

## Youth Courts Put Peer Pressure to Good Use

Almost 200 years ago, the English poet Lord Byron wrote that “the days of our youth are the days of our glory.” Life was likely simpler and more innocent for young people when Byron penned those words than in today’s fast-paced world, where we’ve become all too used to hearing about violence on our streets and drugs in our schools. The age at which children are forced to confront negative peer pressure keeps lowering, with significant consequences for many adolescents and their families and neighbors. In response, communities around the state and country are turning to teen courts—which target nonviolent, primarily first-time juvenile offenders—to help prevent at-risk adolescents from moving on to more serious crimes.

Teen courts, also called peer or youth courts, hold youthful offenders accountable for infractions that might not otherwise be prosecuted, sentencing them to community service, educational workshops, counseling, writing apologies to their victims or any such combination of sanctions. Although they hand out sentences to young offenders, most peer courts do not decide guilt or innocence, requiring the defendant to admit to committing the offense before accepting the case.

At youth courts nationwide, teen volunteers are learning to act as defense attorneys, prosecutors and jurors, with adult volunteers—including judges, attorneys and police officers—sitting in and providing their expertise during the hearings. Most teen courts have adult judges, while others train high-schoolers to take on the judge’s role under adult supervision. Many juvenile offenders, so long as they have parental consent, are opting to have their cases heard in teen court instead of going through the traditional system.

### Young Defendants Get Both Punishment and Help

Brooklyn’s first youth court opened in Red Hook in April 1998 as a joint effort of the Unified Court System’s



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*Red Hook Youth Court volunteers at a hearing*

Center for Court Innovation, the Office of the Kings County District Attorney and Good Shepherd Services. The court offers offenders aged 10 to 15 a more personal, less adversarial forum in which to discuss their crimes, giving them opportunities to speak throughout the hearing, unlike in traditional court proceedings. The youth court proceedings are open to the public, but participants and observers must take an oath of confidentiality.

Director Derek Miodownik says that the Red Hook Youth Court helps adolescents from becoming repeat offenders. He explains, “When teens as young as these commit a minor offense, it stays on record with the police department until they turn 16 and the files are destroyed. That’s just not enough to deter these kids from getting into trouble again, which is where our court comes in. We hold youngsters accountable for their wrongdoing.”

Most offenders are required to perform community service, which might be reading to kindergarten students, shelving books at the library or helping out at the South Brooklyn Health Center cleaning medicine trays or assisting with maintenance-related tasks, positive roles that

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help build their self-esteem. The court also links the youngsters to counseling, tutoring and other services, depending on their needs. An active jury questions the offenders—not just about the crime itself—but about their families and future goals, prompting defendants to do some soul-searching and change their ways.

### Volunteer Members Also Gain

Ranging in age from 14 to 17, the court's members are

recruited from local high schools and trained in leadership skills, group decision-making, the judicial process and public speaking. Shannon Johnson\*, a Red Hook Youth Court ex-offender-turned-court member, was originally referred to the court by the local precinct for being involved in a school fight. Says Ms. Johnson, now an intern at the New York State Bar Association, "At Red Hook Youth Court, I came to understand how hurtful my behavior was to others in the community. As part of my sentence, I attended an anger management workshop and learned about avoiding conflict. I later became a court member myself, pointing out to other offenders how harmful their negative actions are to the community."

### Youth Courts Find Success In Various Communities

In addition to urban areas like Red Hook, youth courts can be found in all types of communities, big and small. In Colonie, a town of about 80,000 outside of Albany, the youth court, which has been operating since early 1995, targets 12- to 16-year-old offenders and handles about 100 cases annually. Colonie's youth court has nearly 400 registered volunteer teen jurors and more than 120 court members, local high school students who rotate the roles of judge, prosecutor, defender, clerk and jury foreperson after completing an

eight-week training program and making a one-year commitment.

The court was recently designated a model by the State Division of Criminal Justice Services, with 99 percent of offenders successfully completing their peer-imposed sentences. About 70 percent of Colonie's offenders are brought in for shoplifting. The remaining 30 percent are referred to the court for unlawful possession of marijuana,

criminal mischief, vandalism or trespassing. Offenders come to the court by way of the local probation and police departments as well as Colonie's three town judges. If a defendant doesn't complete his or her youth court sentence, which rarely happens, the case goes back to either the probation department or town court.

