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HOPE FOR THE JUVENILE CRIMINAL
A Review of the Manatee County Juvenile Boot Camp

by

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Florida has become painfully aware of the juvenile crime problem facing much of the nation. Citizens have been subjected to drive-by shootings, burglaries, car thefts, and murder committed by children under the age of seventeen. These juvenile criminals are shown on the news laughing and joking about their most recent arrest. Such scenes leads the average person to believe that our juvenile justice system has failed. However, there may be hope in changing the criminal lifestyles of some of Florida's youth. The Manatee County Sheriff's Office and the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) opened a juvenile "boot camp" during March 1993 in answer to the Florida's juvenile crime problem.

The Boot Camp Design

The Manatee County Juvenile Boot Camp is the first of its kind in Florida. The boot camp is the product of the efforts of Sheriff Charles B. Wells and Circuit Judge Durand Adams. It is a thirty-bed facility for males between the ages of 13 and 17 who have committed many serious violations. These violations include all crimes except murder, rape, and other sex crimes. The "recruits" are selected for the program by the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services and sentenced to the boot camp by the courts. However, juveniles with mental or physical problems are not considered for the program. The duration of the paramilitary program is four months. It is designed to instill discipline, self-respect, and self-control within the juveniles. The program's goal is to change the juveniles' value systems from criminal into productive, respectful values. For these juveniles, the boot camp

is the last rehabilitative effort before prison (1).

The boot camp is operated by Commander Lee Vallier and a staff of fourteen officers. All of the officers are veterans who have volunteered for the boot camp assignment. Each officer completed over 200 hours training from HRS and the Sheriff's office in preparation for the job (1). Cmdr. Vallier holds a degree in psychology and counsels each of the juveniles himself. He has an open-door policy in which the recruits can talk to him any time they wish. Through counseling, Cmdr. Vallier helps the recruits to stop blaming society for their problems and to develop responsible attitudes for their own actions.

The Visit

The Manatee County Juvenile Boot Camp was visited by this author on March 8, 1994. The facility is located just inside the Manatee County line off U.S. 41. The boot camp was built for \$270,000 and costs \$56 a day per juvenile (2). A high chainlink fence surrounds the compound, which is comprised of a dormitory, a smaller building used for meals and classes, and a small obstacle course for physical training. The dormitory has a reception area, Cmdr. Vallier's office, a large shower area, and thirty small individual recruit rooms lining a tiled hallway. Each of the recruit rooms contains a cot, sink, mirror, toilet, footlocker, and a small barred window. The doors to the rooms are never locked. However, there is a rule that only one recruit is allowed in the hallway at a time, except when lining up for inspection. Each recruit has the responsibility of keeping his room clean, ironing

his own clothes, and shining his shoes. Stereos, radios, TVs, recreation rooms, and snacks are not permitted at the boot camp. Very little talking is allowed between the recruits. This rule is an effort to curb the glamorization of crime that would come through the recruits' bragging. Every day of the week is highly structured. Each day begins with wake up call at 5:00 AM and breakfast at 5:30. From then until 11:30 the recruits exercise, practice drills and do the obstacle course. At 11:30 they have lunch and an hour of personal time afterward. During personal time, the recruits stay in their rooms and do homework, read religious material or nap. The afternoon is devoted to counseling, classroom work, and homework with lights out at 9:00 PM.

Apprehension about meeting the type of offenders housed at the boot camp can be expected from any visitor. The Manatee County Juvenile Boot Camp houses some of the most hard-core of juvenile offenders. A visitor could rightly expect to find young men with the aura of hardened criminals. Instead, the visitor will find innocent-looking teenage boys, some not even old enough to shave. This author was permitted to interview four of the recruits without the presence of a guard. The recruits interviewed were between the ages of fifteen and seventeen years old and all were from single-parent families. The recruits had committed crimes including strong arm robbery, auto theft, assault, gun charges and possession of drugs. Each recruit told of how much he liked the boot camp, especially Cmdr. Vallier. None of the four recruits had ever had a male role model. Thus, each began to regard the Commander as a

father figure and someone they all could trust.

