

under the sun

THE BRUNSWICK BEACON

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Grantham Aims To Break Spiraling Cycle Of Crime

BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

John Grantham's job is part of an ambitious and idealistic effort. His mobile counseling service to juvenile offenders is meant to break the pattern of behavior that begins with a youngster stealing a VCR and ends with an adult felony conviction and a prison term.

If you drive by one of Brunswick County's high schools or middle schools during the school day, you may see the big white bus that proclaims, "Brunswick County Counseling Service." Step into the bus and you're in a cozy office equipped with a television, VCR, computer, desk, chairs and a supply of programs and literature that help Grantham do his job.

His work is part of Community Based Alternatives, a state and federally-funded program in the Brunswick County Schools, to which the county makes in-kind contributions valued at about \$15,000.

He counsels young people from 7 to 17 who have been referred by the juvenile court or the schools.

"My goal is to keep them out of training school by presenting other options to the family and the court," he said. "A condition of the grant is that 85 percent of our referrals must be from the courts."

"I deal primarily with kids on probation and I am an advocate for them with their probation officer and the court."

The remaining 15 percent of his clientele are referred by the school for disruptive behavior beyond the capabilities of school counselors.

"I choose from their recommendations those children I think I can help where they can't," Grantham said.

The problem might be three days or more in school suspension or more than 10 days of out-of-school suspension, he said. Assaults on teachers or other students, vandalism, or bringing weapons to schools are other behaviors that could bring kids to Grantham's bus.



STAFF PHOTOS BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

COUNSELOR JOHN GRANTHAM prepares materials for the next student session in his mobile office.



THIS BUS TRAVELS to high schools and middle schools around Brunswick County, reaching juvenile offenders.

"It has to be voluntary," he noted. "Once in a while, I'm persuaded to take someone who doesn't want to talk to me. The kid and I will just sit there and look at each other for an hour, and every question I ask gets just a grunt."

Home contact is an important part of the process. Grantham writes an introductory letter to parents, makes home visits and depends on their support in monitoring and reinforcing behavior.

Options he presents to them and to the probation officer include the Wilmington-based Tough Love program, Waccamaw Boys Home, The Brunswick Hospital's adolescent treatment program for self-abusive behavior, the Big Buddy program and Job Corps.

Grantham's case load is from 10 to 20 students, each one expected to remain in the program for 185 days.

"Sometimes I terminate them earlier if they do very well or if I can't establish rapport with them," he said.

His success rate has been high, he maintained, with only two or three kids sent to a state training school despite his counseling.

Grantham's schedule takes him to each of the county's high schools and middle schools once a week, where his "clients" are called, one by one, to the bus and spend 30 minutes to 45 minutes with Grantham.

"I start out by discussing their problem and its possible consequences," he said. "If someone stole a small item from a store, I ask them if they realize they can be charged with larceny."

"If they broke into a trailer, I tell them the next time someone might be waiting to kill them. I talk about what the law says in their case, too."

Then he shows videos that "fit the crime." Some kids see videos of violence by peers and the outcome of it.

A prison video called "Scare You Straight" is an effective tool, as is an interactive computer program on self-esteem. "Low self-esteem is sometimes a problem," Grantham said. In some cases he uses group counseling as well.

Young people are led to explore actions they might have taken to avoid their violent behavior.

"Many kids don't know the difference between assertive and aggressive," Grantham said. "We discuss this and I constantly monitor their behavior after our talks. I find them on the school grounds or halls involved in violence and remind them of what we talked about."

His goals are to teach critical thinking, values and the difference between right and wrong. In this effort, he said, parents are cooperative.

"Most parents are very caring and want help," he said.

The program, in progress here nearly three years, has served a wide variety of youth. Grantham said most have been white males ages 14 to 15.

"Only a small percentage of these display violent behavior," he said.

Besides the in-bus counseling, kids under Grantham's tutelage are treated to such excursions and activities as the "Ropes" course, (an outdoor program teaching self-reliance) camping trips, visits to detention centers, jails and prisons, trips to Fort Fisher, canoeing and hiking.

What are his results?

"Most have been good," he said. "One I particularly remember is a kid who was not involved in any school or outside activities and was always in trouble. I encouraged him to get a job and join the soccer team, and he began to get better grades. He made a real change in his life."

In another instance, involving a special education student, Grantham detected that the youth was in an inappropriate grade.

"I got him re-evaluated so he could learn at his correct rate and he began to have success for the first time. His mother stopped punishing him and he began bringing home good grades."

Recently, a parent wrote her child's probation officer, asking that the child be re-enrolled in the counseling program because it had been so effective for him.

These examples speak for the program's success.

"I feel we're doing more than keeping kids in school or helping a young person here and there," Grantham said. "We're actually addressing the growing prison population, because the right counseling can prevent kids from going to training school, then back to bad behavior and eventually to prison."

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