



STRIVING TO STOP THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

Widener faculty and students work with Youth Court to help troubled youth avoid incarceration

Christina Delva, a 2014 Widener graduate, addressing a Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Policy Committee hearing in Philadelphia on Youth Court programs in May. She shared her story and advocated for the program that helps youth in trouble through restorative justice.



By Allyson Roberts

Near the end of her seventh grade year, Christina Delva found herself in trouble at school. The daughter of Haitian immigrants living in Chester, she often struggled to speak English, making her an easy target for bullies.

Unable to fight back with words, she fought instead with her fists—an act that led to her expulsion. “My teachers labeled me the problem,” Delva said. “They told my parents that I seemed to have issues with everyone, so I must be the one at fault. I had no allies, and I didn’t have the vocabulary to advocate for myself.”

Tossed from school at the age of 13, Delva was fortunate to have a strong family to fall back on. “When I didn’t fit in anywhere, they decided that I should be home-schooled,” she said.

Delva’s family support and internal drive helped her keep her education in focus—she went on to become a successful student at Widener, graduating in 2014, and has begun a promising career.

But she is an exception.

Research shows that many youth who are suspended or expelled like Delva often get into serious trouble on the streets and end up involved in the juvenile justice system, says Dr. Nancy Blank, a professor and chair of the criminal justice program at Widener. “Youth from lower-income urban communities, where few alternatives exist to provide them with support or even an outlet for their time and energy, are disproportionately suspended or expelled,” she said. “What are these kids supposed to do all day? When they end up misbehaving, the juvenile justice system often assumes more responsibility because of the absence

of alternative sources of institutional support. And once a young person enters the justice system, it’s really tough to get out.”

Youth Court

Blank is one of the leaders of a large contingent of Widener faculty, students, and alumni from a variety of programs who are working to try to stop the school-to-prison pipeline through a juvenile justice program known as Youth Court.

Nine years ago Blank partnered with attorney Gregg Volz to support a Youth Court at Chester High School. Volz, who was running a legal aid program in Chester, learned about Youth Courts at a legal seminar. He researched the program and saw its potential to impact Delaware County youth. “Some schools lack the resources to help students by addressing problems that cause students’ inappropriate

behavior,” Volz said. “However, all schools are filled with youth wanting to work for justice. Youth Courts are where they can find that peer justice.”

A Youth Court operates within a school and provides an alternative intervention to the regular school disciplinary system in which students accused of misbehavior are heard and judged by their peers. The sentencing is then based on the philosophy of restorative justice. Youth are held accountable for their actions, but instead of a punitive consequence—like suspension—they often are asked to participate in a character-building exercise, including serving on a Youth Court jury. The Youth Court typically addresses minor infractions—such as acting out in class, using a cell-phone on school grounds, and verbal

altercations—with the goal to address such behavior before it snowballs into something more serious.

With an initial grant, Volz began a Youth Court at Chester High in the fall of 2007. With Blank’s help, he secured another grant and connected with faculty on the Widener University Delaware Law Campus who recruited law students to help Volz train Chester High students to run the Youth Court. “Having our law students involved in Youth Court helped them gain a better understanding of the law as they had to explain it in a way that made sense to the youth,” said Associate Professor Fran Catania, one of the law faculty in Wilmington currently involved in the program. “For the youth, the experience helped them learn about the law in a positive way. They saw it as something they could make work for themselves to create

a better school environment, rather than something they were at the mercy of.”

Blank also engaged her undergraduate criminal justice students from the Main Campus in service learning projects with the Youth Court. One of her students, Jenna Messa, a criminal justice major and legal studies and analysis minor, took a strong interest in the program as both an aspiring lawyer and a Widener Presidential Service Corps/Bonner Leader committed to community service. Messa worked with Blank on a research project on the effectiveness of restorative justice. She observed the court in action and conducted focus groups with participants to assess the impact of Youth Court on their lives. “I heard so many great stories of students completely changing their attitudes and behaviors because of Youth Court,” Messa said.