The recruits were asked what was the worst thing about the camp. Their unanimous response was "losing my hair." When the recruits arrive at the camp, their hair is cut military fashion. This is done in order to place the recruits on the same level with regards to individual identity. After the hair is cut, each new recruit is given a red baseball cap that he will wear for the first thirty days of his stay. If the recruit follows all the rules and makes adequate progress, he trades in his red cap for a blue one at the second thirty-day period. Continued progress brings the recruit a green cap at the third thirty-day period and finally, a gold cap during his last thirty days at the camp. The recruits refer to this process as "going for the gold."

There is great psychological significance in the "going for the gold" process. While the recruits are only working for the prestige of being able to wear a gold cap, they are developing along preset boot camp standards. In essence, the recruits find themselves wanting to succeed in the program for their own benefit. Other than the different colored caps, the recruits wear the same light blue uniforms and military-style boots. The cap system is the only reward system at the camp. It is also the only individuality the recruits are permitted. The seventeen year old that was interviewed wore a gold cap. The two sixteen year olds wore blue caps and the fifteen year old wore a green cap. In listening to these recruits discuss the meaning of the caps, it became obvious that each recruit held a great deal of respect and admiration for

the gold cap. They told of how the gold cap represents self-respect, control and responsibility. Since these are the things each recruit has fought for his entire life, the gold cap is a very special token of achievement. Yet to receive the cap, the recruit must develop physically, mentally, and emotionally within the boot camp program. Education plays a very big role in this success.

Many of the recruits have been labeled "learning disabled" by the public school system. At the boot camp, they have proven the label wrong. At the camp the recruits can study and learn in a non-disruptive atmosphere away from peer pressure. They take reading, English, math and computer courses in addition to courses in hygiene, good decision making, social adjustment, life skills, and substance abuse counseling. It is of utmost importance that the recruits work toward getting their high school diplomas. The high school diploma is the first step toward a productive, non-criminal career.

As the interview with the four recruits drew to a close, they were asked how they felt about graduating from the boot camp. It was surprising to learn, that if they had the choice, they would rather stay at the camp instead of going to aftercare at The Associated Marine Institute. The Associated Marine Institute was founded in Florida in 1967 and is funded mainly through the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services and Medicare (3). The Institute provides an eight month aftercare program of counseling and vocational courses designed to help the youth from boot camps and other programs make the transition back into society

by teaching teamwork and anger control. The program includes academic courses and marine courses such as fishing and scuba diving. The recruits gradually spend less time at the Institute and more time in their own communities. However, if they skip school, violate curfew, or associate with their old friends, they will be sent back to the boot camp, provided they are still under the age of eighteen. The seventeen year old interviewee had been sent back to the boot camp three times. He said the aftercare was comprised of juveniles who did not go through the boot camp and they did not respect what was taught in boot camp. According to the seventeen year old, this made it difficult to stay at the Marine Institute. Commander Vallier is helping him to find a job so he will not have to go to aftercare upon this graduation. Furthermore, there are a number of recruits who have called Cmdr. Vallier, after being released, requesting to return to boot camp for fear of failing in aftercare.

Analysis and Suggested Improvements

Nothing should be changed about the Manatee County Juvenile Boot Camp program. Even though it is operated with strict discipline, the recruits come to realize this is what they need in order to change their lifestyles. Beneath the front of being tough, these are empty, weak children who could not even succeed in a life of crime. Commander Vallier seems to genuinely care about the well-being of each of the recruits. The Commander's philosophy is that the recruits can be taught just about anything once they are under control. This is where the military foundation

of the program comes in to play. When a group of new recruits arrive at the boot camp, the officers are to break the juveniles' street-tough attitudes through yelling instructions and intimidating them into conformity. After this initial phase, the officers treat the recruits with respect and work together to build the youths back up with responsible attitudes. One way the building up is done is through "Victim's Day."

