

Pima County Juvenile Court
Communication Bulletin
June 2014



Judge Abrams' public service extends beyond the bench

Pima County Juvenile Court Judge Lisa Abrams has been able to combine her love of dogs and her love of the law and court-involved children and other members of the public are reaping the benefits.

Read more Pages 6-7



Check out these other stories in this month's bulletin:



The PCJCC's new educational consultant's life experiences help her get kids on the right path.

Read more Pages 4-5



Mixed martial arts champion Anthony Birchak brings special message to court-involved kids.

Read more Pages 8-9

New Metro program offers mentoring, skills development

The half dozen kids listening to Reggie Kennedy were shocked at the numbers he rattled off.

Americans drink 1,500 plastic water bottles every second. It takes 700 years for one of those bottles to degrade. Only 20 percent of those bottles are recycled. Eighty percent end up in the ocean or a landfill.

Kennedy met the kids down on 4th Avenue through a brand-new Goodwill program called Metro.

Since April, teenagers who have been involved in the juvenile justice system within the last year have been offered a wide variety of services through the program, said Metro recruiter Lance Meeks.

Working closely with other organizations, such as Higher Ground and Gap Ministries, the folks at Metro help the kids get back into school, provide tutoring, discuss careers possibilities and

assist them in developing the skills they need to enter the work force, Meeks said. They also teach them how to fill out job applications and create a resume.

If the kids' families are struggling financially, Metro can also provide the kids with clothing vouchers for job interviews, bus passes and food through the Community Food Bank.

On occasion, kids are also able to obtain real-life job skills by volunteering or working for one of Goodwill's other programs, Meeks said.

In addition, the young people learn how to repair the damage they've done to their victims and community. Every Metro member is required to participate in two restorative justice projects within an 11-month time frame.

That's where Kennedy comes in. The rap artist and eco-friendly clothing company owner is on a quest to collect 1 billion plastic water bottles. Over the next several months, kids involved in the Metro program will be painting recycling bins, distributing them to interested 4th Avenue business owners and collecting the bins as they fill.

It takes 10 water bottles to make a T-shirt, Kennedy said.



Entrepreneur and rap artist Reggie Kennedy (center) chats with the kids at Metro about the world's recycling needs.

(Contd. Page 3)

Kennedy has also reached out to area schools to educate students, he said.

“It’s really about getting them involved,” Kennedy said. “There’s only one Earth and the kids are really unaware of what’s going on.”

The Metro program was created thanks to a two-year grant from the California-based Metro United Methodist Urban Ministry, said Beth Hannon-Penny, Goodwill’s new programs manager.



Lance Meeks

According to its website, it’s the non-profit, faith-based organization’s goal to “overcome poverty and to achieve self-sufficiency through employment, education, social services and leadership development.”

Oftentimes kids are uncomfortable in formal settings like probation offices, courthouses and Division of Child Safety and Family Services offices, Meeks said.

Metro, which is located at 300 N. 4th Ave., offers them a place where they can use computers for homework, listen to interesting people like Kennedy or seek the advice of a Metro-provided case manager, Meeks said.

“I think the environment is more comfortable and welcoming here,” Meeks said. “They can be themselves down here.”

Another perk of the program is the \$50 monthly stipend members get if they take part in at least 12 hours of positive activity, Meeks said. Positive activity could mean seeing a doctor, job hunting, attending school, performing community service and attending their court hearings.

Most importantly, Meeks said he believes the kids like Metro because of the relationships they develop with the staff.

“I think these kids feel like there’s a group of individuals who really care about their best interests,” Meeks said. “They like hearing it when we tell them ‘Good job in getting that job interview’ or ‘We’re proud of you for raising that grade.’”

He recently took a young man to Eegee’s after the teenager raised his biology grade from an F to a C, Meeks said.

Children learn about the Metro program from probation officers, the Division of Child Safety and Family Services, group homes, behavioral health networks and the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections, Meeks said.

Several local schools have also allowed Metro to present information about the program, too, Meeks said.

Right now, 25 court-involved children are Metro members. Another 10 kids who haven’t been involved in the system are considered “guests” in the program. They receive many of the same services, but are not entitled to the monthly stipend, bus passes, etc.

The hope is that Metro will one day have at least 100 kids involved in the program.

“We want to impact young individual’s lives and show them a sense of purpose for their future,” Meeks said.

