the idea, but despite their deepening voices and patches of stubble, Missouri knows they're still children. Deep down, they, too, realize they have a lot more growing up to do. "I wish I was sent here a long time ago," says Jason, with a level of maturity that would please his parents and his public school teachers. "I could have already been on the way to success instead of doing all the bad things I've done."

Care after Crime

When a juvenile commits a serious crime in Missouri, he or she usually spends at least a month awaiting a court date in a local juvenile detention facility not run by DYS. For minor crimes, a youth may usually stay at home if the judge believes the youth will show up for court and does not pose a risk to the community. In detention, juveniles tend to sleep in individual rooms at night and spend much of the day in common areas. They may receive some type of academic instruction for part of the day, but mostly their day is unstructured.

A judge will commit a youth to DYS if the crime is serious

enough and if he or she has exhausted local interventions such as probation, family counseling, or community service. Once the judge commits a youth to DYS, the court loses jurisdiction and DYS provides treatment and education services. Girls tend to commit fewer and less serious offenses, and in residential facilities DYS treats them separately.

Within the first five days of commitment to DYS, a service coordinator meets the youth and his or her family. The coordinator conducts a comprehensive risk and needs assessment by looking at family history, prior referrals to the juvenile office, school records, and mental health history to determine the youth's placement within a DYS program. DYS is divided into five geographic regions with programs and facilities throughout the state, and officials make every effort to treat youth as close to their homes as possible. Although two-thirds of youth in DYS come

Of the 2,200 youth committed to DYS each year, between 84 and 88 percent are productively engaged upon their release, which means they're working or attending school.

from urban areas, those from rural parts of the state may still be a two-hour drive away from home.

For youth with minor offenses, the coordinator places them in one of 10 nonresidential treatment centers, where they spend weekdays in academic classes and counseling and then return to their homes at night. Treatment here can last anywhere from a month to a year. Offending youth who need more structure and support stay in one of seven group homes that typically house 10 to 12 youth for four to six months. They attend school within the group home, but they can hold jobs and participate in activities in the surrounding community.

Juveniles who commit more serious crimes and have a history of offending are placed in one of 19 moderate care facilities usually for six to nine months. Here, staff members closely supervise youth and allow them to participate in community activities and field trips.

A step above moderate care facilities are six secure care facilities that house juveniles who commit the most serious crimes. Unlike other residential facilities (with the exception of one moderate care facility), a fence surrounds secure care facilities, where juveniles usually stay for nine to twelve months and participate less often in outside activities.

One of these secure care facilities houses juveniles who have been tried and convicted as adults. They have committed the most serious felonies, such as armed robbery or murder. Still, they

[†]There is no documented national recidivism rate for juvenile offenders. But compared with other states that measure recidivism in similar ways, Missouri's outcomes for youth are far better. The Annie E. Casey Foundation has documented these outcomes and compared them with those of other states. See *The Missouri Model: Reinventing the Practice of Rehabilitating Youthful Offenders*, available at <http://bit.ly/HpQTO1>.

receive the same treatment and educational opportunities as youth in other DYS facilities. These juveniles, however, have received dual sentences in the state's dual jurisdiction program, in which the judge initially suspends the adult sentence and sends the youth to a secure care facility in Montgomery City. After the youth finishes his juvenile sentence, and before he turns 21, a judge decides whether to release him outright, place him on probation (if he has successfully completed the DYS program), or send him to adult prison.

No matter the facility, youth receive intense care. Within two to three weeks of entering a DYS program, a youth and his or her family usually meet again with the service coordinator. Together, they devise an individualized treatment plan. The plan outlines specific objectives, such as rebuilding family relationships and making healthy connections with adults, that the youth will work on during his or her stay. In DYS, families are vital to treatment; the organization studiously avoids placing blame. "We have a basic, core set of philosophies that people want to do well and succeed" and "that they're doing the best they can based on the resources available to them," says Tim Decker, the director of DYS. Poor behavior "is a symptom of unmet needs and often an inappropriate way that young people and families are trying to meet their needs."