A community service sentence at the Colonie court can be anything from working in programs for the homeless to helping out at the food bank to cleaning parks. Violet Colydas, the court's program director, observes that the young offenders come from both low-income families and

well-to-do homes. "It runs the gamut. You'd be surprised how many are straight-A students headed for top colleges. Then you've got the kids without any direction, the ones who don't want to continue school," she says, adding, "It's always a joy talking to the ex-offenders who stop by my office to report how well they're doing."

### Teen Juries Can Be Tough

Albany Family Court Judge Gerard Maney, a member of the youth court's advisory board, is very optimistic about the Colonie program and youth courts in general. "I think it's very appropriate for first-time teen offenders to be judged by their peers. The youth court members are really hard on these young offenders. Usually, the defendants very quickly realize they've done wrong and

*The following letter of apology, reprinted with the permission of the author and his family, was written by an offender from the Red Hook Youth Court to his parents.*

Dear Mom and Dad,

I'm sorry about stealing your car and now realize that I could have hurt or even killed myself or somebody else. I guess I was only thinking about the fun of driving at the time and apologize for the damage to your car and the one I hit. I truly regret that you have to use your hard-earned money to pay for the damage.

I know that I must gain back your trust over time and am prepared to do whatever is necessary to accomplish this. I will say it again: I am very sorry for what I did.

Love always,  
Kevin\*

\* Names have been changed to protect privacy

are ready to pay for their mistakes. Youth courts, by addressing low-level juvenile crime at the onset, are helping many at-risk youngsters avoid future brushes with the law. The court members also benefit, gaining important skills and learning about our justice system,” asserts Maney, who helped develop the Colonie court’s training manual and prepares members for the role of judge.

### A Coordinated Effort

Suffolk County’s Riverhead Youth Court, which tried its first case in May 1998 and targets 9- to 15-year-old offenders, is modeled after Colonie. “Our town officials fully supported the youth court concept and that’s how we got started,” says coordinator Judy Doll, who, along with the local police sergeant and a volunteer attorney, is present when cases are tried before Riverhead’s teen judge and jury. Parents, even those who are at first skeptical about youth courts, are quite impressed once they attend a trial and watch the Riverhead court’s young members in action.

There are currently more than 500 youth courts operating nationally, with approximately 60 in New York State alone. These courts—a coordinated effort of our justice system, schools, community leaders and others—mobilize a diverse mix of volunteer teens and adults in addressing problems associated with low-level crime. At the same time, they send the message that the overwhelming majority of young people do not condone their peers breaking the law. Colonie’s Ms. Colydas sums it up this way: “The thing is, youth courts really do work. They give teens who might otherwise go on to commit more serious crimes an opportunity to learn from their mistakes and make something positive of their lives, and that’s what it’s all about.”

For information on how to start a youth court in your area, visit the National Criminal Justice Reference Service’s Peer Justice and Youth Empowerment web site, [www.ncjrs.org/peerhome.htm](http://www.ncjrs.org/peerhome.htm), or contact the Center for Court Innovation at (212) 373-8096 or [bryers@communitycourts.org](mailto:bryers@communitycourts.org). ♦

## Jurors’ Mailbox

*Judge Abbey Boklan of Nassau County Court in Mineola received this note of thanks from the 13-member jury who, last spring, served on a criminal case over which she presided:*

Dear Judge Boklan:

During the past two days, we sat and listened as the assistant district attorney, defense counsel and you thanked us for our role as jurors. We would like to take this opportunity to return the favor and thank all of you. We also would like to thank the many court officers we met, and of course, the two

wonderful court stenographers for getting it all down for us. Everyone associated with this trial conducted themselves in the most professional and courteous way possible.

Your command of the court, and the assistant district attorney’s and defense counsel’s many indulgences afforded us during the trial,

have not gone unnoticed. We are all extremely impressed with the state of our court system in Nassau County. Bravo!