For more information, contact Meeks at 306-8445 or lmeeks@goodwilltucson.org

Court's new educational consultant brings varied experiences

As one might imagine, when children become involved with the court, whether it's because their parents are having difficulties or they have gotten into trouble with the law, they often are having trouble in school.



Nandi Muhammad

Some of them might have dropped out, others may have fallen behind and still others have behavioral, psychological or cognitive issues.

Obviously, when the Pima County Juvenile Court needed to hire a new educational program coordinator a few months ago, administrators wanted to find someone who understood the importance of these children's educational needs and the overwhelming challenges they sometimes face.

In Nandi Muhammad, they got someone who "gets it" from every imaginable angle.

She's the mother of a special needs child, a former therapeutic foster mother and she has spent time working as a juvenile probation officer, family support specialist, school district administrator and an investigative case worker for the agency formerly known

as Child Protective Services.

"I always knew I wanted to work with kids," Muhammad said. "When I was 16, 17-years-old I worked for Tucson Parks and Recreation."

"Kids are honest for the most part and they're fun," Muhammad said. "I want to be able to make a difference. They are at that age where they are impressionable and you can help change them if you give them the right information and attention."

As the educational program coordinator, Muhammad has an ever-changing caseload of 30 to 35 kids, many of whom have been referred by probation officers.

She spends her days trying to help expelled children find schools that will not only accept them, but will suit their personality and see to their individualized needs.

Much of her time is also spent dealing with individualized education plans –making sure children obtain them, educating parents as to their children's rights and working with schools to ensure they are being followed. IEPs are for children who are emotionally disabled, have health issues or who have one or more learning disabilities.

In addition, Muhammad is a member of a wide variety of committees. She is a member of the Youth Recovery Court team and she regularly consults with folks who

(Contd. Page 5)

are working on issues relating to foster children, Disproportionate Minority Contact, homeless youth and truancy.

Being a mom, Muhammad knows what it's like to be a stubborn advocate for a child.

Over a six-year time period she was a foster mom to 17 special needs children who needed someone to make sure they were getting all of their needs met. Her first foster children were four siblings who had been living in a group home for a long time, were ill, had lice and clothes that didn't fit.

"It was so satisfying to be able to take those kids from a bad situation and get them into a good situation," Muhammad said. "They really progressed and thrived."

At different times, she also took in foster children who were either juvenile sex offenders or sex crime victims.

"I took in the sex offenders because I knew those were the ones most foster parents and prospective adoptive parents didn't want, but those kids need a place to go too," Muhammad said. "I found that when you lay down structure and rules you don't have too many problems."

While working as an investigative case worker, Muhammad said she came to see the challenges from the other side – the challenges being faced by parents whose children have been removed.

"I have more of an understanding now of what the parents are dealing with on a daily basis," Muhammad said. "Some of them are dealing with substance abuse issues and a lot of parents are desperate because of finances. A high number of them also have mental illnesses and special education needs of their own."

As a probation officer and a mom, Muhammad said she's found that the best way to develop a rapport with children is to just be honest with them. Many have been in the system so long, they have a hard time trusting adults.

Muhammad worked for the Maricopa County Regional School District for about four years. While there, she created a program that helps children transition from detention centers back into the community. A similar program is currently being modified here and Muhammad is helping out with that.

No matter what position she's held, she's always happiest when, at the end of the day, she believes as though she's given children and families the information and help they need to be successful.

"I've found out that education is one of the most important, if not the most important component in a child being successful," Muhammad said. "Any child who achieves any amount of success, even if it's minute, feels empowered. They want to continue to feel that success. I believe all kids can become eager to learn more."

She acknowledges her job can be a tough one, but she loves it.

"I like challenges," Muhammad said. "Give me a problem and I'll see what I can do."

Judge Abrams' Penelope on a mission to bring comfort

When Judge Lisa Abrams was seven, she fell in love for the first time. Her parents gave her a dog as a "consolation prize" when her brother was born.

Dogs have been an important part of Judge Abrams' life ever since. They've even appeared in life event photos, including her engagement picture.

"I can't imagine not having a dog," Judge Abrams said. "They've always given me such comfort and they're always in a good mood."



That being the case, Judge Abrams said it just made sense to do what she could to share some of that comfort. Earlier this year, she and her 13-year-old son, Henry, went to the Humane Society of Southern Arizona with one of their standard poodles, Penelope, for special classes. Penelope has been a certified therapy dog since March.

Penelope on a recent visit to the Pima County Juvenile Court's lobby.

