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Program Puts Troubled Teens Back on Track

By Tammy Adamson-McMullen

For the Kitsap Sun Sunday, January 6, 2008

A junior at Bremerton High School, Marquis Bittinger up until a few months ago was getting into "a lot of trouble," he says, and headed for a lot more. At one point, the 17-year-old was suspended from school, "because of a bad decision I had made," he admits. That's when Marquis' mother, Joan Bittinger, called Deborah Jackson and asked her to help him.

Jackson is founder and director of Surviving Change, a nonprofit program that works with students who are at risk of not graduating from high school and puts them back on track.

A motivational speaker with a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's in criminal justice administration and management, Jackson developed Surviving Change to help move students from "dysfunctional to functional behavior" so they can graduate from high school, go on to college, find jobs and eventually give back to their communities.

To do this, Jackson scrutinizes everything about her students, from their classes and homework habits to their self-esteem and friendships and then draws up a plan of action to put students on the road to success.

Jackson's primary goal is to guide students through college and into career placement; however, she also has several students who take classes at West Sound Technical Skills Center in Bremerton to gain valuable job skills as well.

The students who enter Jackson's program are typically those who have fallen through the cracks of the school system because of family problems, gang affiliations, drug and alcohol abuse, juvenile offenses and other issues.

Two of Jackson's enrollees were involved in a high school drug bust; another is related to a reputed gang leader.

Yet another was displaced from the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. "He's coming from an all-black to a mostly all-white environment and is in culture shock," Jackson says. "He never smiles."

Jackson works closely with students, parents, teachers, school officials, mental health administrators and parole officers to keep kids focused on achieving their goals and away from bad influences.

In Marquis's case, boredom was the problem, says his father, Dennis Bittinger.

"He just couldn't stay focused in the classroom, so he was acting out," Dennis says. According to Dennis, Jackson helped Marquis move into classes that better matched his abilities. "Now, he's getting the classes he needs to actually challenge him," Dennis adds. "He's doing much better."

Marquis acknowledged that his grades are good, and he's completing assignments on time. He also is hanging out with a different crowd. "I'm associating with people who have the same goals as me," he says.

Additionally, Marquis has begun setting his sights on graduating next June. "Miss Deborah is helping me get extra credits this year so I can graduate early and go on to college," says Marquis, who wants to pursue a bachelor's degree in journalism.

Marquis has learned that writing is one of his gifts. Last spring, he wrote an article and poem as part of his school's Dare Not to Swear Campaign. The article was printed in the Curriculum in Context Journal, published by the Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

"This was not a child we could give up on," Jackson says. "Marquis is very smart. He tutors my second-language students in English every weekend."

Students are either referred to Jackson or enroll themselves, realizing that Surviving Change might be their last chance to graduate. Jackson prefers to take no more than 21 students at a time, but at last count had 24.

One of the last enrollees wrote Jackson begging for admittance into the program. "I'm a senior with low credits trying my best to graduate on time and make my family proud," she wrote. Jackson couldn't turn the student away. "I keep saying I'm not going to take any more, but then I can't help it. The need is there," she says.

So far, Jackson's track record with students has been impressive, according to Naomi Spear, who teaches NovaNet, a computer-based learning and credit-retrieval program, at Bremerton High School. Students have told Spear they wouldn't have stayed in school without Jackson's guidance.

"The Surviving Change program is very effective in helping students change their lives," Spear attests. "I have noted significant changes in her students' academic and social lives. These students are attending school and achieving."

Jackson requires students and parents to sign the plan of action she draws up to make sure everyone is committed to making it succeed. Once the plan is in place, Jackson monitors the student's homework, test grades and school attendance. She also closely watches students' behavior and attitude, which must be exemplary for them to remain in the program.

"It's all about decisions and choice-making," says Jackson, who won't permit students to blame "the system" for their failures. "Often these kids have manipulative behavior and have been pacified in that behavior. I'm here to change that."

According to Dennis, Jackson sets high standards for her students.

"Deborah doesn't really accept 'no' as an answer or take any excuses the kids might come up with," Dennis says. "She's really strict, but in a good way. She gets down to their level."

Jackson believes she relates well to at-risk kids because she was one herself. "I came from a family of 13 kids with 12 different daddies. I was branded and labeled and not accepted, because of who I belonged to," says Jackson.

As a Bremerton teenager, Jackson was in constant trouble in school, but there was one history teacher who saw her potential and encouraged her to succeed.

"Every time I do motivational speaking, I talk about how he touched my life," Jackson says. "I love history to this day."

In 1990, Jackson went through a divorce and lived for a number of years in Oklahoma City and Portland, Ore., before returning to Bremerton. Two of Jackson's children after the initial move began having problems in school. Jackson ended up getting involved in the school system and advocating for them. Over time, she also began advocating for other children as well, especially those with disabilities.

Along the way, Jackson decided to enroll in college and received three degrees in four years' time. "I thought, 'How can I encourage (my kids) to go to college if I've never gone?' " she says.

Today, Jackson's older son, Anthony Daniel Jr., is training to be a deputy sheriff in Oklahoma City; her daughter, Antoinette, is a corrections officer and lives in Tacoma; and her younger son, AnTwon, is a senior at Portland State University who intends to pursue a law degree. Jackson treasures a photo, taken in 2004, showing all four family members in caps and gowns as they graduated with various degrees and diplomas that year.

Jackson believes that at-risk kids are motivated by these types of stories and tend to mimic what they see. Consequently, she regularly takes her high-school students on field trips to visit regional colleges and universities so they can see other Surviving Change students who have "made it." Many of these students transferred from Olympic College — two of them with a 4.0 grade average — and are now pursuing four-year degrees.

Meanwhile, Jackson is looking for a funding source to help her income and to increase educational programming for her students. Currently, Jackson's main revenue comes from motivational speaking, but it isn't enough to cover expenses.

"There are things I want to do with the kids. I want to take them to cultural workshops, lectures and conferences," she says, noting that it's important for her students to see life from a different perspective.

"These are kids who are products of their environment, but who have the potential of becoming someone," Jackson says. "All of these kids don't have to fall through the cracks."

Dare Not to Swear Campaign

By Marquis Bittinger

Rap artists are notorious for it, some politicians make the same mistake.

It's part of others' vocabulary, icing on the cake.

Others have no clue that they have said it.

They blame it on their mouth, say they just let it.

What is the benefit, name one good thing

It makes you sound stupid because nobody's listening.

Give up the excuses, admit it's the wrong thing to do

A lot more people will pay attention to you.

What if we all put forth an effort, to use alternate words.

To the words less appreciated, give people the respect they deserve.

A way to show intellect, show you truly care.

Make the world a better place if you "Dare Not To Swear!"

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