

EARLY CORRECTION

Program gives young offenders a taste of life behind bars as a warning.



Juvenile offenders wear jumpsuits – and handcuffs – like real detainees during the Shortstop program to give them a taste of what awaits second-time offenders.

The teenagers drop their smirks and attitude when the handcuffs come out. They're here on a school night, lined up in an empty corridor of Superior Court, for a second chance. Every one of them has been picked up for some petty crime – tagging, fighting, swiping a bottle of perfume or a can of beer.

But if they can just get through the next few hours – the sneering taunts of real felons, past the moment when they quietly confess their crimes to their parents – they can get on with their lives. No jail time. No criminal record.

It's called Shortstop, and it's one of the oldest and most successful juvenile detention programs in Orange County. In 30 years, the program has tried to shove more than 30,000 young offenders back onto the right path before they stray too far.

"Oh, now it got real quiet," Shortstop coordinator Robert Diaz says as program staffers cinch handcuffs and zip ties around the wrists of the latest class of delinquents.

"Now it got real quiet all of a sudden." Sheriff's Special Officer Juan Villegas watches 30 kids straggle in for the tough-love first day of the Shortstop program and offers an observation. Kids are like computers, he says. If you don't give them the right information, they just don't run well.

His partner this evening, Santa Ana Detective Eddie Nunez, sees the kids now eyeing him warily more like trees. If they don't get enough care, they'll grow crooked.

The Shortstop program is meant to be the download of information that these kids need, the stake in the ground to make them grow straight.

It's run by the Orange County Bar Foundation. And it measures success by the number of graduates who stay on the right side of the law afterward – close to 90 percent, according to Bar Foundation numbers.

These kids looking at their feet and mumbling "Yes, sir" to the officers – they're not hardened criminals. They're first-time offenders whose crimes mostly amount to dumb-kid bad judgment. Most are in their late teens, but the program will take kids as young as 10.

The deal: If they go through the program with their parents, then their record is cleared. If they fail, then they go to court and face the criminal-justice system. A boy in this latest class, smoothing his hair despite orders to stand still, is about to find that out.

“Hey! This is no place to be playing games,” Nunez shouts. The detective’s head is shaved to stubble and he’s wearing an olive suit coat that makes him look even more like an Army officer. “You’re 17? Act like it.” He stomps into a courtroom, returns with the boy’s mother and sends them both home.

“We’re just here to wake them up,” Villegas says.

The kids stand in formation in the courthouse corridor, no talking. They pull orange jumpsuits over their clothes, with the words “Property of Shortstop” stenciled in black on their backs.

When kids come to Shortstop, they commit to two days of life lessons and tough questions. They write essays about how much a funeral costs, or how much their city pays to scrub out graffiti. Their parents have to get up and say a few words about what makes them proud about their son or daughter.

But that comes on the kinder, gentler second day. This is Day One.

The kids file into a courtroom holding cell, their hands cuffed behind their backs. Their parents follow. They sit on concrete benches littered with crumpled lunch bags and tattooed with years of graffiti.

Four recent parolees stand in the shadows along the wall. One snaps his neck back and forth. Another steps forward and warns the kids that inmates sometimes vomit on the benches where they’re sitting. “You could catch something,” he says. A few parents shift in their seats.

The neck-cracker calls out the taggers in the room: “You want a box of crayons? Seriously, you did that when you were 5 years old.” Another parolee, balding, with a goatee and a tone in his voice that says he is not to be messed with, tells them what a life in and out of jail is like.

“When you keep coming into these places, I’m gonna tell you something, when you keep coming into these places, you lose a little something,” says the man who, like the other parolees, declined to give his name. “You lose your friends. You lose your parents. You lose your self-esteem.”

“I know she’s scared,” a mother named Malia says afterward of her 13-year-old daughter, here for stealing a shirt. “She doesn’t want to be inside here. She doesn’t want to be in jail.”

The next stop is a courtroom. The handcuffs and jumpsuits come off, and the kids sit with their parents as if awaiting trial. The two officers, Nunez and Villegas, call them up one by one to confess.

They stand facing their parents. When they speak, their voices are halting, barely above a whisper.

Nunez calls up a boy from Tustin, a baby-faced freshman who looks more grade school than high school, busted for bringing a fake gun to school.

“What do you think happens if you get shot,” Nunez asks, eyes locked on the boy.

“I dunno,” the boy says, looking down. “I go to the hospital?”

“Forget the hospital,” Nunez says.

Jim Rose has been right there, looking at his shoes, answering questions with his dad shaking his head in the audience. He was 15 when he sneaked out of his bedroom window and helped some friends break into a car. They got away with some old cassette tapes; a detective knocked on the door a few days later.

It’s been 22 years, but he still remembers what it was like to sit on that concrete bench in the holding cell, trying not to think about what might have happened there. He swears he never messed around after that. He’s now a corporal with the Santa Ana Police Department. And sometimes, he’s the guy on the other side of the courtroom asking scared kids in the Shortstop program to describe their crimes.

“A lot of these kids, they’re not bad kids,” he says. “They just screwed up, and now it’s time to get them back on the right path.”



Shortstop Coordinator Robert Diaz gets hands-on with handcuffs on the juvenile offenders last week during the diversion program at Orange County Superior Court in Santa Ana.



PHOTOS: ROSE PALMISANO, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER
Juvenile offenders, facing a holding cell, are informed about the realities of prison life during the Shortstop program.



DOUG IRVING
REGISTER WRITER