Court and detention center several times and she's provided comfort at Handmaker, an assisted living center, too. Soon, they hope to take her to hospices and rehabilitation centers.

"Penelope likes older folks and older teens," Judge Abrams said. "She's very comfortable around wheelchairs, walkers and canes."

Although Penelope went through extensive training that included a lot of role-playing, Judge Abrams thinks her personality just lends itself to dealing with the elderly.

In order to be accepted into the program, Penelope had to go through a stringent assessment process to see how she reacted to loud noises, aggressive hugging, flailing arms, etc.

Once accepted, Penelope, Judge Abrams and Henry attended a two-hour class every Sunday for five weeks. They also had homework assignments, which included riding in elevators and going to Home Depot (Contd. Page 7)

to get used to loud and unexpected noises.

At the end, Penelope was assessed by a dozen people and her human partners took a written test.

All three had to learn how to deal with folks can be manic, delusional, aggressive and non-verbal.

Judge Abrams would love to train a couple of her other four dogs as therapy dogs. She can envision bringing a dog to court with her every day.

One of her terrier mixes, Theo, has visited the detention center on a couple of occasions.



Judge Abrams' dog Theo brought a lot of joy to this boy in the PCJCC detention center recently.

"I remember that during one of our Bring Your Pet to Work days Theo picked out a child who must have been the one most in need," Judge Abrams said. "He wouldn't leave his side and he wouldn't let any of the other dogs near him."

A similar incident happened recently with Penelope. Judge Abrams was at the Festival of Books on the University of Arizona's mall when Penelope singled out a man standing alone.

"The man fell to his knees and hugged Penelope. When he looked up he was crying," Judge Abrams said.

The man had walked over from University Medical Center where his daughter had just been diagnosed with leukemia.

"I really believe that animals have intuitive powers that we can tap into," Judge Abrams said.

Penelope not only calms people, but she also offers kids a different perspective of her, Judge Abrams said.

"I think she makes me seem human," Judge Abrams said. "Sometimes they see people in black robes and they don't realize we're just regular people. I think having a dog makes it easier for them to communicate with me. I'll see kids from detention in the courtroom and they always ask about her."

Judge Abrams has always felt the need to serve others and she's thrilled to have found yet another way to do so.

"To help people get to a better point is just so fulfilling," she said.

Mixed martial art champ urges kids to make right choices

When Anthony Birchak's dad died when he was 4, he turned into an angry little boy who began acting out. Luckily, he found an outlet for all of that rage when he was five, Birchak said.

Birchak became a wrestler. Every day, he hit the mats instead of hitting something else. As he got older, he saw his friends being pulled away by negative influences; he chose to stick with wrestling.

It all came down to one thing.

"I didn't want to be a statistic," Birchak, 28, said.

People kept predicting he would never make something of himself since he was fatherless.

Well, Birchak is now a well-known mixed martial arts champion whose picture has made *Sports Illustrated*. He's also about to sign a contract with the Ultimate Fighting Championship.

Earlier this month, Birchak shared his story with more than 30 kids who were in Youth Recovery Court or the detention center.

"I'm an elite athlete in this world because I chose to be," Birchak told the kids. "I had a lot of opportunities to succeed, but I also had a lot of opportunities to be in here with you guys. It's all about choices, guys."

When his friends were choosing to do drugs and get into trouble, Birchak said he chose to go to the gym instead. As a result, he won 140 out of 170 matches in high school. He was a three-time state medalist and a state runner-up.

(Contd. Page 9)



Anthony Birchak shows off the belt he earned last fall.

He won the Greco-Roman State Championship four consecutive times and was a two-time AAU All-American in Greco and Freestyle.

He messed up once, Birchak admitted. When he was 17, he stole his mom's car, drove to Mexico, got drunk and was arrested for driving under the influence on his way back in Bisbee.



He spent several days in jail with a one-eyed, 6-foot-4 inch man who called himself "Thumper," Birchak said. The 5-foot-8 inch Birchak promised himself that would never happen again.

After college, Birchak turned his attention to becoming a mixed martial

artist after he saw a friend do well on The Ultimate Fighter reality TV show.

Last October, Birchak won the bantamweight crown in Maximum Fighting Championship 38. (Bantamweight mixed martial artists weigh between 125 and 136 pounds.)

Birchak, a father of four, told the kids they can become whatever they want to be, they just have to make the right choices. He urged them to look around the room and to realize everyone standing around them genuinely cares for them and wants to help them. They should take advantage of that before it's too late, he said.