To determine educational needs, DYS helps the youth and his or her family create an individualized education plan, which outlines academic goals—say, reading on grade level or earning a GED—that the youth hopes to achieve. Unlike many juvenile correctional systems in the United States, Missouri's DYS is an accredited school district. It has a statewide education supervisor who functions like a superintendent and reports to the DYS director. He oversees the work of regional education supervisors, who hire teachers and provide professional development. DYS employs 130 teachers, many of whom are certified in special education. Their expertise is crucial given that 30 percent of youth committed to DYS have special needs. Often, learning problems lead to frustrations with school that prompt them to commit crimes in the first place. Students attend class every day except weekends, and, unlike the majority of public schools, the DYS school year is 12 months.

In all DYS programs, juveniles receive treatment and education in small groups so staff can best meet their needs. In residential facilities, for example, youth both undergo therapy and attend school in groups of 10 to 12. During the day, each group works closely with a classroom teacher and a "youth specialist," a staff member who serves as a teacher's aide. That closeness is underscored by the fact that youth call all staff members, even teachers, by their first names.

Youth specialists tutor students in class and help manage classroom behavior. DYS does not group students by grade level or age, although they can range in age from 11 to 17. Instead, teachers and youth specialists typically teach all academic subjects and differentiate instruction. Some facilities divide English, mathematics, science, and social studies among teachers so that each teacher and youth specialist has to teach only two subjects. Despite the age variation, this one-room schoolhouse approach allows youth to receive individualized instruction and to develop

strong bonds with group members. In many cases, youth come to view their group as a family, making it easier to share hopes and fears.

In the evenings, after the classroom teachers and their youth specialists leave, each group participates in therapy with two other youth specialists, who do not work in classrooms. They work evening and overnight shifts and strictly focus on counseling and youth development. At every DYS facility, staff members closely interact with only a few juveniles at a time. "They work with one group of kids where they really get to know them and develop a healthy, adult-child relationship," Decker says. "That, of course, is based on structure and a rigorous schedule and discipline, but also there's an element of caring and concern."

An Opportunity to Learn

The sign in front of the long, one-story brick building just off the interstate and around the corner from a gas station and a liquor store says Rich Hill Youth Development Center. A moderate care facility about 70 miles from Kansas City in southwestern Missouri,

the center sits on a road with no outlet in Rich Hill, a small, rural city with a population of about 1,500. It's best described as a farming town. Row crops, including corn, wheat, and soybeans, fill the largely flat landscape.

Nothing about the center's façade suggests that juvenile offenders live here. Neither a fence nor a guard secures the building's perimeter. But the front doors are locked, and visitors must be let in. Once inside, they hand their car keys to a staff member, who locks them up (employees here don't take chances).

A facility manager, three teachers, 18 youth specialists, a cook, a nurse, and two maintenance men work at the center. Rich Hill is one of the smaller moderate care facilities: it can house up to 24 youth. As of this writing, 23 boys, ages 11 to 17, are here. An extra space is held open for what's called "shelter status," in case a youth who has completed his stay in the program and has trouble making the transition home needs to return for more support.

At Rich Hill, the 23 youth are grouped into two teams called the Mustangs and the Titans. Years ago, a different set of juveniles grew tired of being referred to as Group 1 and Group 2 and came up with the names, which have stuck.

The teams occupy different sides of the building, which are identical. Each group has a day treatment room with couches and chairs and a phone the boys use twice a week to call home. Each group also has its own classroom. And each group sleeps in its own big, open dorm room, with bunk beds along one wall and wardrobes along the other. In front of the bunk beds, a youth specialist sits at a desk to keep watch over the boys throughout the night. At all DYS residential facilities, staff members supervise youth 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Just past the desk is the bathroom: four toilet stalls and six shower stalls. The laundry room, with a washer and dryer, is a few steps away. The boys wash their own clothes, but as a safety precaution, detergents are locked in a closet, along with cleaning supplies, so they can't abuse any chemicals.

