

## Local judge hosts program to keep kids out of jail

Caddo Parish Judge Scott Crichton is considered by some inmates to be harsh, and to repeat offenders, he may be more likely to issue severe sentences, but Crichton has been reaching out to first-time underage offenders for years to keep them out of trouble and out of prison.

Crichton and Caddo Parish Sheriff Steve Prator have hosted a program over the past six years called "Don't Let This Be You." The program is designed for teens 13 and older and their parents to give them a glimpse at the repercussions of criminal activity.

Crichton scheduled a session of the program for Tuesday night that included a short lecture about the consequences of breaking specific laws for underage residents.

The lecture was followed by a tour of the Caddo Correctional Center, conducted by shift supervisor Sgt. Anthony Gaines and a handful of CCC staff.

Crichton opened his lecture with the statistics. Crichton told the room of underage offenders that Louisiana has the highest incarceration rate per-capita of any state and that 1 in 55 residents were under lock and key.

Crichton said the cost of imprisoning those men and women was more than \$650 million.

"Imagine what that money could do if it were put into our schools," Crichton said.

Crichton referenced a number of cases he presided over, warning the young people that they have a choice between a life of happiness and freedom or jail.

Crichton showed the audience the degenerative effects of methamphetamine use to the human body over time and the dangers of many other illegal drugs. He stressed the point that addiction to substances is the motive for many repeat offenders.

"This program is about the power of choice," Crichton said. "I want to provide them with the knowledge and let them know they have a choice."

Crichton also covered violent, vehicular, alcohol related and cyber crimes, such as

sexting and cyber bullying.

"It's a labor of love," Crichton said. "It helps them understand the mistakes they make now can have implications later when they are trying to get a job or get into a college."

The tour took the group through the women's cellblock, titled Golf, an octagonal open room with two stories of cells along the wall. Women in orange jumpsuits watched the group as they entered the recreation yard, an area 50 feet wide and 20 feet long with sheer 80-foot concrete walls and a ceiling of metal mesh.

It was a cool evening, and many of the group shivered as Gaines spoke about the hardships they would face if they ended up in CCC. Gaines painted an intimidating image of life at the CCC and introduced three female inmates who shared their stories.

One inmate spoke about facing life imprisonment and how it took being incarcerated four times and facing that sentence before she decided to give up crime.

The group was then taken to the segregation cells, an area set aside for the most violent offenders and those awaiting transfer to death row at Angola.

The cells were quiet as Gaines showed the group the concrete mattress and small plastic box for storage that each room contained. Inmates in black and white jumpsuits that indicate they are serving 40

years or more stared out of their foot-wide windows at the group gathered outside.

Gaines cautioned the group repeatedly that it's easy to wind up in the CCC, that getting out is the hard part. He said he'd seen the same people come in and leave only to return a few months later for a longer stay. He said the center was designed to hold 1,300 inmates and currently houses 1,480. He said they could always make more room.

The tour ended at the medical wing, where Gaines told the group the price for medical care for inmates.

He said an inmate can receive dental care for \$5 and can get a prescription for half the price that a free person would pay. He said the taxpayers make up the difference.

Gaines and Crichton have one goal in mind when they give the tours and lectures — keeping kids out of jail.

"In a perfect world, we would be out of a

job," Gaines said. "This is not a perfect world. It may sound harsh, but we have job security. If we can keep one minor from ending up in here, that's a success."

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