

Last chance at life

Program at Camp Oakland teaches kids to stay out of prison

By Rebecca Haynes
staff writer

HE WAKES UP every morning in the bedroom he shares with 19 other boys. He washes in the communal bathroom, goes to work and to school, plays basketball in his spare time, and visits his family on weekends.

At a glance, this might sound like a typical routine for a college student, but 17-year-old John is doing "time" for shooting someone.

John is a resident at Camp Oakland in the Work Education Program.

He was placed there by the state of Michigan in the hopes that the camp's staff and atmosphere would help him to straighten out his life, learn how to handle life's lumps in a responsible way, and to choose his friends wisely, steering clear of those who might be a bad influence.

Although the shooting was ruled self-defense, John, a Detroit native, was arrested for carrying a concealed weapon. His victim was not seriously injured, and the incident stemmed from a long-standing argument and an attack against John's sister.

"They had to do something, they couldn't just let me go," he said.

But John violated his probation, which required periodic check-ins with his probation officer.

"I didn't report," he said. "I was too busy working."

"THEY GAVE me choices. They said they could put me in community placement or on intensive probation. I could come here," John said. "I picked this one 'cause I thought it was a good program. I didn't want to go in a community placement 'cause I didn't think I'd be able to stay."

Intensive probation wasn't something he wanted because it would have required him to wear an electronic device, allowing authorities to

monitor his whereabouts. John gets up with the other residents at 7 a.m. He goes to work in the morning and school in the afternoon. All residents are required to hold part-time jobs.

Although he spent his first nine months in the program working in the warehouse on the camp's grounds, he recently began a job in the local community, which he'll keep until he leaves the program in June. As with all of the residents, half of John's salary goes to the camp, while the other half can go into a savings account for use when he leaves.

John is also taking additional night classes, working on his GED, which he anticipates completing in June. School for the Work Education residents is an individualized tutoring plan.

"The teacher, she tests you to see where you are and she has different books for different subjects and levels," John said. "I try to look at this like it's a college, 'cause that's what I want to do when I leave."

JOHN HOPES to attend Lawrence Tech to study electrical engineering, or possibly Ferris State University, which he recently got to visit.

"At first I thought I wanted to play basketball," he said. "But now I know I really want to go to college."

Debbie Shipman is John's teacher at Camp Oakland.

"John is a very conscientious. He's been a good student since the time he arrived," she said. "He's willing to take additional responsibility in the program, which has sometimes been a burden for him."

Shipman said John has good goals, but added that going to and completing college will be the toughest challenge he's ever faced.

"It'll be a big move for him to leave the Detroit area, but he has more going for him than lots of gentlemen who've come through this



STEVE CANTRELL/staff photographer

John finds a quiet place and some time for reflection in the schedule he follows in the Work Education Program at Camp

Oakland. Learning responsibility and the ability to keep and do well at a job are two of the main goals.

program," she said. "It's a big enough challenge for a stable young person to go away to college. It's even more difficult for these kids, considering the environment most of them come from."

Cassandra Bowers, assistant director of the camp, said if she had one pipe dream she wishes could come true it would be to have the control over the residents' home life once they're gone that they have while they're in the program.

"IT WOULD be nice if we could make changes in their home environments, but we can't," she said. "We've found that most of the kids who've gone through the program have not gotten into trouble once they've left."

"It seems that as long as they have some kind of tether to us, they do OK," she said. "We have kids (former residents) call us all the time if they're having some difficulty or can't seem to manage. We would

never turn them away if they ask for help."

"Our primary philosophy is to teach them that you're responsible for your own behavior by providing choices," Bowers said. "They can either suffer or be rewarded for the choices they make. These kids are troubled, but with some help they can turn it around."

A large majority of the Work Education residents were involved in narcotics, not as users, but as sellers, she said. If they're not able to straighten up with the program's help, chances are they'll wind up in jail or prison.

Occasionally they get a resident like John, who was never in trouble with the law before the offense that landed them there.

"There are a lot of kids who could benefit from this program, but we only have so much room," Bowers said, adding she recently received a letter from a former resident now in jail.

"HE WANTED me to read his letter to the kids," she said. "He wanted them to know that he hadn't paid attention or done the things he should have while he was here and tough luck, look where it landed him."

Aside from academics, the residents also learn money management and various life skills.