The cafeteria, a light-filled space with windows and walls half painted red and half paneled with wood, sits in the middle of the building. Together, the two groups and staff members eat meals



here. As another safety measure, knives are nowhere in the room, only forks and spoons.

An hour before lunch one January morning, the Mustangs sit in their classroom and listen to their teacher, Jim Kithcart, prepare them for an upcoming field trip. In February, staff members will take them 15 miles east to the Schell-Osage Conservation Area to observe eagles. So his students make the most of their visit, Kithcart introduces important background knowledge. He shows them a video, *Where Eagles Soar*, produced by the Missouri Department of Conservation, and gives each student handouts from the department. He discusses the animals' size and strength. And he has written words such as "eaglet," "endangered," and "extinct" on the board.

"Do you want to tell Edwin about eagles' strength?" Kithcart asks the class after a student walks in with a youth specialist in the middle of the lesson. When students need to come and go from the room for various reasons, such as a visit to the nurse's office, a youth specialist always accompanies them. "They can crush a baseball," one boy tells Edwin. "Think what an eagle can do to your hand," says another.

"How many of you guys have ever owned a snake?" Kithcart asks. All hands go up. "Do snakes have power?" Everyone immediately says yes. Kithcart notes that animals smaller than humans are sometimes surprisingly strong. Size alone, he explains, does not always convey strength. He knows his audience; the subject fascinates his students, all of whom are completely engaged in the lesson. "For most of our boys, it'll be their first up-close look at an eagle," Kithcart says later. "Every kid in the program will talk about it until he leaves."

For 14 years, Kithcart has worked at Rich Hill. A certified social studies teacher whose mother and several aunts and uncles teach in public schools, Kithcart teaches all academic subjects just like he would in elementary school. He's a native of Rich Hill who still helps out at his family's orchard. After college, he wanted to work with his hands before teaching full time, so he joined a laborers' union and poured concrete in Kansas City for two years. Then he

came home to Rich Hill. His booming voice and easy smile serve him well at the center where boys sometimes arrive shy and withdrawn. He chose to teach here instead of a regular public

school for the small class size and the chance to help troubled youth change their lives.

He takes pride in former students like Chris, now a Marine, whose picture he keeps on his desk. Kithcart taught the young man, convicted of a sexual offense, about 10 years ago. He describes him as bright, with an incredible memory. As part of a civics lesson one year, Kithcart asked his students to recite the name of every American president in less than 30 seconds. "He went all the way from Washington to Bush, and just to show me how good he was, he went backwards," he says. "He did it in just a little over the prescribed time. Everybody in the class jumped up like a home run was hit." Kithcart remembers how Chris, who came to Rich Hill quiet and reluctant to share, proudly smiled. "Those are the moments I teach for."

