

Fairfax County



Creative Corner

Juvenile & Domestic
Relations District Court

Creative Corner

The teens are back seated in a courtroom before the judge. Their parents, guardians, parole officers sit nearby ... but on this day, the teens are not there to be sentenced, but to be celebrated.

Summary

The first Creative Corner celebration was held May 20, 2007. Under the stewardship of Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court Judge Teena Grodner, it has evolved into an annual event that celebrates the writings of court-involved youth. Writing can be a powerful outlet for juveniles who are struggling to share their imaginations, hopes and fears. The Creative Corner project is designed to encourage them and to give them hope. "This may be the only awards these kids have ever gotten," says Judge Grodner. This positive recognition is also an opportunity for parents to feel good about their children. And also an opportunity for parents, teachers and counselors to understand what the teens are going through.

The project has been noted by the media —

- "Writing Their Way Through the Pain: Creative Corner helps youths find their voice" — Washington Post, May 14, 2009.
- "A Good Day in Court" — Times Community Newspapers, March 27, 2007.
- "Writing Their Futures: Teens in trouble with courts turn to writing to find success" — Connection Newspapers, March 29, 2007.

Creative Corner was started in 2006 as a way for the Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court (JDRDC) to showcase the talent and creative writing of court-involved youth. It was hoped that a few poems or stories might be submitted each year to be featured in the JDRDC's biweekly newsletter, "Full Court Press." Then the writings

started to arrive — and kept on coming. Creative Corner is now a regular feature in “Full Court Press” and over the years the works of more than 150 teens has been published.

Each year’s Creative Corner writings are published in “Sparks of Imagination,” a booklet that is presented to the writers during the Creative Corner celebration. Each composition is highlighted with an illustration of some type – clip art, photo, etc. – further enhancing the young author’s achievement. Many of the honorees read their compositions aloud. The writings include haikus, poems, short stories, essays about writing, essays about the National Football League and essays about field trips. The emotions displayed range from sadness to anger to contentment — and the many emotions in between. The struggles of the juveniles are apparent, but so is the courage that it took for them to write. This year’s titles included “Fill the Silence,” “Effects of the Recession,” “Living Alone,” “My Goals,” “Guilty of an Attempted Apology,” and the practical PowerPoint, “How to Write a 5-Paragraph Essay.”

The Creative Corner project draws its creative writers from the classrooms of Fairfax County Public School’s alternative schools. Many of the writings are the result of class assignments. The students gain success in school with their writing, hopefully gain some insight and/or personal growth, and then gain positive recognition with publication. An important program element is inclusiveness – what the teens submit is published; only one has been rejected as inappropriate.

Background

On March 29, 2002, as part of a strategic planning initiative to improve communication within the court, the Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court published the first edition of its biweekly newsletter, the JDRDC “Full Court Press.” For the most part, the newsletter focused on court programs, court personnel and court vocabulary, and not necessarily on recognizing the clients and families being served.

In 2005, Judge Teena Grodner suggested that the newsletter broaden its horizons by featuring creative writings from court-involved youth. She felt that it would be a good way to positively recognize the juveniles. She also felt that if there was enough participation, there could be a yearly celebration for the youth and families whose writings had appeared in the newsletter. An e-mail was sent out to the court's residential programs asking for creative writing contributions. In Volume 92, on Jan. 13, 2006, the first Writer's Corner appeared, with a note: "Based on a suggestion from Judge Grodner, we hope to have a new feature in each edition of the newsletter – writings from court-involved juveniles. Topics can range from news features, such as today's, to creative writing about their innermost thoughts and feelings." In the next issue, the Writer's Corner was re-titled Creative Corner. Since that time, except for during the summer and early fall months, there has been a steady submission of creative writing for the newsletter.

The Creative Corner gives the probationers positive recognition for positive and well-done work. The submissions are often followed by an e-mail about how excited the juvenile is to be published and to have his or her work seen in a positive light by everyone who works for the court.

Partnership with Alternative Schools

Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court partners with and is the location for a number of Fairfax County Public School's alternative schools. Each of the four probation offices houses a small alternative school, as does each of the court's residential programs, including one at the Less Secure Shelter, one at Boys Probation House (a residential treatment center for court-involved boys) and one at Foundations (a residential treatment center for court-involved girls) as well as a multi-classroom school at the Juvenile Detention Center. In addition, there are independent study

programs, GED programs and volunteer tutoring programs, all designed to assist court-involved juveniles get through school.

