

JUVENILE CRIME

Program 'changes' young offenders

■ **The Gate Program for Juvenile Weapon Offenders does not waste time lecturing boys about their mistakes, but instead shows them the reality of gun violence.**

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It's the smell that Dachel Diaz remembers most.

Stepping into the morgue that day, it was overpowering. Unforgettable.

He was 15, in trouble with the law and probably headed for more. Then came the Gate Program for Juvenile Weapon Offenders and a close-up view of a corpse.

"I went inside that place and my whole life changed," he says today, five years later. "It shocked me. I don't care how bad you are, it changes you."

The Gate Program is a diversionary program and a harsh reality lesson for boys, ages 11 to 17, who are first- or second-time weapons offenders.

Instead of classroom lectures,

•TURN TO YOUTH PROGRAM, 2B

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• YOUTH PROGRAM, FROM 1B

the program specializes in truths.

At Jackson Memorial Hospital's Ryder Trauma Center, participants learn what life might be like if they're shot, dealing with catheters and pain and uncontrollable bodily functions.

At a rape treatment center, they learn about prison rape, and some students take turns placing their feet in stirrups on an examining table as a nurse explains the check-up process after a male sexual assault occurs in prison.

The trip to the morgue is another eye-opener, starting with the smell and including another unpleasant discovery: the corpses have toe tags just like ones the boys wrote their names on during the first class.

The message: If you stay on a path of violence, you could end up here.

"It's all about choices and consequences," said Mimi Watson Sutherland, a nurse at the trauma center who started the program five years ago.

Tired of seeing increasingly young children arriving at the hospital with gunshot wounds, she decided to help.

A NEW APPROACH

But scaring teenagers or lecturing them wouldn't work, she thought. After researching programs across the country, she decided the most effective technique would be to show the boys what she sees everyday at the trauma center: the results of violence.

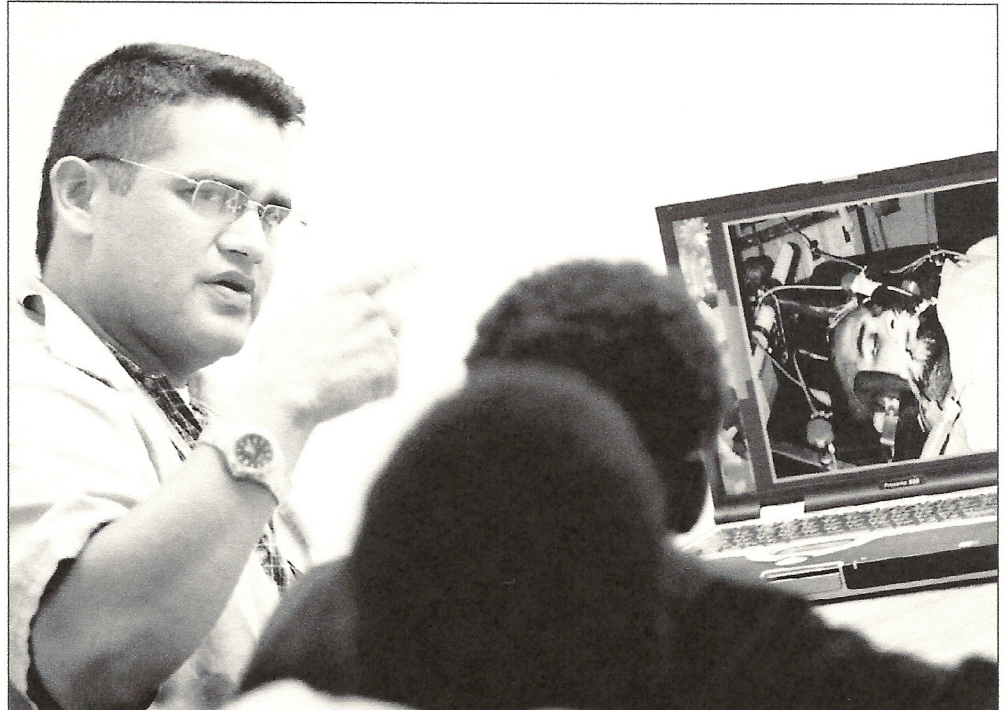
Boys enter the program through referrals from the juvenile justice system and case managers from the county's delinquency prevention services.

A \$150,000 a year grant from Miami-Dade's Youth Crime Task Force helps pay for teachers and trips.

"I personally think the program works really well," said Rafael Martinez, director of the task force. "I can see it in the graduation ceremonies where the boys give their speeches."

Since the program began in 1999, more than 150 boys have graduated, and 25 to 30 boys are in the program at any given time.

The Gate program is evalu-



CARL JUSTE/HERALD STAFF

HARSH LESSON: Adalberto Manco, left, shows Gate program participants a photo of himself taken after a motorcycle accident that left him in a coma for 90 days.

ated yearly by an outside consultancy that measures the boys' attitudes and school performance and keeps track of any arrests during the program.

Ronald A. Werner, an administrative officer for the task force, said it does not keep track of the boys to see if they are rearrested after graduating from the program.

About 20 percent of Gate participants do not graduate, officials said, and even the strongest advocates of the program say it's impossible to succeed in every case.

"Unfortunately you can't reach everybody," said Jayme Niemeier, program coordinator and teacher. "There are some that will need some more life experience but then there are the kids who not only get it but get it really strongly."

TRAUMA CENTER

During a visit to the resuscitation unit at the trauma center in July, the boys stood in a semi-circle around the emergency room table watching nurses tend to an imaginary patient.

Lamar Joseph, 14, couldn't take his eyes off all the tubes. One to go down the patient's throat, and a second — intra-

venous — for the patient's arm.

"It's not like the movies, is it?" Sutherland asks the boys.

Niemeier said after-tour discussions are just as important as the actual trips, especially following a visit to the rape treatment center.

"Sexual assault is a fact of life in jails and prison," Niemeier said, as he waited for the boys to arrive for class one afternoon. "We want them to see what people go through."

VIVID EXAM

Simulating a rape exam — sitting on the examination table with feet in stirrups — is a vivid, unpleasant experience that just might get through to even the toughest boy, he said.

"It's uncomfortable and they feel vulnerable," he said.

"We want them to understand this is what you will have to do. It's things they never think of. Their world is, 'Nothing is going to happen to me.'"

In the final few months of the program, the boys focus on the future, learning how a criminal record can prevent them from getting jobs and getting into colleges, about peer pressure and money

management.

Alejandro Casco, 17, who graduated from the program in July, said it helped him realize he needs to make plans for life after high school.

"In [Jayme Niemeier's] class on career development he made me realize that if I don't go to college I will work more and get paid less," he said during his graduation speech.

The graduation ceremony ended, as it always does, with one eagerly anticipated moment — when Sutherland hands the boys the toe tags they filled out the first day of the program.

The four July graduates jumped on stage in the South Miami/Coral Gables Elks Lodge, posed for a quick photo and then tore the tags into tiny pieces.

Diaz, who was sitting in the audience, gave a short speech about his graduation from the program and the way the teachers — especially Sutherland — changed his life.

"I just started to listen to them halfway through the program and I decided, well these people do have a point," he said, looking at Sutherland and Niemeier.

"If it weren't for them, I might not be here."