

**Optimist Reading and Discussion Program at Shawnee County
Juvenile Detention Center**

By
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(submitted by Ted Heim)

In the summer of 1998, the Shawnee County Juvenile Detention Center moved to a new facility adjacent to the Shawnee County Adult Detention facility in downtown Topeka, Kansas. Both facilities are part of the Shawnee County Department of Corrections, which consists of a 75-bed juvenile detention facility and a 557-bed adult detention facility. Little did they know at the time what new relationships were on the horizon that would lead to creation of a program, now ten years later, that continues to play a significant role in the lives of juveniles that come through the doors of the juvenile detention facility. It was at that time that leaders of the Downtown Topeka Optimist Club began *to* ask how its club members could be of assistance to youth confined in the new juvenile detention facility. It was recognized that there was a unique opportunity to develop a relationship between the Juvenile Detention Center and the Optimist Club in that the two were “neighbors” since the Club met every Friday at noon in a hotel a block away from the facility.

The motto of Optimist International is “Friend of Youth” and perhaps the Topeka Club members were remembering that the original description for Optimist Club was “friend of the delinquent boy.” The former Director of the Juvenile Detention Center, Dina Pennington, responded to the Optimist’s request by suggesting that the Optimists consider meeting weekly with the youth to read and discuss books and other materials. The Optimists responded positively to this proposal and several members volunteered to take this assignment. After screening and initial training, four members of the Club began going to the Center every Friday afternoon. The entire Club accepted the invitation of the Center Director to become better acquainted with the facility by visiting it as part of its regular Friday meeting. Later, the Club’s Board of Directors began allocating funds on an annual basis to enable the Center to add to its reading materials for its residents. Needing an identifying name for the project, Director Pennington chose an acronym, DODG, referring to the program as the Downtown Optimist Discussion Group. This title is fitting since the group leaders not only read aloud to residents but also ask them to react to the statements and actions of individuals about whom they are reading.

Ten years later, the DODG program continues to *actively* operate at the facility. When the Center expanded its educational classes for those who have not completed high school, it was necessary to move the reading and discussion program to the 3:00 to 4:15 p.m. time slot on Friday afternoon. The program continues to be voluntary for residents to attend. Over the years, interested volunteers who are not members of the Optimists have joined the program.

From the outset, the goal of the Optimists has been to send the message to youth that someone in the community cares about them while they are in detention. The 12 to 17-year old youth taking part in the program are asked their opinions about characters and their decisions and behavior. Ted Heim, an Optimist with the program since its beginning, explains that the materials are treated very much like case studies in which participants are asked to consider options that might have been followed by characters in the story.

A wide variety of materials have been used in the DODG program. The volunteers started with classic stories such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Soon, they begin to add stories by contemporary authors focusing on problems and situations faced by youth today. The leaders look for those stories that involve youth facing realistic challenges in the world today. When two volunteers are present, the youth often are divided into two groups to permit more to engage in discussion. The discussion leaders ordinarily rotate through the institution's three modules. Recently, materials containing rather long dialogues have been used to permit the leader and youth to read the parts of the characters. Consideration is being given to making use of short plays to allow more youth the opportunity to read parts.

Richard Kline, Director of the Shawnee County Department of Corrections, sees this as an important and vital part of the services and support provided to the juveniles at the center. "For some of these youth, this is the first time in their life, where some one has sat down with them to read a book. It is through this experience that the youth begin to realize the importance and relevance that reading can have in their life. What adds to the impact of this program though is that it is more than just reading. It is also the first time for many of them to be asked their opinion, ideas or beliefs. The discussion though is not always about finding a right or wrong answer; it is an exercise in reflective thinking. It is the opportunity for youth to use the books to be able to discuss topics that are very relevant to the challenges they are facing in their lives. The juveniles leave the facility with not only greater appreciation about reading but also a better understanding of themselves."

The DODG program, like any other activity in a secure confinement facility, is subject to being interrupted or terminated when required by the needs of the institution. Fire and storm drills have resulted in volunteer leaders being evacuated along with residents. Real emergencies, such as a disturbance in another module requiring extra personnel to be dispatched and residents to be locked down, end or suspend reading and discussion activities.

Both staff and volunteers cooperate to maintain order and courteous behavior on the part of residents. Officers usually open each session with comments reviewing what is expected of youth if they are to remain in the group. Volunteers also have developed intermediate responses to inappropriate behavior before asking that staff remove individuals who engaging in disruptive behavior.

At the tenth anniversary of DODG, both staff and juveniles recognize the reading program as an established activity every Friday afternoon. Perhaps an even greater reflection of the importance and value of this program to the department is that in the spring of 2008, at the Shawnee County Department of Corrections Annual Volunteer Appreciation Dinner, the department honored Ted Heim, a retired professor who has been with DODG since its inception, with the Department's Volunteer of the Year Award for his service. He was not only instrumental in helping create the program concept and in seeing the program got implemented but has also been a steadfast volunteer reader throughout the program's existence.