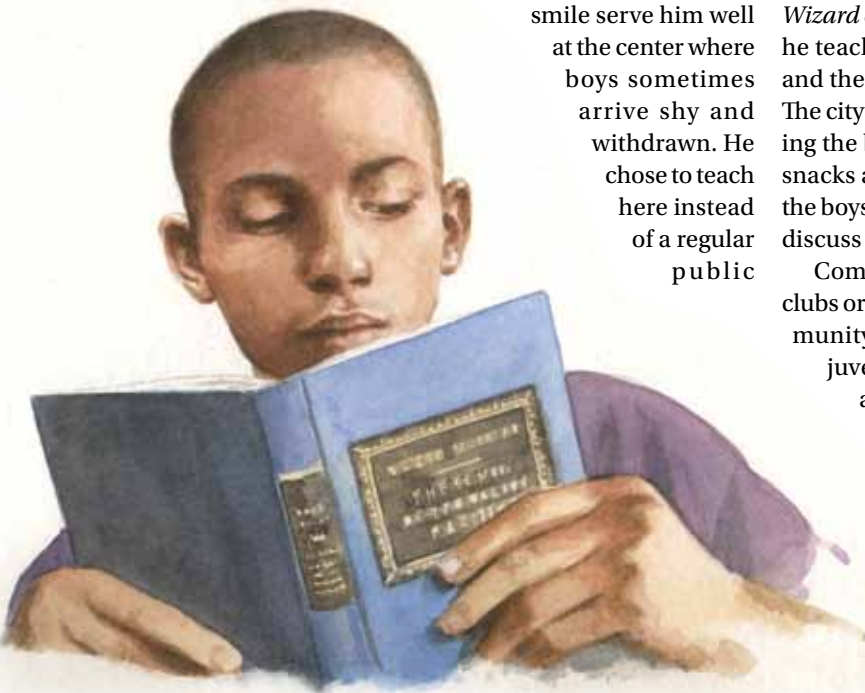
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To teach all academic subjects (the boys have a separate vocational teacher), Kithcart follows state curriculum guides. But like all DYS teachers, he chooses his own materials. He prefers to use textbooks for basic math and language arts. He also supplements instruction with novels, computer programs, and individual reading assignments. Paperback editions of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Treasure Island* fill his classroom's bookshelves; he teaches about 10 novels each year. In late January, Kithcart and the Titans' teacher, Clayson Lyons, are teaching *Old Yeller*. The city's community book club donated copies and is also reading the book. One evening in February, club members bearing snacks and drinks will visit the center to discuss the book with the boys. Each year, the club chooses a different book to read and discuss with them.

Communities tend to embrace DYS facilities. Besides book clubs or other community groups, each facility works with a community liaison council, whose members may bake cakes for juveniles on their birthdays or throw them holiday parties and barbecues. Staff members supervise the visits, which help youth practice social skills. In Rich Hill, relations between the center and the community are especially good. Besides teaching at the center, Kithcart is the mayor of the city of Rich Hill.

To prepare for the book club's visit, the students read *Old Yeller* aloud in class. Because they spend

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evenings in group therapy, they are not assigned homework; they do all their schoolwork in class.

Kithcart says that most students, despite their ages, often read and do math at fifth- and sixth-grade levels. As a result, he can present most lessons to the whole class. For students further behind or ahead and who need more individualized instruction, he, or Jeff Tourtillott, his youth specialist, works with them one-on-one. But to a large degree, “we’re gap fillers,” he says.

This afternoon, Kithcart and Tourtillott fill in gaps with measurement. A handful of Mustangs, ages 13 to 17, have math textbooks open in front of them. Half of the students have left the room to attend their vocational class, while the rest measure various lengths with rulers.

For each textbook problem, Jason neatly records his answers. Wearing glasses and a Mizzou baseball cap, he sits in his seat, focused on his work—the picture of good behavior. It’s hard to believe that before he came to Rich Hill three months ago, the 16-year-old from Joplin routinely caused trouble. “I stole money from my parents,” he says. “I stole money from stores.” He drank excessively and used cocaine. He also fought with his classmates and did little schoolwork. The local juvenile office eventually placed him on probation.

A few months into probation, though, he calmed down. He drank less and made good grades. It seemed he had turned a corner. Then disaster struck. On May 22, 2011, Jason was at home with friends when a tornado tore his house to shreds. Though he and his friends were not hurt, Jason says the trauma of the event derailed his progress. “Every time wind would pick up, I’d freak out.” He had nightmares and drank heavily to cope.

After leaving a party in October, Jason crashed his car, in which two of his friends were riding. No one was hurt, but police charged him with a DWI and endangering the welfare of children; like him, his friends were 16.

After a month in detention, Jason was sent to Rich Hill. “The first night I got here, I started talking about the things I needed to talk about,” he says. “I just let everything out.”

