

Lack of knowing penalizes teens

By Sharon Dargay
staff writer

Your boss fires you for bad work habits but you suspect discrimination. The unemployment office denies your claim and the landlord withholds the security deposit on your first apartment.

You're arrested for drunk driving and named in a paternity suit. To top it off, you're only 18 years old.

What may sound like the makings of a television soap opera, illustrates the kinds of legal battles that teen-agers and young adults may encounter, but know little about.

"I get tired of kids getting ripped off because they're kids. It's less hassle being able to go through life knowing what's available and not being mis-handled," says Sherry Wells, an attorney with offices in Birmingham and Mt. Clemens.

"They get themselves screwed over and I can't see that."

Wells is offering a three-hour class on law for teen-agers through Southfield continuing education. The session costs \$12 and starts at 7 p.m. on Thursday at Brace-Lederle Community Education Center, Nine Mile between Evergreen and Southfield Road.

"Kids from 11 to 24 think they know everything about the law or that they're not going to have any problems. I'm not going to talk about bankruptcy or murder."

"Paternity, for instance, is an 18-year sentence. But teenagers don't think about that," she said. "In my office I get the results of ignorance of the law."

WELLS, A WAYNE STATE University law school graduate, has been in practice for five years, concentrating on family law and employment. Although she lectures in high schools,

Wells hasn't been able to generate enough interest in the topic to run classes in other districts.

In one district I was told the kids learn about law in junior high. That's too young. High school is more appropriate. Criminal cases, divorce, paternity rights, are the kinds of things they may not encounter now, but they should start learning about them.

She'll talk about criminal and traffic offenses, as well as consumer and civil cases. Wells claims most teen-agers don't consider taking legal action in civil cases because they feel powerless.

"When people find out what their rights are, they are more confident. Teenagers don't know their rights."

But Judge Barry Grant, Oakland County Juvenile Court, says minors can't exercise rights in civil cases without parental consent. No one under age 18 may obtain credit, write a will, file a civil lawsuit, or sign contracts. Juvenile court handles cases involving youngsters, up to age 17, who commit criminal acts or are victims of child neglect and abuse.

"When a young offender goes into court, the judge tells him what his rights are."

But Wells says her aim is "prevention," by equipping teens for future legal battles.

"SEXUAL HARASSMENT" is a situation that they don't know how to handle. Getting fired from a first job for something that you may not have done can be especially embarrassing.

In one case she advised a client to take photographs of her apartment to help reclaim a security deposit.

Students who attend her high school lectures typically ask about relationships, marriage, divorce and the law.

Class registration is being accepted at Brace-Lederle Community Education Center or by calling the center, 354-7456.

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