For the most part, students in the court schools have been unsuccessful in a mainstream, regular school setting. Some of the students have been expelled from the school system for a variety of crimes, some are chronically truant from school and some have failed grades repeatedly. Many of them are reluctant students who have been unsuccessful and who view school as an area of failure in their lives. Often these juveniles continue to struggle with other issues besides school, such as substance abuse, mental health issues, behavioral problems, anger management issues, poor self-esteem and dysfunctional and chaotic families. The teachers in these classrooms are patient, flexible, creative, nurturing and firm. Often these alternative school settings are the first school successes the students have had in a long while. A teacher said that two new middle-school students have, "already told their parents that they might get their haiku poetry published!!!"

Staffing and Budget

In a time of tight budget constraints, the Creative Corner program leverages and capitalizes on existing resources. The Alternative Schools are funded by Fairfax County School Public Schools, and in collaboration with the Juvenile Court have been dealing successfully with hard-to-reach students. The court's newsletter "Full Court Press" is developed, edited and distributed via the Internet, with the only cost being the already existing salaries of those who work on it. The celebration's main expense is printing the "Sparks of Imagination" booklet; sponsorships from local businesses defray the costs. Other contributions cover the cost of the refreshments; the court does pay for the gift cards given out, but those are appropriately taken from the court's incentives program for juveniles. Overall, the Creative Corner celebration is an economical way to give positive attention to juveniles.

Perhaps most important is what the teens say in Creative Corner ...

What if I Never —

What if I never found them
What if I never picked them up
What if I never sold them
What if I never gave up
What if I had never ran away
What if I never got caught
Maybe if I had never
Then maybe just maybe this would stop.

Effects of the Recession

Desolate.
Far from content.
I have lost my intent.
Someone please, convince me out of my misery.
I need company.
Not large corporation foundations.
Millions, billions, trillions,
Money can only do so much.
Cheers!
Tip your cups, bottoms up chug it up.
Because I am probably going to be evicted this month.

Unknown Feeling

Sometimes I wonder why I am here
Trapped with this unknown feeling
It's bigger than dislike and smaller than hate
It might be the feeling of feeling unloved
Am I the only person feeling this way?

Overview

Creative Corner is a culminating celebration of a powerful outlet for court-involved juveniles who share their hopes, fears, imagination and dreams in constructive academic-grounded writing exercises. Stories, poems and essays are submitted by alternative school students – some struggling with substance abuse, mental health issues, behavioral problems, anger management issues, poor self-esteem and dysfunctional and chaotic families – and published in a pamphlet sponsored by the Juvenile & Domestic Relations District Court system. An annual celebration brings the teens together to celebrate their writings and allowing some to read theirs aloud. This positive recognition succeeds on many levels: it is an opportunity for parents of troubled youth to feel good about their children; a chance for the youth to experience a measure of success; and an avenue for parents, teachers and counselors to gain insight into what the teens are going through.

Fairfax

EXTRA

THURSDAY, MAY 14, 2009

FN FS

3 Baiting Thieves
Fairfax police plant specially rigged cars throughout the county.

3 Traffic Change
University Drive in Fairfax City to close as another street opens.

6 Live!
The Voce Chamber Singers perform Saturday in Reston.



Lee High's Jordan Cox plays varsity baseball, not softball.

15 Varsity Letter
Girls are in high school baseball lineups with little fuss.

Writing Their Way Through the Pain



PHOTOS BY RICHARD A. LIPSKI — THE WASHINGTON POST

Laurie Laso, above, a probation officer with the Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court, hugs Angelique Baughan, one of several young writers honored for their creativity in a ceremony at the Domestic Relations District courthouse last Thursday. Other honorees, at right, are Ashley Neilon, left, Dylan Krafft, William Richards, Kazandra Evans, Angelique Baughan, Peter Binder and Alicen McCarriek.



Creative Corner Helps Youths Find Their Voice

By SANDHYA SOMASHEKHAR
Washington Post Staff Writer

Kazandra Evans was the first to read. She was a striking presence behind the lectern — tall, with blazes of blue and plum in her dark hair.