When Messa graduated from Widener in 2011, she committed to City Year, a program working with youth in Philadelphia, before enrolling at Widener's Delaware Law School in the fall of 2012. She was happy to see that the law school remained involved with the Youth Court program and was initiating the start of a new program at a middle school near the law school's campus in Wilmington.

In her second year of law school, Messa helped to launch the Youth Court League and recruited 25 law students to participate. She scheduled the law students to train Youth Court participants and assisted faculty in recruiting new school partners.

One story sticks out for Messa that speaks to the effectiveness of the Youth Court model. "I had one student who was usually engaged show up withdrawn," said Messa, who finished her law degree in 2015 and is now an attorney with Carpenter, McCadden & Lane, LLP, in Media, Pennsylvania. "When I asked what was wrong, he told me that he didn't sleep at all the night before because there was a shooting right outside of his house. This really put things into perspective for me. We needed Youth Court to give these kids something positive to be a part of, but we also needed it because only these kids' peers could fully understand what they were going through on a daily basis and, therefore, could deliver the most reasonable and fair dispositions for their infractions."

An Informed Perspective

One person who truly appreciated the Youth Court structure, especially the opportunity for students to make their case in front of their peers, was Delva. Although home-schooled as a teen, Delva participated in after-school activities at Chester High. "I wanted to serve on Youth Court to advocate for students who were going through what I went through in middle school," she said.

As a Youth Court participant, Delva interacted with Widener law students and lawyers, interned in the Delaware County

Courthouse, and spent a summer rewriting the bylaws for the Youth Court as a member of the club's executive committee. "All of these experiences helped me increasingly gain the confidence I needed to go on to college and set my sights on one day working in government or the law," Delva said.

Delva enrolled at Widener and graduated with a degree in political science and international relations in 2014. While on campus, she thrived as vice president of the NAACP chapter in her freshman year, a Presidential Service Corps/Bonner Leader for three years, a resident assistant for three years, and the student representative on the university's Board of Trustees her senior year.

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– Christina Delva

Delva has made a career as a campaign manager, now working on Brian Kirkland's campaign for the state representative in the 159th District, and she remains a Chester resident, vowing never to leave and to one day serve as mayor. One of the things she would do in office: find more funding and support for Youth Courts in Chester.

Delva recently joined Volz to testify before the Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing on Youth Courts in May. She also is working to form a Youth Courts alumni network to create a more formalized group that can advocate on behalf of Youth Courts.

An Interdisciplinary Approach

Widener recently shifted its Youth Court involvement to piloting an interdisciplinary approach to the program in the Widener Partnership Charter School. University programs participating include clinical psychology, undergraduate psychology, education, criminal justice, law, and social work.

The pilot program launched in January 2016 with sixth-grade students at the charter school. Primary involvement came from Widener's Delaware Law students, who taught the student jurors, and social work undergraduate and graduate students, who were already serving as interns in the charter school and helped introduce the Youth Court program to school administrators and teachers, parents, and students. Amanda Tracey, a 2016 master's of social work graduate who was a charter school intern, played an invaluable role as a liaison between the Youth Court and the school. "Amanda went to the hearings and offered to help students carry out their dispositions," said Shanna Williams, director of Widener's Social Work Counseling Services and a clinical assistant professor. "It was such a natural fit to involve social work in this program, especially since we are so focused on connecting with students, parents, and the community to create positive changes."

Widener's interdisciplinary approach pleases Volz, the attorney who founded the Youth Court in Chester almost ten years ago. "By combining expertise in the law with expertise in human behavior, we will simply have more arrows in our quiver to effectively deal with behavior and work toward plugging this school-to-prison pipeline," he said. [W](#)

To watch a video of the Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Policy Committee hearing on Youth Court held in May, visit the *Widener Magazine* blog at www.widenermagazine.com.



Chester High School students involved in the Youth Court program visit Widener's Delaware Law campus in Wilmington to learn from law students. The Youth Court trains teens to serve as jurors, judges, and attorneys in real-life cases involving their peers.



ABOVE: The Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Policy Committee hearing included input from youth in the Philadelphia region.

BELOW: Attorney Jenna Messa, '11, '15L, worked with the Youth Court program while an undergrad and law student at Widener.

