



NEWS - LOCAL

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'Reality' checks kids headed for crime

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FORT MILL -- Tasked with 20 hours of community service, Nation Ford graduate Brandon Bryant was offered a choice by the Fort Mill Police Department after completing half of his required work. Bryant, 18, could either continue to brave the late summer heat and finish his time, or watch a 67-minute video designed to educate at-risk teens and young adults.

He opted for the latter, and as he prepares for his fall semester at USC-Lancaster, Bryant discussed how the video, titled "The Reality Check Program," forced him to reassess his behavior going forward in life.

"The video opened my eyes and made me become more self-aware of my actions," Bryant said. "I would recommend anyone straying down the wrong path to watch this video and see what the reality can be if you make the wrong choices in life."



"We offer this video to everyone, to those who are at risk and to those who have already made a mistake and could face a slippery slope if they aren't reached in time," said Fort Mill Police Lieutenant Ray Dixon.

Dixon said approximately 30 to 40 young adults have already viewed the video to meet their community service requirements. The video is available to check out from the Fort Mill Police Department upon signing a waiver.

"Those who view it aren't just doing medial work, they are learning something, and what I've found is that this program is one of the best, most proactive tools in the country."

"The Reality Check Program" was founded and produced by Larry Lawton, an ex convict who spent 11 years in a maximum security prison

after being convicted of racketeering charges. He was locked up from 1996 to 2007, beginning his sentence at age 34.

The video documents Lawton's harrowing, often violent prison experiences, regrets for living an illegal lifestyle to achieve wealth, and the hope that can arise from having a second chance. Since its debut, the program has shipped over 10,000 DVDs around the country, is included as a court mandated pre-trial diversion program throughout the state of Florida, and has received widespread acclaim from an array of public officials, state attorneys and public defenders.

According to Lawton, statistics show that the program yields a 90 percent success rate, with 43 percent of those who view the video seeing improvements to their grades and 31 percent reporting better school attendance as well. And for Lawton, the reason for its effectiveness is the simplicity of the program's message, which deals strictly with the realities one can face by making just one bad life decision.

"I'm not a parent, a councilman or a Harvard professor; I'm merely an ex-con who lived and survived the life with a story to tell," said Lawton, who was contacted by Dixon over a year ago about introducing the program to Fort Mill. In addition to the DVD, Lawton spreads his message through his syndicated radio program and via numerous TV appearances, including a recurring role on Fox News and "The Daily Show with John Stewart." Lawton was also contacted to be an advisor on National Geographic's "Lockup" prison series, but declined when he wasn't permitted by producers to discuss "what really goes on in the prison system," he said.

"I don't deal in 'scaring people straight.' I deal in reality, and I don't care who you are, there are prison institutions across the country that are waiting to take you in for making one bad choice. I believe there is no such thing as bad kids, just bad choices, and that every young adult out there is at risk in this day and age."

Lawton describes his program as a "community policing tool" that sparked the interest of Dixon and the Fort Mill Police Department, which consistently seek fresh ways to spread the message about the repercussions one will face by living a life of crime. Currently, Fort Mill is the only town in South Carolina that has instituted the program.

Lawton believes the program, which is strictly voluntary, can not only be used as positive reinforcement for its target demographic, but could also help shatter the negativity towards law enforcement fostered by today's youth.

"In most places I've visited, people tend to have an 'us versus them' mentality in regards to the police," Lawton said. "So instead of simply arresting someone and throwing them behind bars, why not give them a copy of this program and show you actually care about what happens to them instead of further fueling their hatred of the police and need to rebel?"

Dixon agrees with Lawton's views of the program's potential to forge positive community relationships, and has hopes of increasing local distribution of the DVD to be included in patrol cars with intentions of handing them out "as needed." The police department would require sponsorship to do so, something that Lawton encourages through cross-promotion between local businesses and the program itself (copies of the DVD that are shipped out often bare a large yellow sticker on the cover displaying the businesses purchasing copies).

"I would love to reach the point where officers could be at the ready to hand the DVD out to kids receiving speeding tickets, or breaking up a teenage house party for example," Dixon said. "We want the community to trust us and believe that we are invested in them. The police are members of the community themselves, a badge doesn't make us any different."

This past week, Lawton visited Fort Mill from his home in Florida to meet Dixon in person to discuss the potential of the program as it pertains to the local youth. After his visit, Lawton described his experience in the local community and sees Fort Mill as a leader in adopting creative approaches to reach kids before they make the same mistakes that nearly cost him his life.

"It's great working with big cities and pin pointing the problems existing there, but to take the time to meet people like Ray in person who genuinely care is refreshing," Lawton said. "I lost seeing my kids grow up, I lost my beloved grandmother, and I lost the final time I could've spent with my father before he contracted Alzheimer's disease, all because of prison. The police here in Fort Mill simply want to see citizens do the right thing, and I'm honored to work with Fort Mill at any capacity. When this program spreads throughout the state, Fort Mill can say they had it right from the beginning."

For more information on the Reality Check Program, including Lawton's TV appearances, radio program and feedback from prominent figures regarding the program, go to www.lawton911.com.

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