"We're all fighters. We all fight things, whether it's mentally, physically, emotionally or something in our home lives," Birchak said. "You see the people around you right now? They're here to help you guys.

Learn from these people. Everybody's got something they can teach you."

Birchak encouraged the kids to contact him, promising to help them get a start if they are interested in wrestling or mixed martial arts.



Judge Adam ends rotation as PCJCC presiding judge

At the end of this month, Judge Karen Adam will wrap up her term as Pima County Juvenile Court's presiding judge and rotate to Superior Court to work on the Family Law Bench.

She sat down a few months ago to discuss her time as the "PJ" and other topics near and dear to her heart.

Q: How would you describe your job as the presiding judge?

A: "It was my dream job because I really believe so strongly in the work that was done before I got here. I wanted to carry it on and I had some ideas of my own that I wanted to try...The one thing that I really, really wanted to do was ensure that we were one court. That has been my big thing. I wanted to ensure that under "One Family, One Judge"



Judge Karen Adam was excited to continue the court's Disproportionate Minority Contact work when she became presiding judge and is confident the work will continue after she leaves.

everyone was sharing knowledge and sharing resources. I wanted everyone to remember that we are all guided by the same core principals, the same commitment to children and to the safety of the community. I wanted everyone to remember nobody is less important and that it's a continuum whether it's detention, probation, child welfare, county attorney or public defender, it's all of a piece."

Q: What's important to remember as the presiding judge?

A: "Keeping the momentum going is primary, as long as you believe in it and the programs are data-driven, best practices and evidence-based...The phrase "best practice" is over-used, but by that I mean it's working and we should be doing it because it's the right thing to do. Sending out a really well-written and welcoming probation letter may not have any impact at all on Disproportionate Minority Contact, but it's what we should be doing. So you can't measure everything, which the researchers don't want to hear, but really and truly you've got to do some things

(Contd. Page 11)

because they are right...and you've got to stop things that aren't working. That's really, really important. You've always got to be looking at what's in place, giving it time and then looking at it and then abandoning something that's wasteful and not effective. So it's both sides of it."

Q: Please describe your personal style, how did you try to engage with the families you served?

A: You bring who you are to the table. It's naïve to think that judges are not human beings who are on the bench. You are not supposed to -- and judges guard against not letting their own personal experiences affect specific outcomes or decisions -- but if you've had substance abuse issues in your family you can't help but have an added understanding of that in a particular case. Even if it doesn't ever play out, in any way, in any ruling, maybe you're going to be kind to someone who is struggling because you've had that experience...You don't want anything you say to detract from your ability to have the person respect who you are and to follow the rules. I was widowed and it's absolutely the only thing I ever talk to anybody about. I will have a mother and child sitting in front of me who have just lost a dad and that is the one thing I will talk to them about. I won't make a big maudlin speech about it, but I will say "I know a lot of people say I know how you feel; I literally know how you feel. I don't know your particular circumstances, but my kids lost their dad and I lost my husband and here are some things that helped me and maybe it will be helpful for you. Or I'll just say I'm so sorry and It's awful and How can I help you?"

Q: If you had unlimited funding, what are some things you would do with the money to better serve our families?"

A: "Access to safe, affordable housing would make the single biggest change in the lives of most of our children and families, followed closely by well-paying employment, quality child care, well-funded education, and food security. If we could deal seriously with the poverty issues and the disparities in our community, we would be able to make serious headway with the other pressing issues we face: child abuse, domestic violence, trauma, truancy, teen pregnancy, and poor school attendance and performance."

Q: Where would you like to see the PCJCC in five years?

A: "I'd like to see the court continue to be vigilant about Disproportionate Minority Contact, trauma and domestic violence. It should continue to treat its employees well and recognize them for work well done. It should continue to offer training to all so that everyone up to speed on the latest research and practices. It should also continue to be active in the community, engage new partners and forge strong connections."



Happy Independence Day and thanks to those who have and continue to serve!