Please take this simple but heartfelt “thank you” from us. Your Honor, we have nothing but the highest regard for you and are grateful for all you’ve done to make our jury service as comfortable as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Members of the Jury

*If you have an interesting jury experience you’d like to share or have comments, questions or suggestions about the jury system, please call 1-800-NY-JUROR, send an e-mail to [NYJUROR@courts.state.ny.us](mailto:NYJUROR@courts.state.ny.us) or write to:*

*Chief Judge Judith Kaye  
Continuing Jury Reform  
25 Beaver Street  
New York, NY 10004*

## UPSTATE JOURNALIST REPORTS THAT JURY SERVICE IS GRAND

Kathy O'Hara admits that when she was summoned for jury duty last year, she was hoping to get out of it. A noted newspaper reporter who covers government and does a weekly feature for The Evening Sun, published Monday through Friday in New York's Chenango County, Ms. O'Hara was initially concerned about juggling work and the responsibilities that come with being a juror. "That didn't turn out to be a big problem, though," says Kathy, who was selected the foreperson on a grand jury panel and later wrote about her stint as a grand juror for The Evening Sun. She adds, "Actually, I'm eternally grateful that I was chosen because grand jury duty was a wonderful experience." Unlike petit jurors, who sit on trials, the more than 25,000 grand jurors who serve throughout the state each year decide whether there is sufficient evidence to proceed with the prosecution of felony cases.

Representing a variety of professions and backgrounds, the jurors on Ms. O'Hara's panel were very much on the ball. "We were a friendly and enthusiastic bunch, and everyone was committed to doing the right thing for the benefit of the community," she states.

Kathy's only complaint about jury service is that the cases were presented in a small room with very hard chairs. To make things more comfortable, the jurors took short breaks throughout the day and, at the district attorney's suggestion, brought pillows from home to cushion the seats. "I raised the issue of those rocklike chairs at our county's next round of budget talks and they've since been replaced," she says proudly.

Kathy says that some of the jurors were a bit nervous at first, so her advice to first-timers is to relax and be prepared for an educational, even enjoyable, time. "It's really very rewarding to serve on a jury. Even though I had to make up all the work and meetings I missed at the paper, I'd be happy to serve again," she adds.

Kathy, who used to live in New York City and Miami and has held down a variety of jobs, enjoys being a reporter and is happy to be back in her hometown of Norwich—which lies about 35 miles north of Binghamton and about 75 miles southeast of Syracuse.



*Reporter and first-time grand juror Kathy O'Hara*

"I've been pretty lucky in life so far," she says thoughtfully, explaining how she was more or less hired on the spot by CBS News upon arriving in New York City years ago after completing her graduate studies in New Mexico. She moved to Florida a few years later, becoming a history and religion teacher at a private school for girls before going into the landscaping business. Ms. O'Hara recalls being something of a disciplinarian as a teacher, laughing about the time she actually chased down a student she'd caught smoking in the school bathroom.

These days, Kathy prefers quieter pursuits and is particularly fond of fishing, looking forward to her annual fishing trips to Canada's Thousand Islands with her mom and her mom's husband. "My best times are when I'm fishing, and the best food is the fish I catch," she says. She's also very fond of small-town life and proud of her neighbors' community spirit and volunteerism. Reminiscing about the T-shirt company her grandfather started in Norwich at the turn of the century, Kathy says, "Dad ran the company for years, taking a loss on the plant, which eventually closed down. For as long as he could, though, he kept the plant going because it employed about 400 people and was so vital to the community." Ms. O'Hara notes that although the town has lost a significant number of jobs in recent years, lately some small companies have begun moving into the area.

Even with her colorful life, Kathy places grand jury service high on her list of interesting experiences and says, "Maybe it sounds hokey, but serving on a grand jury made me feel proud to be an American citizen. Before that, I never realized how much work goes into investigating a case and moving it from arrest to indictment to trial. It's a fair and just process, and I feel privileged to have taken part in it." ♦

## COURT'S JOB TRAINING PROGRAM TURNS LOW-LEVEL EX-OFFENDERS INTO NINE-TO-FIVERS

The phrase “ready, willing and able” aptly describes the student body of the Midtown Community Court’s Times Square Ink (TSI) on-site job training program. Eager to find gainful employment and make new lives, the enrollees, mostly low-level ex-offenders of the court, undergo 10 weeks of job readiness and office services training. During these two and a half months, they get hands-on experience in mailing and other back office operations so they’re armed with marketable skills when they enter the New York City job arena. Supported in part by private contributions from the likes of Pfizer, Morgan Stanley and Bloomberg, TSI operates out of

several floors of the West 54th Street building that houses Manhattan’s Midtown Community Court.