Time to Share

DYS has developed a treatment model that enables youth to share. Each facility may tweak certain aspects of the process, but all facilities approach it the same way. At Rich Hill, each boy memorizes the facility’s 11 expectations (for example, respect yourself and those around you, have a positive attitude, give sincere effort) and presents them to three staff members in his first seven days at the center. Then he writes and presents in group therapy his

life story and a family tree. These include details of how he grew up and his relationships with family members. “No one knows more about them than they do,” says Danielle Rolph, Rich Hill’s facility manager. “That’s where they start.”

If boys discuss past abuse or deaths of loved ones, they tend to get emotional, Rolph says. In group therapy, it’s not uncommon to see tears. But the process, though painful, is important: family history gives the youth specialists insight into how each boy views himself and others. For instance, a youth who has been abused by family members may describe them as loving, Rolph says, so “his idea of relationships may be skewed.”

After detailing his family history, each boy chronicles the 24 hours leading up to his committing offense and presents it in group therapy. When he shares his “CO,” as the boys call it, he includes the events that led to his arrest, as well as his thoughts and feelings.

With the support of youth specialists, the boys identify their negative behavior patterns. Once they recognize their need for change, they spend the bulk of therapy learning how to regulate their emotions. Then they focus on the transition home. The boys create relapse prevention plans, which detail the steps they must take to succeed outside the facility. These plans include supports, such as a list of positive friends and family members the boys can rely on once they get home, as well as a list of people they should avoid.

After a youth specialist has signed off on the plan, the service coordinator, who assigned the youth to Rich Hill and has been meeting with him monthly, sets up a transition meeting with the youth and his family. They discuss what the youth needs—therapy or academic supports, for instance—to succeed back home. If the youth plans to return to school, the service coordinator will invite a school representative, such as a counselor or a teacher, to attend the meeting. Often, the service coordinator will help the youth find a job. DYS has partnerships with local businesses and non-profits willing to employ rehabilitated juvenile offenders. Even



after the youth leaves the facility, the service coordinator continues meeting with him for four to six months, routinely checking in to see how he's doing.

To prepare for the transition, boys go home on two- or three-day passes before they've completed their stays in the program, so they and their families can gradually readjust to living together. It would be an understatement to say the boys look forward to such visits. Just ask Tyler. One January afternoon, he anxiously stands inside Rich Hill's locked front doors with his hands jammed in the pockets of his jeans. He has lived at Rich Hill for five months and officially leaves in a couple of weeks. In that time, he says, he has learned how to treat his mother and sisters respectfully and live a drug-free life. In a few minutes, he will leave on his three-day pass. Tyler's service coordinator will save his mother a trip and drive him the hour and a half home. "I was counting the days," says the 15-year-old, excitedly.

Before he came to Rich Hill, Tyler abused pills, drank alcohol, and smoked marijuana. When his anger would get the best of him, he would curse at his family members and punch holes in the walls of their home.

The night of his arrest, he and his friends planned to "do shrooms." They were breaking into cars looking for money to buy the drugs and got caught. In therapy, he learned that he used drugs to escape memories of abuse. Tyler's father (who is now in prison) molested him when he was a child. "I didn't want to feel that pain," he says, looking down at his shoes. "I love my dad." He says this last bit quickly and uneasily. The giddiness of going home can't hide wounds that will take more than five months of group therapy to heal.

When Tyler goes home for good, he plans to focus on school. He has resolved to participate in class and turn in assignments on time. Before he came to Rich Hill, he earned 93 tardy notices in one semester. He regularly skipped classes, stared out the window when he did attend them, and hardly did homework.

Tyler has already begun to catch up with school. He's supposed to be in tenth grade. But because he has not earned enough credits, he will return to ninth. In his time at Rich Hill, he has worked hard to earn three and a half credits; before he came, he had only two.

Security in Relationships

Not everyone released from DYS can return to school. Missouri's Safe Schools Act prohibits a youth from reenrolling in any public school if convicted of first- or second-degree murder, forcible or statutory rape, forcible or statutory sodomy, first-degree robbery, distribution of drugs to a minor, first-degree arson, or kidnapping. For those youth, and others who choose not to return to public school, DYS has recently created a distance learning academy, which helps students complete their high school credits, prepare for their GEDs, or acquire career skills online. DYS began to offer the academy in April of this year. Tim Decker, the DYS director, says it will serve between 80 to 100 students each year.

