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GREENBELT

'Take Charge' offers second chance

■ Juvenile diversion program helps keep teens out of trouble

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Shaar Mustaf has refined a strategy for reclaiming troubled youth after working with hundreds of juveniles in Prince George's County over 17 years.

The retired county court bailiff said the key to helping these troubled teens is not complicated; you just have to make them aware of that soft spot in their heart called a conscience.

"If you can touch their core... then you can change them," Mustaf said. "We try to shake up their conscience."

His formula seems to work, for Mustaf runs Take Charge of Your Life, one of the county's most successful youth diversion programs. Only about 10 percent of the young people who go through a program with Take Charge go back to their criminal ways, according to Department of Juvenile Services figures.

The young people who come to Mustaf's program in Forestville get 16 weeks of intensive counseling and rehabilitation exercises.

They have committed a variety of offenses, from stealing a car to



CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON/THE GAZETTE

Theo Martin (background) joins Stephanie Narvaez, 16, of New Carrollton (left), Omar Batson, 15, of Upper Marlboro (center), and Delondre Mason, 16, of Beltsville (right) at the Boulevard at Capital Centre to hand out flyers on preventing auto thefts on Saturday. The teens participate in the Take Charge Juvenile Diversion Program that has been effective in helping juveniles stay out of trouble.

taking a joy ride in a stolen vehicle. Some have violence issues and some even have been charged with sexual assault.

In each case, the courts have seen fit to give them another chance. Mustaf does his best to see that they make the most of it.

His program serves all juveniles but focuses primarily on young black men, who Mustaf

believes are in danger socially because many lack father figures in their lives.

"Boys have a strong desire to talk to a man," Mustaf said. "I'm asking them, 'Can I count on you to be a man at age 40? Because you're going to replace me as a man when I'm gone.'"

Mustaf credits his staff members with providing authority fig-

ures to children who have had little guidance.

The program is popular with judges and State's Attorney Glenn Ivey for its effectiveness in keeping recidivism low.

"We're pleased it's working well... we'd like to see an expansion of the program," Ivey said. "It gives judges another sentencing option, and it helps kids get their lives back on track."

"It forces them to confront basic lines of right and wrong and helps them get on the right side of the line."

A February audit showed that out of 43 youth who took part in an anti-vehicle theft program with Take Charge, only one fell back into criminal activity.

Program participants must confess their offenses to their peers as well as their parents as a first step.

Then, parents and children begin evaluating each other's behavior to see if they are meeting criteria of honesty, integrity and empathy and helping strengthen the parent-child relationship.

The young people begin to take classes about their racial or cultural heritage to get a sense of what their ancestors sacrificed in order to give them the position they have today.

"You have to know your history," Mustaf said. "That's a must."

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Students must pass a history quiz to successfully graduate from the program.

Mustaf also uses language like "victim" and "victimizer" to cut to the core of the young people's past misdeeds. He asks them whether they would want the behavior they exhibited to another person exhibited against them or a family member.

Questions like these can begin

to instill more empathy in the teens and help them realize that what they did was wrong, he said.

"I tell them 'You're constantly victimizing people,' and I challenge them that for the next week they be victim-free," Mustaf said.

Terrence Minor, 17, of Largo, came to the program last year for sexually assaulting a girl in an incident involving inappropriate touching. At that time, he didn't think of himself as a victimizer; but he realized the error of his ways by the time he graduated from it last year, Minor said.

"I didn't think of everybody being as good as I was," Minor said. "But now, I don't think I could survive in this world without respect for women. I realized that something like this could happen to one of my family members."

The Take Charge program helps counsel and rehabilitate about 240 troubled youth a year on a \$250,000 budget.

Mustaf said he gets grant money from County Executive Jack Johnson's office, the Maryland Vehicle Theft Prevention Council and State Farm Insurance Co.