Since 1993, this innovative, award-winning court has played a role in reducing quality-of-life crime in mid-Manhattan, working together with neighborhood residents, local businesses and social service providers in developing and supervising community service projects and providing drug treatment, health care and other services for offenders charged with nonviolent, low-level crimes. Midtown Community Court defendants pay back the neighborhood for their crimes by performing services such as cleaning streets,

planting trees and assisting local nonprofit organizations with bulk mailings.

### Once Again, Necessity Is the Mother of Invention

TSI began as Times Square Express, the court’s on-site bulk mailhouse. Offenders came here to carry out their community service, with many voluntarily returning to take on additional work after completing their sentences. “When we saw so many ex-offenders coming back to Times Square Express even though they were no longer required to by the court, we began thinking about an on-site job training program to address the over 70 percent unemployment rate of our defendants,” says Midtown Community Court’s presiding judge, Eileen Koretz.

Classes begin every two weeks, with anywhere from eight to 12 students simultaneously enrolled in the program, which has three components: job readiness, office services training, and on-the-job internships. TSI trainees—who must have completed their community service sentences, be drug-free for at least the last six months and not have any outstanding arrest warrants—are chosen for their high level of motivation and genuine commitment to finding and keeping a job. “Generally speaking, we have two categories of trainees. The first group is made up of younger people, 18 to 29, who don’t have any real job experience but are ready to change their lives and don’t know quite how to do it. Then there are the people in their thirties and forties with huge gaps of unemployment on their résumés—often the result of drug and other problems—

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*TSI’s vocational counselor, Jasmine Hopper ( second from left ), and Judge Eileen Koretz flanked by two TSI graduates*

*TRAINING PROGRAM continued from previous page*

who now have things under control but need a helping hand getting back into the job market,” says Rebecca Busansky, the court’s director of operations.

Each participant is assigned an on-site social service counselor who helps the trainee work out any medical, housing or other issues that could present difficulties later on at the job. Enrollees also can take advantage of high school equivalency and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs offered through the court.

### **Taking A Realistic Approach**

Before students can begin putting together their résumés and rehearsing their employment interviews, vocational trainer Jasmine Hopper says they must first be able to take a critical look at their shortcomings and be willing to change the negatives into positives, otherwise some of their past issues may come back to haunt them at the workplace. This job readiness segment of the program, where participants examine their own strengths and weaknesses and work to overcome any obstacles to employment, helps the trainees set realistic employment goals and teaches them how to meet employers’ expectations. Here students quickly learn that having a positive attitude and good interpersonal skills count as much as technical expertise when it comes to landing a job and being successful.

Students attend job readiness classes for two hours every day, spending the rest of their time at the court’s on-site office services center, faxing, copying and learning firsthand about shipping and mailroom procedures. Rudy Pile, TSI’s production supervisor, trains

the students in these skills and likes to role-play with them, acting the part of the tough supervisor who makes life difficult. Says Pile, “I do this to better equip our trainees to handle problem bosses as well as other stressful on-the-job situations. This hands-on approach works very well.”

The trainees gain actual job experience during their last month at TSI, working as interns for established legal and other firms as well as the state Office of Court Administration. Although the program works closely with potential employers to help place the graduates in jobs, TSI participants are expected to take steps on their own to find a position.

### **Helping People to Help Themselves**

Ms. Busansky says the TSI staff decided to train ex-offenders in the office services field because it offers decent pay and advancement for those with limited work experience—a decision that is indeed paying off. Over 90 percent of the graduates have found and retained office services jobs, most of which provide benefits after three months. In addition, some of the program’s earliest graduates have already gotten promotions.