Eric, 16, doesn't say whether he's allowed to return to school. He has earned his GED and dreams of joining the Marine Corps.

Six months ago, he arrived at the Waverly Regional Youth Center in Waverly. He was sent here after being convicted of robbery. He was also convicted of gun and marijuana possession. At 14, he began using methamphetamines to cope with his home life. His stepfather drank and treated him and his siblings poorly, and his mother ignored their complaints. "She'd believe my stepdad over us kids," he says bitterly.

Eric moved in with his uncle, who allowed him to stay on one condition: that they burglarize homes together. One night, they got caught. Eric spent three months in detention and was then sent to Waverly's center, a moderate care facility, in central Missouri, about 70 miles from Kansas City. Like the city of Rich Hill,



Fences don't provide the best security; relationships do. "We tell our staff, 'Don't count on the fence. You need to provide the eyes-on, ears-on, hearts-on supervision,' " says Tim Decker, the DYS director.

Waverly is small; its population hovers around 900.

Unlike Rich Hill's center, though, Waverly's facility provides more security. And because their crimes are more serious, youth here stay longer: six to nine months instead of four to six.

A low-slung building between two churches, and across the street from another church and a handful of residential homes, Waverly's facility is a former hospital built in 1956. It has been renovated to accommodate 45 boys. Inside, the center looks very much like a public school. Student work decorates classroom walls, and bulletin boards celebrate those who made honor roll. Outside, though, something strikes a visitor as different: a 13-foot-high chainlink fence secures the center's backyard. It is the only moderate care facility with a fence—and a history.

In June of 1992, a youth escaped from the center. He physically assaulted a woman in the community and set her house on fire. At the time, the facility had no fence. After the incident, neighbors demanded it. "The community had every right to expect changes," says Decker, the current DYS director, who was one of the regional administrators at the time. Decker moved into the facility for three weeks after the incident to help change the culture of the place so boys felt their needs were being met and would not run away. He also helped rebuild community relationships. Within six months, staff members had enlisted elderly residents to visit the boys. For the last several years, community members have baked birthday cakes for them. Even the woman who was victimized years ago bakes one. (According to Decker, DYS could not rehabilitate the young man who attacked her, and he is now in adult prison.)

Decker emphasizes that fences don't provide the best security; relationships do. "We tell our staff, 'Don't count on the fence. You need to provide the eyes-on, ears-on, hearts-on supervision.'" That supervision works so well that staff members do not need to use more extreme measures, like mace or isolation rooms, to calm youth.

Moderate care facilities such as Rich Hill and Waverly don't even have isolation rooms. Only five of the six secure care facilities have such rooms, which are used mostly for storage. Decker says that those sites may use the rooms only two to three times a year when a youth cannot be calmed any other way. A juvenile usually stays alone in that room for an hour, with a staff member right outside the door. "When we built those centers, the thought was we might have to use [those rooms] more often," he says. "But because of the treatment approach, we don't have to."