"We try to teach them that even if they don't have a lot of money they can still feel OK about themselves

and not have to worry about looking over their shoulder for a police officer," Bowers said. "And they're quite surprised and pleased when they see how quickly the money they make while they're here accumulates."

Bowers said there's a misconception that juvenile delinquents are stupid.

"They may be academically deprived, but they're not stupid," she said. "Once they've had the opportunity to succeed in an academic atmosphere, most are just as competitive as any other student."

The average length of stay in the program is 9-12 months, depending on the progress of the youth. But Bowers said a resident can stay longer if the staff feels he needs more time.

"They want to see that you can show good leadership and have the capability of meeting people in a positive way," John said, adding that he thinks his stay there has taught him to be more responsible and level-headed, to think things through instead of making rash decisions.

John goes home to his parents' house every weekend, and spends time with his toddler-age daughter. The only thing he said he'd change about the program if he was able would be to allow more home visits.

"I think I've learned to work with problems instead of jumping to conclusions," he said. "I just had a problem being too independent."

commitments arose and they had to stop going the child would be devastated," she said. "There are a lot of things we can't do now because of liability."

"We used to take the girls out shopping," she said. "Now we would never think of taking on the responsibility of taking them off the campus."

THE WOMEN'S Auxiliary which began 30 years ago look on fundraising as its primary responsibility. They hosted events like movie premieres, bringing the stars to Detroit, as well as celebrity golf tournaments.

The new group would like to do fund-raising as well as volunteer work on the camp's grounds.

"There are some real tangible things that can be done there, all we have to do is get the word out," Falberg said. "I do think that once we get all of those potential volunteers out there they'll be just as enthusiastic as we are."

For more information on the Women's Auxiliary or on volunteering at Camp Oakland, call Karen Strang-Feeney, the camp's special events coordinator, at 628-2501 or 548-6417.

Volunteer committee makes a fresh start

By Rebecca Haynes
staff writer

Carole Falberg wants to get the ball rolling.

The Beverly Hills resident was an active volunteer at Camp Oakland in the '70s, but as some of the key people involved in the camp's mission either died or moved away, the volunteer program sort of fizzled.

"I felt that I had to have some means of relating to the girls, so I'd come out and teach a yoga class at Girls Ranch," she said. "Kitty DeLorean came out here (to volunteer) with her horses about the same time I started."

Once a month Falberg would also set up a birthday table to help the girls celebrate.

"We're trying to get a volunteer program going again," she said. "We want to get women to come out to the camp to read to the children, to help them write letters, to do things that a mother would help them with."

"I always liked being out there and I think others would too," she said. "So I called a few friends and people who have been active in the past."

Those people gathered at Fal-

berg's house recently for their first official meeting. Later they toured the camp, getting a first-hand look at its programs.

"THE FIRST time I ever laid eyes on it (Camp Oakland) was the Fall Festival (a September '89 fundraiser)," said Birmingham resident Jeanne Weston. "I had to change some other priorities, but volunteering there is definitely something I want to do."

Weston sings soprano at Kirk in the Hills and Franklin Community Church and would like to use those talents in some capacity at the camp.

Volunteers are needed in a variety of areas, from office clerical help in working with camp residents. Evening and weekend hours are also available for those who hold full-time jobs.

Let art consultant Mary Denison has strong ties to Camp Oakland and was eager to take part in the reorganization of its Women's Auxiliary. Her father, Judge Arthur E. Moore was one of its founders.

"I was always an observer as a teenager and 30 years ago got artists to do the drawings we used for the

Christmas cards we sold as a fundraiser," she said. "My father felt it was very important (for the community) to work with the courts."

"He thought there should be a staff of educated people who could provide an alternative experience for young people who didn't have good role models," Denison said.

ALTHOUGH ITS purpose has remained consistent, the way the camp programs operate has undergone some change.

"I remember my father used to bring people (camp residents) home at Christmas time," Denison said. "There used to be quite a bit of one-on-one (with the residents)."

"Then their problems got to the point where they needed more professional help," she said, adding some of the residents were there because they'd committed serious crimes. "People were a little bit more leery about inviting them into their homes."

Falberg remembered volunteers choosing one of the residents similar to programs like Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

"They'd go out there and be all gung ho for a while, but then if other

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