Judge Koretz sometimes refers offenders to the program and says TSI puts them on a path to self-sufficiency. “Not only do the trainees gain office skills, they also acquire life skills,” she adds. At a ceremony held last spring, where those who had just successfully

completed the program were honored with parting gifts and framed graduation certificates, the judge addressed the new graduates, praising them for their hard work and tenacity. She also asked them to stay in touch with court personnel and each other, which many do. In fact, several TSI alumni were on hand that graduation day to cheer on the newest honorees. The TSI staff looks to its former students for feedback in making the program more beneficial for future participants.

“Times Square Ink really changed everything for me,” says December 1998 graduate Derek Young, who has been working for a document services firm in lower Manhattan since last January and now plans to study business management. Adding that he no longer wastes his time hanging out on the streets, Derek credits TSI for showing him the way to a busy, productive life and a promising future. ♦

If you have or know of job opportunities for Times Square Ink graduates or would like more information about the program, call Rebecca Busansky, (212) 484-2772, or e-mail her at [rbusansk@courts.state.ny.us](mailto:rbusansk@courts.state.ny.us).

## Special Hotline Hears Out Jurors Around the State

Since its installation back in the spring of 1994, the New York court system's toll-free line for juror comments, inquiries and complaints (1-800-NY-JUROR) has fielded thousands of calls from citizens all across the state. The recommendation to implement this hotline—which offers a sympathetic, responsive ear to those who have questions, suggestions or gripes relating to their jury service—came from The Jury Project, a 30-member task force convened in late 1993 by Chief Judge Judith Kaye to devise a blueprint for improving New York's jury system. Along with starting a juror hotline, The Jury Project made a number of other recommendations that have also come to fruition, including reducing average terms of jury service, increasing juror pay, eliminating automatic exemptions and upgrading juror facilities.

If you call 1-800-NY-JUROR during business hours, you'll get the voice of a real live court employee at the other end, not a recording. There's a voice-mail system in place for early morning, late evening and weekend calls. The hotline's response team, made up of several Office of Court Administration (OCA) employees located in lower Manhattan, leaves no stone unturned in resolving complaints and answering questions from jurors throughout New York State.

Joan Marra, who spent much of her workday answering the hotline before her retirement from OCA last December, says, "I helped a lot of people via the 800-number and was always very conscientious about following up on the status of every call, whatever the question or complaint." Ms. Marra recalls being surprised at the variety of calls—including inquiries about juror pay, requests to postpone jury service and offers to volunteer for jury duty—she received during the hotline's early days. The volume of calls grew steadily until reaching approximately 3,000 a year, all of which are documented and carefully reviewed. "We never rush callers, but do everything possible to put them at ease, which is why the hotline has been such a great success," Ms. Marra says with pride.

*In the future, along with the option to speak to a live person, the juror hotline plans to add a recorded message containing responses to these and other commonly asked questions . . .*

**I recently completed jury service. When can I expect to receive my juror pay?**

Those jurors who are eligible to receive the juror's fee

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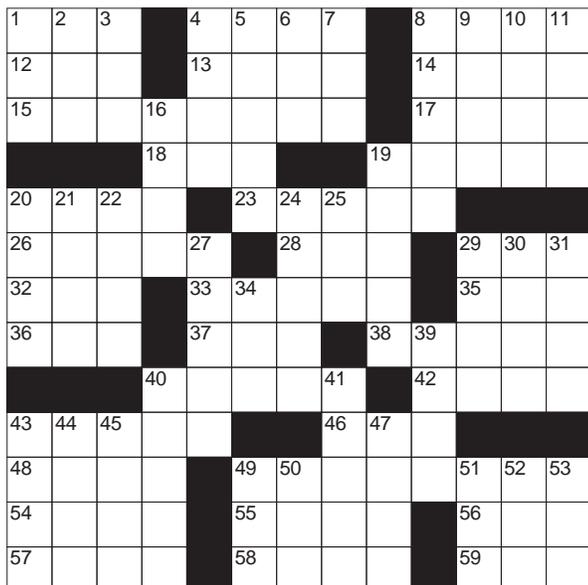


Several members of hotline team, from left: Lissette Lopez-Gellys, Joanne Freeman, Clema Walters (front) and Ari Weissfelner

All the hotline staffers agree that when you call 1-800-NY-JUROR, it's nearly always satisfaction guaranteed. "People want answers quickly, so we don't waste any time," says OCA's Martha Perez, who takes a lot of the calls. Ms. Perez gets many inquiries from jurors who've recently served and want to know when they're getting paid, in which instance she verifies the juror's dates of service, finds out when the check is being issued and gets back to the party as soon as she has an answer. She also gets quite a few calls from people asking what to do about a lost jury summons. "One woman said the dog ate her summons," laughs Ms. Perez, who told the caller to contact her local commissioner of jurors to find out when to report for jury duty.