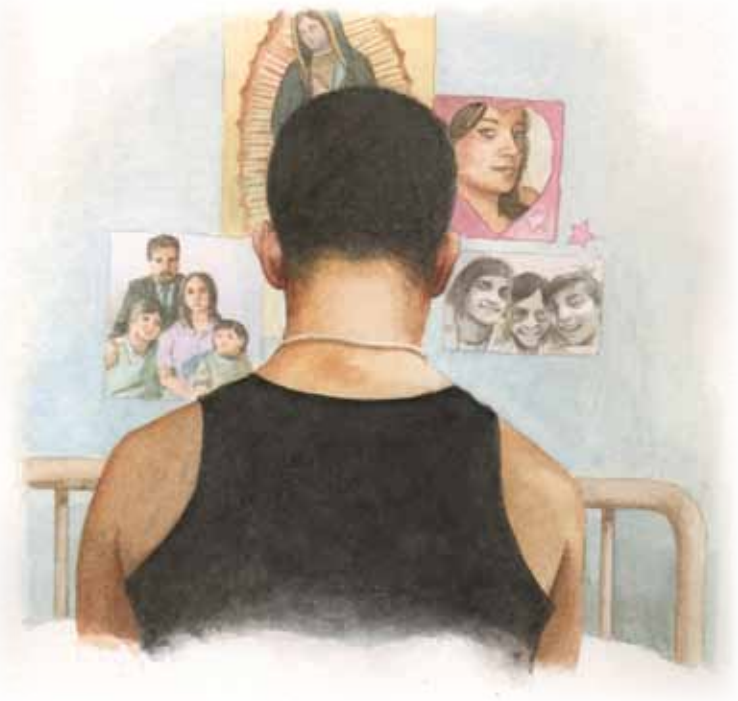
Treatment also includes helping youth deal with each other. Instead of letting problems between boys fester and possibly come to a head in a fistfight, DYS encourages them to share whatever is on their minds. So when they need to, they call a huddle. It looks just like it sounds: a group of boys stand in a circle, and the individual who called the huddle explains why he did so.

One January afternoon at Rich Hill, a boy named Ethan calls one. He says he's upset that another boy did not believe his answer to a question about whether the boy was allowed to move a lamp in the dorm and chose to ask staff instead. Ethan, who has been at Rich Hill for a longer period of time than the boy, is hurt that the newer resident did not trust him. After Ethan receives an apology, a youth specialist reminds the boys to listen to each other. Staff members stand with youth in huddles, but participate in the discussion only when necessary.

Ready to Work

Sometimes juveniles initially resist treatment. His first day at Waverly, Eric remembers his group members making helpful suggestions: "Not to worry about my time, take it day by day, which I didn't listen to at the moment," he says. "I wanted to get out." But Eric says he never considered running. Instead, he tried to think of ways he could talk family members into convincing a judge to release him. When he realized that wouldn't work, he began to act out. He does not say exactly what he did. Mitch Bennett, Waverly's facility manager, says that Eric left Waverly for a short time to get psychiatric help the facility could not provide.

He returned with a new attitude. "I started buckling down on my schoolwork," he says. "I just started taking advantage of everything that got thrown at me." He paid attention in his academic classes and passed the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (the military's entrance exam) and the GED. He threw himself into his vocational class and developed a knack for woodworking and graphic design. On a tour of the facility led by Eric and staff members, he points proudly to the scoreboard in the facility's gym. Eric explains how he and a classmate refurbished it after someone donated it to the center. He adds that he himself designed the scoreboard's decals: Wildcats in white and blue.



Like any public school, Waverly has a mascot. The boys take great pride—"paw pride," they call it—in being the Wildcats. Each fall, DYS sponsors an Olympics of sorts for its residential facilities. Within each region, youth from each facility compete in games designed to promote trust and teamwork. "It's awesome," says Eric, his face lighting up. "It's a whole day of group builders." He describes how in one activity his group quickly changed tires on a big wooden car while holding it in the air. In another, his group carried one of its members on a square piece of wood without dropping him.

Debbie Walker, who teaches math and English at Waverly, says that Eric worked through some difficult times. "When he first came in, he was very unsure of himself, very attention needy," and "just was not focused on his schoolwork." But one day, he earned an A on an essay she had assigned, and it surprised him. "He said, 'I can do this!'" Walker recalls. "He had the ability. He just had to find out that he could do it." All of her students, she says, are capable of learning. But many don't think they can because they've failed in school more times than they've succeeded.

Walker says that showing the boys they can achieve makes her job rewarding. A former special education teacher in a regular public school, she came to the center six years ago because she wanted a change. For several years, she had participated in a church group that visited the boys monthly. So when the opening to teach came, she applied.