On Victim's Day, a local crime victim volunteers to give a lecture about the experience to the recruits. It should be noted that the victims are not the victims of the recruits. However, the result is still dramatic. Through the lectures the recruits come to realize that crime hurts actual human beings and hurting others is nothing be proud of. Victim's Day is a tremendous help in the real challenge of getting the recruits to understand the nature of their crimes. The real challenge to any type of juvenile correction program is to teach the youths how to walk away from trouble they will face on the street. The boot camp program can accomplish this for those juveniles who have the desire and determination to change. The boot camp removes them from the unstable family and community environment in which they developed their criminal tendencies. The boot camp program provides a stable environment in which they are cared for mentally as well as physically. The fact that they receive three well-balanced meals a day is a vast improvement in the lives of most recruits.

The juvenile boot camp philosophy has the potential to work well. However, it is often forgotten that regular military boot

camp is followed by years of service training. For the boot camp youth to be able to succeed, they need lengthy, concentrated aftercare. Many of the juveniles sent to boot camp are from very poor and abusive families. A majority of the boot camp recruits have virtually been on their own since early childhood with little parental care or attention. In such cases, it is the obligation and duty of the State to act on the juvenile's behalf. As a last effort to save the hardened juvenile offender, the boot camp regime is a viable alternative that is in the child's best interest. The State must continue to work with the juvenile beyond the boot camp phase. The Associated Marine Institutes program does not adequately accomplish the aftercare phase. The Associated Marine Institute teaching the recruits to fish and scuba dive is irrelevant when most of these juveniles cannot afford to rent a scuba tank or buy a fishing pole. These juveniles should be placed in an aftercare program designed exclusively for boot camp graduates. Such a program should be based on the military design of the boot camp. The aftercare phase should extend for three to four years after boot camp graduation. During aftercare, the graduates should be required to complete high school and either enter college or begin full-time employment. By the time the boot camp graduates completed this type of aftercare, they will have gained the discipline and self-respect to truly turn their lives around. Through this plan the youths would be spared the ridicule and despair of the community in which they got into trouble. Also, the trend of sending juveniles to prison, where they merely gain

more criminal knowledge, would be broken.

Department of Juvenile Justice Preliminary Findings

During the week of March 23, 1995, the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice released a preliminary study of Manatee County Boot Camp graduates (4). The study found that on average the boot camp graduates do better than other incarcerated youths and cost taxpayers less money. In comparison, 51.7% of boot camp recruits were judged guilty of a crime within one year of graduating as opposed to 66.1% of juveniles in moderate risk programs and 58.5% in high-risk programs. As noted by Cmdr. Vallier, some of the boot camp graduates might have been arrested for crimes they committed before initially entering the boot camp program (5).

Many studies have noted the apparent failure of adult boot camps. However, it is unreasonable to extrapolate studies of adult camps to those dealing with juveniles; one deals with adults who are set in their criminal lifestyles and the other deals with juveniles who are more susceptible to change and official authority. Since the trend of sending juveniles to boot camp is relatively new, there must be further research into the area of rearrest and conviction of juvenile boot camp graduates. Such a study could track the graduates of the Manatee County Boot Camp in order to determine why and how soon any graduate had been arrested and convicted of a crime.

Conclusion

The Manatee County Juvenile Boot Camp is comprised of

juveniles who want more from life than a criminal career and prison. Each of them had dreams of success that were destroyed early in life by family and community circumstances beyond their control. While looking into the faces of these juvenile criminals, it is easy to forget they are among the most violent and dangerous of Florida's delinquents. Society must not forget the crimes of these children but also society must not help them to become adult criminals by throwing them away in the prison system. These juveniles should be punished for their crimes but they should be required to change their actions also. The juvenile boot camp provides a way in which to accomplish both and an adequate aftercare program will enhance the success of the juvenile boot camp.

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