The juror hotline was actually the brainchild of OCA Jury Coordinator Anthony Manisero, who remarks that there used to be a lot more calls relating to poor juror facilities. These days, many jurors phone in to say how pleased they are to see cleaner, more comfortable court facilities. Mr. Manisero muses, "Just recently, a juror rang up to report that the bathroom smelled too much of disinfectant. When you start getting 'complaints' like that, you know you're on the right track." ♦

## COURTSIDE CROSSWORD



## ACROSS

1. Chef's need
4. Strikes lightly
8. From a great distance
12. Ram's mate
13. Region
14. Get up
15. Plea of the accused, perhaps
17. Smile
18. Prefix meaning "other than"
19. Hotel visitor
20. Smell \_\_\_, have a suspicion that something's wrong: 2 wds.
23. Conscious (of)
26. One who takes part in deciding a verdict
28. \_\_\_ de Janeiro
29. Sean Lennon's mom
32. Boxing's all-time great
33. Assumed name
35. Pitcher spout
36. Bold color

37. Prefix with "inform" or "lead"
38. Holy one
40. What a thief's assistant does
42. Departs
43. Cuban dance
46. Neckwear
48. Call it \_\_\_, take a breather until tomorrow: 2 wds.
49. What 26-Across bases the verdict on
54. He's one of baseball's heroes
55. Voir \_\_\_, questioning one must undergo to become 26-Across
56. Sounds of delight
57. Hebrew prophet
58. Talk disrespectfully to
59. Still
11. Tenant's payment
16. Upon
19. Disgusting: slang
20. Slightly open
21. Make a determination, as a judge
22. Desertlike
24. Bracelet site
25. U.S. organization for those in 1-Down's profession: abbr.
27. Stallone role
29. Hodgepodge
30. Number in a baseball team
31. Makes a choice
34. One should never do this, especially when under oath
39. 20th-century American author
40. Bottomless pit
41. Mixes
43. Baby's first word, maybe
44. Eve's mate
45. Part of a sandwich order, perhaps
47. Roman date
49. Deceased variety-show host Sullivan and namesakes
50. By way of
51. Negative vote
52. Revolutionary leader Guevara
53. Suffix for a superlative

## DOWN

1. Renowned Chinese-American architect
2. Possess
3. \_\_\_ Commandments
4. Mexican fare
5. Place for an entertainment event
6. Ballpoint
7. Took a chair
8. Successful trial lawyers do this with great skill
9. Word preceding "engine" or "place"
10. Without any changes: 2 wds.

HOTLINE *continued from previous page*

(namely, those who were not paid by their employers during service) are typically paid within four to six weeks. To find out the status of your payment, contact your local commissioner of jurors. If you don't have this number, you can obtain it by calling 1-800-NYJUROR.

**I'm not a citizen but have been summoned for jury duty. Must I serve?**

No. Non-citizens may not serve, but they must provide their local commissioner of jurors with a copy of their alien registration card or other proof of their non-citizen status.

**How do I volunteer for jury service?**

Call your local commissioner of jurors for a qualification questionnaire or leave your name with the jury hotline staff.

**What should I do if I have a complaint about the juror facilities?**

Talk to your local court personnel about the problem or call the juror hotline for assistance.

**My relative/friend has been summoned as a juror but doesn't speak English. What should he/she do?**

The law requires that a juror must be able to "understand and communicate" in English. Your local commissioner of jurors will determine if the individual is sufficiently proficient to serve.

**My son/daughter was summoned for jury duty but is presently away at college (or in the military, etc.). What should I do?**

Call your local commissioner of jurors to explain the situation and request an excusal or a postponement to a more convenient date.