



# WHAT'S WORKING

A Message From DJJ Director Andy Block

Oct. 20, 2014

## Danville Youth 'Reconnect' At High Rate

"It felt good to be able tell kids about why they shouldn't get involved with drugs and alcohol," the confident young man said.

While all DJJ probation officers may have said this at one time during their careers, in Danville the statement came from a surprising source: a youth who himself was still on probation for a robbery charge, and had told his peers about the hard lessons he already had learned as part of Danville's successful "Reconnection" program.

CSU 22-Rocky Mount's Probation Supervisor Joyce Green knew the program had promise when Amanda Oakes of Danville-Pittsylvania Community Services (DPCS) first approached her with the idea four years ago.

"We were struggling trying to find effective ways to get kids in detention or returning from our Juvenile Correctional Centers back into the community," Green recalls. "The Reconnection program provided a structured, eight- to 10-month program, not just the usual 90-day process we were using."

"The Reconnection program ensures that the youth has an established goal when he or she finishes the program," said Oakes, a former CSU 10-Farmville employee before joining DPCS. "We start by talking with them about their experience before they are ever released. Then we work on skill development, educational and employment goals, making sure we connect them with potential employers in the area."



*From left: CSU 22-Rocky Mount Probation Supervisor Joyce Green, Danville-Pittsylvania Community Services Prevention Specialist Marvin L. Martin, and DPCS Director of Prevention Services Amanda Oakes. CSU 22 Probation Officers John Downs, Frank Githens, Diana Graves, Rachelle Moore, and Sherri Oliver all participate in the "Reconnection" program's success.*

Kids also learn social skills they may have missed along the way. This is handled mostly by DPCS Prevention Specialist Marvin Martin, whose affability and wide smile is coupled with a determination that the kids he works with will succeed. "I try to keep a laid-back approach, not punitive," Martin says. "I tell them to stay in school, keep learning. I'll take them to see employers, to visit colleges, to community service projects and recreational opportunities. I also show them a better way of acting in public – just basic social skills."

It was Martin who saw leadership potential in the young man who now speaks to other kids about drugs and alcohol. Martin enrolled him in a workshop in which the youth learned presentation skills. The youth has since

spoken to hundreds of his peers about why drugs and alcohol are a bad idea, relating his own experience along the way. Other program participants have graduated as valedictorian of their class, enrolled in college, obtained their GEDs and gained employment.

The DJJ-DPCS tandem estimates they have worked with about 50 kids during the program's existence, with a very high success rate. Oakes believes the program's greatest attribute is the bond of trust it engenders between probation officer and youth.

"When the youth see we are here to help them and not here to lock them back up, then we can move forward," Oakes says. "If they fail, we fail. And in this program, failure is just not a word we use. Everyone is given the opportunity to succeed."