

Lake County Juvenile Court

Judge Karen Lawson

New Voices for Girls Program

The New Voices Program was launched in January, 2010 under the direction of Judge Karen Lawson to address low self-esteem in young women involved in the juvenile justice system. This self-esteem group is cognitive behavioral based, teaching girls to use their voices to speak for themselves and recognize that they can make positive choices in their lives.

The New Voices team consists of female court staff led by a program director and two co-facilitators. Referrals to the program come from the bench, intake officers, and probation officers. Upon completion of the referral packet, the youth is assessed by program staff through interviews with the intake/probation officer and a review of all pertinent social information. This assessment allows the team to group girls with similar issues which in turn help to create the group's identity and goals. A total of 28 girls were referred to the group in 2011 of which 19 participated and 16 graduated successfully.

Group size is limited to 8 girls and each session is 8 weeks long. Weeks one through seven are educational in nature and week eight is graduation night. Topics covered range from personal values, relationship issues, family issues, peers, bullying, internet safety, decision making, personal goals and one's journey ahead. A self-esteem workbook is purchased for the girls to use during the group and to take with them upon completion. The girls are encouraged to continue using this workbook on their own or with their therapist if they are involved in counseling. Feedback from the therapeutic community has been very positive in continuing this work.

Group is held once a week for three hours in the evening during which a light dinner is provided. These dinners help teach social skills that in turn improve the girls' self-esteem. Group activities include readings and discussion and art projects such as painting and collage. Guest speakers address individual goals and present their own journey to becoming successful community leaders. All group work stresses core values and how they affect the girls' choices and decisions in life.

Another strong component of the program is the modeling of positive behavior. Judge Lawson and many female court staff volunteer to add material to the curriculum based upon personal experiences they believe would be helpful to the girls. In addition to court staff,

volunteers from the community have contributed their own stories and successes. This community partnership includes all aspects of functional, positive living. Community Partners include the Western Reserve Junior Service League, Lake Erie College, Lakeland Community College, and Partners with Paws, a service based on the care and training of therapy dogs.

In December 2011 the New Voices program received a generous \$50,000 donation from the Painesville law firm Dworken & Bernstein. This donation was given to the Court through a cy pres legal settlement for use in this program. This donation is expected to fully fund the New Voices program for seven years.