Within a few weeks of working here, she realized the job was easier than she thought it would be. "I don't have the discipline problems in my classroom that I did in the public school," she says. "We have our youth specialists that take care of those immediately."

A visit to Walker's class reveals no discipline problems, just enthusiastic students. "Raise your hands, guys," says Diane Bradbury, Walker's youth specialist, after several boys call out answers to a question. Walker's math lesson one January morning includes a review of how to determine the areas of various polygons.



Eric sits off to the side, working independently. Although he has earned his GED, he must still attend class. But he, like all students who have earned GEDs, can work alone when the teacher covers material he has already mastered. He can also leave the room, with a youth specialist accompanying him, for scheduled meetings to discuss career plans. Those meetings are with Nicci Rasa, Waverly's Title I and GED teacher.

When she first meets individually with a student interested in taking the GED, Rasa administers a test to gauge his strengths and weaknesses. Then they focus on areas where the student needs to improve in order to pass the test. For those who earn GEDs, she helps them decide which jobs to pursue.

One January morning, Rasa meets with Eric; it's their first meeting since he earned his GED. She explains that since the military prefers recruits with high school diplomas, it's harder to enlist with only a GED. So he may need to delay his dream.

Instead of trying to enlist right away, Rasa suggests he register for ACT WorkKeys, an online career preparation program that tests applied reading and math skills. Completing the program may make him more attractive to potential employers. Eric agrees to consider it.

He reminds Rasa that he may have a child on the way—he'll need to take a paternity test upon his release—so he needs a steady income. He also needs money to pay \$2,200 in restitution, though he's not sure what it's for, maybe property damage.

He tells Rasa that construction and farm work interest him and that he learned how to operate backhoes on his grandparents' farm. "I can run farm equipment in my sleep," he says confidently.

He's also had experience logging, something he can see himself doing full time: "I'm familiar with it," he says. "It's good pay." "Is it something you enjoy?" Rasa asks.

Eric says yes.

"It's as important to know what you want to do as what you do *not* want to do," she says.

Eric takes in her advice. "I'm not someone to sit at a computer all day," he says.

Rasa asks him to list, before their next meeting, all the machinery he knows how to operate. "Be real about it," she says. She

explains that she doesn't want him embellishing his expertise. She also asks him to list his past work experiences. Then they can craft his resume.

After Eric leaves her office, Rasa says that many Waverly students around his age—soon he will turn 17—choose to earn GEDs rather than return to public school. For "so many kids, school was not their friend." A former special education teacher in a regular public school, she knows firsthand the discipline problems troubled students can cause. "To have these kids in the classroom, it's chaos," she says. But at Waverly, "they're different students. They're respectful and responsible. They take ownership of their education, and they begin to see the importance of it."

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**—NICCI RASA
TITLE I AND GED TEACHER**

Although many of them have worked through their problems, they are understandably nervous about returning to their communities. They do not look forward to the public scrutiny they will face. Another student Rasa met with that morning "was concerned because he had molested his brothers and sisters," Rasa says. "He's worried about what people in the community will think when he goes home."

She says the two of them discussed how he made some bad choices. But she reminded him that he's worked through his issues and must now let them go. "You're not that person," she told him. "You're not what you did."

The phone rings, and Rasa takes the call. It's someone she knows. The woman on the other end of the line says that a boy she cares about is being sent to Waverly. She wants reassurance that the facility will help him, and Rasa provides it. She tells the caller that the boy will be safe and that Waverly is a good place.

In a matter of weeks, the youth they discuss may sit where Eric sat moments ago. He may look out the window of Rasa's rectangle of an office, where red tulips sit sweetly on the sill. As he tells her his career interests and concerns, he may see the quote on the opposite wall: "I am not what happened to me. I am what I choose to become." Rasa has not posted the name of the famous psychiatrist who wrote these words long ago, perhaps hoping the boys at Waverly will make them their own. □

