

WHAT'S RIGHT WITH BOWLING

MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF YOUTH

A PBA Regional tournament in Florida is about more than knocking down pins.

BY BOB JOHNSON

One not familiar with the work of Larry Lawton might presume that the PBA South Region's Reality Check Classic is a tournament with a challenging lane pattern that limits players to using "low-performance" bowling balls.

In reality (pun intended), the Reality Check Classic, which has turned into an annual event during the twenty-teens, is held to bring attention to Lawton's Reality Check Foundation, which utilizes DVDs, lectures, other educational materials and, yes, a PBA Regional tournament to reach at-risk youth before they end up in prison.

Lawton knows a thing or two about being behind bars. He was once known as the "biggest jewel robber in the United States," a sobriquet that brought him wealth and infamy for a while, but ultimately landed him in federal prison.

Once he was released from the big house in 2007, Lawton sought to live a crime-free life. He founded a company called Jewelry Robbery Prevention, which addressed his primary sins of the past, and also developed the Reality Check Program and the Reality Check Foundation.

His bigger-than-life personality has served him well in helping law enforcement agencies and retail businesses prevent jewelry theft, and in helping youth learn about the harsh realities associated with crime and prison.

Lawton's Reality Check Program consists of four parts:

1. His early life.
2. What prison is really like.

3. What you will lose (if you choose crime and go to prison).

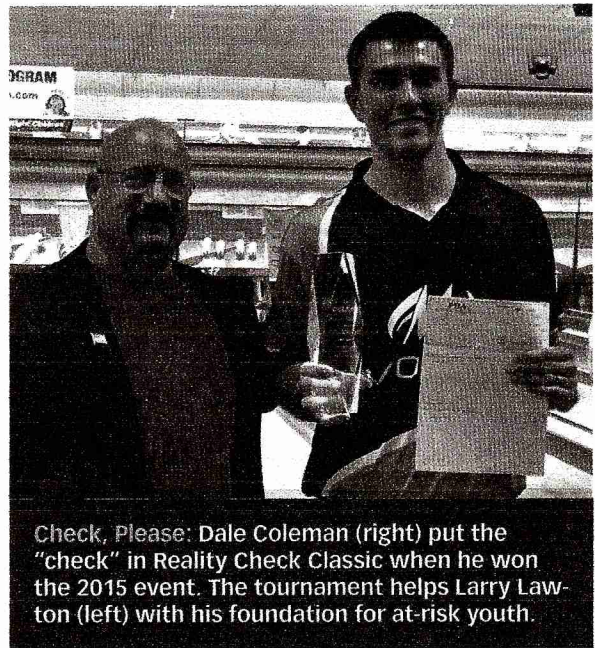
4. Avoiding and dissolving bad associations.

Lawton makes the program available to groups, organizations, schools and corporations. The program also has been used by judges, police chiefs, sheriffs, public defenders, state attorneys, the federal government's "weed and seed" program, and families.

The effort has been so far reaching and successful that Lawton received a unique honor on Aug. 16, 2013. On that date, the Lake St. Louis (Mo.) Police Department named him an honorary police officer — the only time an American ex-con has been so designated.

"I think it's really important that we try to intervene in young people's lives early, before they go too far down that wrong path," said Lake St. Louis Police Chief, Mike Force, just before the ceremony honoring Lawton. "I've looked at the program, flew down to Florida and vetted the program, and went through it myself. I'm convinced that if we can make a difference in people's lives early enough, we can keep them from going down that same path."

This year, the Reality Check Classic, hosted by Sawgrass Lanes in Tamarac, Fla., was part of a full weekend of activities under the banner of "Our Children in Peril." Lawton, himself, spoke at the Front Street Civic Center, other speakers



Check, please: Dale Coleman (right) put the "check" in Reality Check Classic when he won the 2015 event. The tournament helps Larry Lawton (left) with his foundation for at-risk youth.

(Fort Lauderdale Chief of Police, Frank Adderley; former judge and criminal defense attorney, Glenn Roderman; and former Cruiserweight Boxing champion of the world, Marc Randazzo) presented talks in their areas of expertise, and more than a hundred disadvantaged youth had the opportunity to bowl (for free) with top South Region bowlers.

"Seeing the faces of the kids at this event is so rewarding," Lawton said. "Connecting with young people and educating them about the dangers of drugs, crime and bad choices is what this event is all about."

Several proprietors across the country embrace local or national charities when hosting PBA Regional tournaments or other events. The Reality Check Classic is an example of how bowling connects people in ways that go far beyond throwing a ball and knocking down pins.