- **Gary Alvarez, U.S. Air Force, 20 years**
- **Richard Berkeley, U.S. Air Force, 26 years**
- **Anthony Biggs, U.S. Army, 4 years**
- **Keith Brunson, U.S. Air Force, 12 years**
- **Ruben Carranza, U.S. Air Force, 8 years**
- **Alex Celaya, U.S. Army, 10 years/Army Reserves**
- **Van Covington, U.S. Air Force, 22 years**
- **Thomas Dicks, U.S. Army, 5 years/Army Reserves**
- **Sarah Espinoza, U.S. Navy, 13 years/U.S. Navy reserves**
- **William A. Grijalva Sr., U.S. Navy, 4 years**
- **Arnoldo Gutierrez, U.S. Army, 3 years**
- **Tim Hart, U.S. Air Force, 3.5 years**
- **Jay Hengemann, U.S. Navy, 10 years**
- **Terrance Hopkins, U.S. Army, 5 years**
- **Roberta Ishmael, U.S. Navy, 6.5 years**
- **Mark McConnell, U.S. Air Force, 4 years**
- **John Maley, U.S. Army, 25.5 years**
- **Anthony Miles, U.S. Army, 20 years**
- **Michael P. Miller, U.S. Army, 4 years**
- **Jesus Othon, U.S. Army, 4 years, sergeant/Army Reserves, 4 years**
- **John Schow, U.S. Navy, 20 years**
- **Martin Silvas, U.S. Marine Corp., 6 years/Air National Guard, 22 years**
- **Erik Traywick, U.S. Army, five years**
- **Jon Upchurch, U.S. Army, 17 years**
- **William Whited, U.S. Air Force, 23.5 years**
- **Barbara Wilding, U.S. Army, 5 years/ Air National Guard, 6 years**





Sarah Espinoza



Anthony Miles



Van Covington



John Schow

Odds & Ends

Milestones

Jacob Beltran, Information Systems, 10 years

Olivia Grijalva, Administration, 15 years

Dianna Cuckler, Probation, 15 years

Kelly Bentkowski, Calendar Services, 25 years

Did you know?

*31 PCJCC employees have worked here more than 20 years?

* 66 have worked here between 15 and 19 years?

* 61 have worked here between 10 and 14 years?

* That means 40% of our work force has been helping kids and families more than 10 years.

* Most who have the longest tenure currently work in probation.

Detention Employee of the Month

Supervisor **Gale Greene** was selected as the May 2014 Detention Employee of the Month due to her commitment, leadership, and willingness to go above and beyond to get the job done.

Gale was instrumental in scheduling dates, times and facilitators to ensure her staff is in compliance with their annual training requirements, with the majority being completed during their regular midnight shift hours.



The Bravo team awarded one Gem this month. **Ed Beltran** from Detention was honored for working with the Community Food Bank, CAPE School, detention and the South Tucson Police Department to raise awareness of Detention's therapeutic garden. A truckload of organic soil was donated to the garden in May and the group worked together to bring it in and spread it.

Voices

Since the PCJCC is here to help strengthen kids and families, it seems only appropriate the kids in our Detention Center have a platform from which to speak. We'll be asking them questions periodically and printing some of their unedited answers here.

What does patience mean to you?

Patience means waiting without interrupting and politely — Isaiah

Pitence means to me to have time to wait and not letting some one get to you — Danielle B.

Patience means to be calm and at peace during stressful or hard situations — Danielle

Patience means to be able to wait for something, to not rush things — Alonzo

Patient means to withstand stress over time — Joshua

Bieng patient means being able to wait — Anthony

Patience means being able to wait and not being in a rush to get things done — Megan

When you have patience, you are willing to wait until when the time comes — Tyler

Patience is to me having matureity a lot in order to control. Patience not only has about waiting on something you want the most and with that self courage to stand with pride intill your answerd by one or the other. Knowing patience helps you long ways toward jobs, goals or plans. "Ha! Yes, I'm a planer." Knoledged is best in my family runs deep, but never patience. I am working on it though — Camilla

Month in Photos



Pima County Juvenile Court staff and community partners got to say goodbye to Judge Karen Adam June 12 during a small celebration. Judge Adam is wrapping up her tenure as presiding judge and heading to Superior Court. Retired court administrator Steve Rubin presented Judge Adam with a brick from the county's original children's detention center and Judge Geoffrey Ferlan thanks her for all of her work as PJ over the last three years.



The Pima County Juvenile Court held a Summer Kick-Off event June 16 to honor our Court Appointed Special Advocates. They were treated to ice cream and lots of other goodies. They also received awards and the latest news about the program.

2014 GED Community Celebration



On June 19, we invited several teens who earned their GED in our Detention Center back to the Pima County Juvenile Court so they could celebrate their accomplishment with their families. Since last June, nearly 20 children have earned their GEDs. It's such a huge accomplishment, we're making these GED community celebrations a tradition.





PCJCC Communications Bulletin

Published periodically

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