She has been in foster care since she was 3, she said, and in a few months she will be 18, a lifetime that has generated enough drama to fill the autobiography that she has begun to write.

When it was her turn, she did not hesitate.

"How many times do I say 'please stop,'" she read. "I stop and wait . . . and then I'm shocked. Shocked by the pain that is put my way. I am stabbed and beaten and pulled to the ground surrounded by the black darkness. Then I open my eyes, and I am in a black pit with all my memories around me."

Evans's poem, "My World," was one of about 60 pieces collected in "Sparks of Imagination," poems, stories and essays written by children involved with the Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court system. Some of the authors are runaways; others have committed crimes such as robbery and assault. Many

See VOICE, Page 14

Tysons Corner Center
(Upper level near Nordstrom)
(703) 734-0977



PHOTOS BY RICHARD A. LIPSKI — THE WASHINGTON POST

Judge Teena D. Grodner, left, applauds poet Angelique Baughan, after she read her poem, "The Raisin People." Applauding at right are James Dedes and Joan Ledebur.

Creative Corner Helps Youths Find Their Voice

VOICE, From Page 1

of the authors live at home, although some live in group homes operated by the county by order of the court.

Several got a chance to stand before an audience at the historic Domestic Relations District courthouse in Fairfax last Thursday, read their original writings and receive gift certificates and thunderous applause for their work.

"Think about it: This may be the only awards these kids have ever gotten," said Teena D. Grodner, a judge on the Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court and founder of the Creative Corner writing program, which is in its fourth year.

The program began with a humble idea, Grodner said. Kids in various court-ordered programs

are often assigned creative writing projects. Why not publish them in the newsletter that is circulated among court employees?

The first year, Grodner said, she was inundated with submissions, some painful, some moving and all impressive.

Grodner said she eventually decided to combine the submissions into a book and throw a party for the kids who participated.

This year's book, which is not available to the public, was no different from the first one four years ago.

The writings convey the depth and sharpness of teenage emotions, overlaid with the weight of lives led astray.

Many touch on typical teen interests, such as music and romance and the safety of one's room.

They also allude to family tragedies and bad decisions. One



Kazandra "Kassie" Evans smiles after reading her poem, "My World."

poem is about a young woman who is separated from her newborn. Another is about the funeral of a best friend.

Another describes the overwhelming urge to steal. Dylan Krafft, 16, describes a lovely, sim-

ple day of waking up on a brilliant morning, going to a movie with his girlfriend and eating pancakes at IHOP in a poem titled, "The Life I Want."

After the reading, as the kids drank punch and ate cake, Krafft

"Think about it: This may be the only awards these kids have ever gotten."

— JUDGE TEENA D. GRODNER,
Creative Corner founder

said he ended up in the court system school after being expelled from two high schools. He described the clamminess that came over him when he was standing in front of the crowd reading a second piece of his that was included in the book.

"I was sweating," he said, grinning. "I thought I shouldn't have read it. By the middle I was like, 'well, might as well finish it.'"

For Grodner, the writings are a glimpse into the lives of kids who often shuffle by her in court.

"I do a lot of talking to kids in the court, but it is a legal system. There are constraints. I don't always get the back story," she said. But in the writings, "they really bare their souls."

2010 VACo Achievement Awards

Deadline: June 1, 2010



Application Form

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. Deadline: June 1, 2010.

Program Information
Locality Fairfax County
Program Title Creative Corner
Program Category Criminal Justice
Population Category (5) 100,000+

Contact Information
Name Ellen O'Brien
Title Communications Consultant
Department Office of Public Affairs
Complete Mailing Address 12000 Govt Center Pkwy, Ste 551
Fairfax, VA 22035
Telephone # 703-324-3190 Fax # 703-324-2010
E-mail ellen.obrien@fairfaxcounty.gov

Signature of county administrator or chief administrative officer
Name Anthony H. Griffin
Title County Executive
Signature* [Handwritten Signature]

*Entries without this signature will not be accepted.

Recognizing the Best in County Government Programs!



ATTN: 2010 Achievement Awards Program
Virginia Association of Counties
1207 East Main Street, Suite 300
Richmond, Va. 23219-3627
address service requested

Call for Entries