

# Good Night, Sleep Tight

Kalamazoo program to calm turbulent teens catches on

By Naseem Stecker

**P**icture this: a teenager in trouble with the law, locked up in a detention facility for delinquents. It's bedtime—the lights are out. Alone in a cinder block room with heavy metal doors, angry, fearful, anxious, edgy, and even depressed. No radio, television, or telephone to relieve distress. The events of the day keep re-playing in his mind. Sleep is elusive. Pounding the walls, shouting, screaming may help release some of that pent up emotion but there's still a long way to go before day breaks.

To help such incarcerated delinquents, various communities in Michigan have started bedtime story hours with the aim of soothing them, offering hope and at the same time introducing new literature into their fractured lives.

Known as the Late Show, the reading program, adapted from California, has been vigorously developed and promoted since 1993 by Audrey Nesbitt Gray, a member of the Kalamazoo Lawyer's Auxiliary and former Comstock schoolteacher.

"Every child has worth with very, very few exceptions. These kids are not throwaways," Gray said. "We want them to have a broader view of the world than they have been exposed to. Life isn't over by 20 years of age."

Community volunteers recruited by Gray and others read to incarcerated teenagers over the intercom two nights a week, before bedtime, at the Kalamazoo County Juvenile Home. Forty delinquents ranging in age from 12–18 are held there for criminal acts that include felonious assault, car theft, and even murder. On a third night, smaller groups of teens meet with speakers or readers for closer interaction and dialogue.

A library named in honor of Gray, who spends over 80 hours a week on this program has also been set up so that the teens can have easy access to books. Available material in-



cludes fiction, nonfiction, humor and satire, biographies, newspaper selections, and magazine articles. Gray said funding for the library came from donations from individuals, civic and service organizations, the Irving S. Gilmore Foundation, and the Kalamazoo Foundation.

Carolyn Williams, presiding judge in the family division of the 9th Circuit Court has been a strong advocate for the Late Show since it's very beginning in the early 90s. "I believe very strongly that learning to read and loving reading is an important part of a person's ability to be successful in education and life," Judge Williams said. "Many kids don't have that modeled in their home environment. If they have to be with us, we should expose them to things, which they don't have in their environment... Just because these kids have broken the law and lost their freedom we should not think of them as less human. Adolescents do stupid things.

If we got them, we treat them with respect and expose them to what is going on in the community."

Integrating with the community is an important part of the Late Show philosophy. Speakers with varied and interesting backgrounds often visit the Kalamazoo facility to share their experiences and wisdom with the teens. One of the most inspirational presenters according to Audrey Gray was Luis J. Rodriguez, a former gang member in Los Angeles, who's now an award-winning author, poet, and motivational speaker. Other presentations have featured illustrators and writers of children's books, a travelogue—detailing a biking trip from California to Florida, as well as art and music appreciation.

"The Late Show has effectively reduced the negative bedtime ritual and replaced it with a quality calm time for kids to listen to and get lost in story, dream, and fantasy," said Superintendent Donald Nitz of the Kalamazoo County Juvenile Home.

Once fraught with confrontation and anger, bedtime is now a quiet ritual. Nitz credits the over 100 volunteers, who comprise people from all walks of life, for helping to make the program a success. "We have a number of fine volunteers to read to the kids. These are people who would never think of stepping inside the home were it not for this program. The skills of these individuals are helping to turn life around for the kids that are detained here," Nitz added.

Charles, a 15-year-old teenager at the juvenile home says the Late Show is interesting. "It helps my time here go by quick. It's something to look forward to. Sometimes I wish I could read a little better."

Inspired by the Kalamazoo example, which was the first program of its kind in the state, similar facilities in Saginaw, Midland,



Kent, Ingham, and Ottawa counties have also started their own community story hours. While Lawyers' Auxiliaries sponsor most of these programs, in Grand Haven, the project was started single-handedly by David Schock, a professor at Hope College, who's married to attorney Kathryn Neville.

With the approval of Kathy Cleveland, assistant superintendent of the Ottawa County Juvenile Detention Center, Schock decided to take a more interactive, face to face approach. Comfortably seated in a large day room, he reads to the teens every Sunday at 7 p.m. Students from Hope College and other community members have also begun to volunteer at the center.

"The kinds of imaginative stuff these kids have been exposed to, like television and radio have not been helpful. They have not been able to put themselves in context," Schock said. "The media has done them a tremendous disservice and parents have abrogated their responsibilities. These kids have lots of images but don't know how to use their imaginations. They've not been exposed to work of

the imaginative realm." Schock finds that fairy tales go over very well. "The contrast of good and evil and justice—these are the things that I think young



people are longing for. I'm trying to pass on a little imagination, help them to think about things, order the universe, a chance perhaps to change them. They don't know the power that they hold and the gifts that they have been given."

Nationwide, juvenile crime is expected to double by the year 2005. As this reading program spreads in Michigan, other facilities in the nation have been inquiring about it. In fact, Kalamazoo's Audrey Gray has even had queries about the Late Show from Uppsala, Sweden. "This program should be in every facility in the nation," Gray said. "I hope I live that long. I would really like to do that." ◆

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