



WHAT'S WORKING

A Message From DJJ Director Andy Block

Dec. 16, 2015

The Face Of Patience

CSU 12's Lauren Ellis' Perseverance, Tenacity Leads An Angry Young Man To A New Life

The 13-year-old boy that first walked into Lauren Ellis' office at CSU 12 in Chesterfield was "one of the angriest kids that I had ever met," she says, "and he had plenty of reason to be: he came from a family where there was drugs, alcohol, all kinds of abuse." When Ellis began giving his life some structure, he got even madder, thinking she was just trying to tell him what to do.

Ellis knew she faced a serious challenge, especially since the then-District 12 juvenile court judge was not known for granting many second chances. As she and her fellow probation officers do with all their clients, Ellis set out to try to repair a broken life, involving the parents wherever possible.

She worked with the youth on anger management issues; she met with his mother in an effort to break her dependence on alcohol. This was a critical component, since the Chesterfield County Drug Court would not accept the youth until the parents dealt with their own drug issues. Modeling the behavior she wanted the mother to emulate, Ellis took her to school meetings and helped her learn how to give basic structure to her life: planning a meeting, keeping an appointment.

Then something happened that Lauren says probation officers see far too rarely: The mother got sober and began working to improve her relationship with her son. "Once her perspective changed, everything changed," Ellis says of the mother. "It took the kid a while to see that she was serious about it this time. But when he did, he started to turn the corner."

Though it was an unusually long period for a juvenile to remain on probation, the judge noticed the progress Ellis was making with the family, and allowed her to continue working with them. "This is a case of a youth who, without the tenacity of Lauren, would have been committed because of the severe dysfunctionality of the

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*- Lauren Ellis
CSU 12 Probation Officer*

family,” says CSU 12 Director Jim Nankervis.

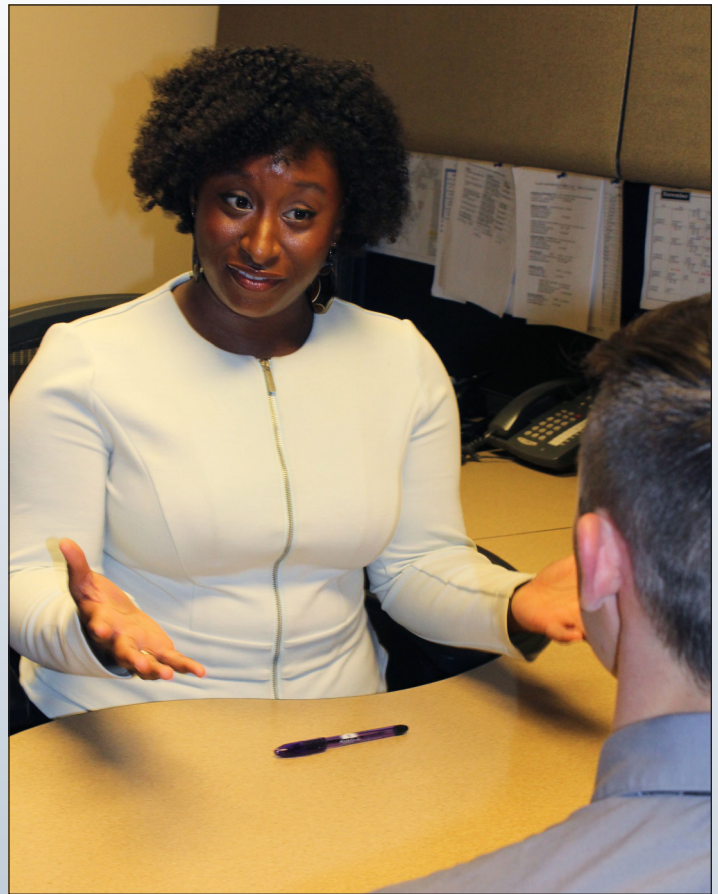
Ellis patiently continued to work with mother and son, teaching them conflict resolution skills. “All she had ever known how to do was to scream at her kid,” Ellis says. “And that’s all the kid ever associated with his mother. I helped them think through situations, both good and bad. We covered a lot of stuff: identifying feelings and expressing them constructively instead of swearing; controlling impulses.”

She knew a breakthrough had occurred when the youth sat in her office without a trace of anger. “Instead of swearing, he identified his feelings and we talked about it,” she says. “He could articulate on his own what he needed to do. He began acknowledging the support I had given him.”

Thanks to Ellis’ persistence and perseverance, the young man was admitted to Drug Court in February and is on track to complete the 18-month program. He got a job at a local fast food restaurant, where he has been for the last 4-5 months. Ellis said she would see the youth and his mother casually in the months that followed. “I know you just wanted the best for our family,” the grateful mother now says to Ellis. But the best was yet to come.

One of the most challenging steps a youth must complete in Drug Court is a special session where he must answer a wide array of questions and provide testimony. “This is a huge step ... very difficult to pass,” says Chesterfield County Drug Court Community Supervision Officer Amber Maio. “The person giving the testimony has to ‘dig down deep’ and talk about the people they have affected, and how they have affected them, during their involvement with the court. Most people don’t pass this step on the first try.”

Ellis was not in court the day the youth gave his testimony. But Maio was, and excitedly called Ellis to pass along what she had heard. “What especially touched me during his testimony was that he talked about his probation officer, Ms. Ellis, and how much she tried to help him and his mother, never giving up on them no matter what during his time on probation,” Maio says. “This was one of the most sincere, heartfelt, and



CSU 12 Probation Officer Lauren Ellis talks with a client in her Chesterfield County office.

emotional testimonies I have seen. The appreciation he expressed for Ms. Ellis was amazing, and felt by the entire group. As a probation officer myself, I know firsthand that this is something you don’t often get to witness.”

“I was really emotional about it when I heard that,” Ellis admits. “I think I called my co-workers to say, ‘Wow, I really made a difference to someone.’ It’s what we all work for, but don’t hear about in any positive way often enough. It meant a lot.”

Nankervis isn’t surprised by the kudos Ellis received. “Lauren enjoys a magnificent degree of success,” he says. “She does really well especially in crisis situations. Her philosophy is, ‘Let’s put the fire out first, and then let’s talk about what caused the fire.’ She is thoughtful and understanding even in the most pressure-packed situations.”

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– Amber Maio
Community Supervision Officer, Chesterfield County Drug Court