

JUVENILE CONFERENCE COMMITTEE - CHERRY HILL - CAMDEN COUNTY
NEW JERSEY. U.S.A.

"You can't make laws to correct the problems of juveniles. There is no pat solution to cure all of them," says Oren Thomas, chairman of Cherry Hill's Juvenile Conference Committee.

Thomas was selected 15 years ago to head this committee dealing with juvenile violations. Although it offers no verdict, guarantees no punishment or penalty, and has no police power, the committee has helped to change the lives of literally hundreds of boys and girls under 18 charged with some infraction of the law.

The concept of a juvenile conference committee came about 20 years ago in New Jersey to answer the overcrowded docks in the courts. Committees were authorized for municipalities and townships in need of them, to be made up of township residents and controlled by county juvenile courts which were unable to spend adequate time to "cure" a juvenile case.

"We try not to take a punitive approach," Thomas warns. "We want to solve a problem of an individual, which almost always involved his or her family."

Initially conference committees included many members of the clergy and other "well-meaning" citizens. Now their memberships are more broad, although it has been difficult to find residents willing to give an evening and more twice a month. Thomas is partner in the architecture firm, Thomas, Kolbe, Thomas and Poponi.

"We can't use 'no-no' people," Thomas says, "who tend to lecture the juvenile about his 'bad' behaviour. It just doesn't go. Nor does the punitive approach where a person asks what kind of lesson can be taught this boy and what punishment will rub it in? Although the complaint is against the juvenile, it should often be made against the parents because it was an action of one or the other that made the child do what he did."

Sometimes, Thomas believes, the conference committee learns more about the problem in 10 or 15 minutes than the parents, who might not have wanted to hear about it or to do something about it. "Our problems concern parents either overly permissive or harshly authoritarian."

Juvenile Complaints Run High

Criminal complaints on juveniles run five times those against adults, Thomas claims. The county probation officer decides whether a case should go to the county juvenile court or to the conference committee. Certain offences like rape and murder are always sent to court. Run-aways, shoplifting, vandalism and others may be sent to committee. "Sometimes this decision depends on the job the committee is doing," Thomas says

Eight hundred cases are heard by the 30 juvenile committees in Camden County annually; 120 come to Cherry Hill. "We think Cherry Hill is a great community with no potential criminals," Thomas remarks. "We probably have as high a percentage as other areas, if not higher."

Occasional cases might be better not heard, such as petty school bus fights and neighbourhood squabbles. "When children destroy the property of neighbours whom their parents dislike, we tell parents to 'cool it', for by their attitudes they give the child the go-ahead to do what he wants to that neighbour," Thomas states.

Where a case involves a broken home or one in which one parent is deceased, Thomas' committee seeks a mother or father image for the juvenile. "Often it isn't someone in the immediate family, but an uncle or aunt, coach, teacher, even someone at the juvenile bureau. I can't praise the department enough," Thomas says, "for everyone works many more hours than is expected."

Cherry Hill's Juvenile Conference Committee has six members: Milton Burdsall, Dorothy Millure, Estelle Berger, Kyle Will, Oren Thomas and his brother Dr. John Thomas, psychiatrist. Mrs. Berger is a specialist in testing with the Cherry Hill Public Schools. The committee meets bi-weekly at Johnson School.

Treat Family As Whole

"We arrange for professional testing or counselling where it is needed," says Thomas. Fifteen percent of cases involve a mental or emotional problem and again, the family as a whole is often sent for psychotherapy or counselling. If the family is financially squeezed the committee arranges for assistance or asks it be given free. Transportation is arranged through a service organisation such as Lions.

"A case some time ago involved a family with three or four boys. The eldest, in great difficulty, eventually went to Texas. Although the second had excessive truancy, we felt nothing was wrong with him. We soon discovered his mother, who had polio, was confined to a wheelchair and insisted the whole family wait on her day in and day out. It was the mother's behaviour which needed correction so we sent the whole family to Lakeland Guidance Centre every Saturday for many months."

Occasionally a case goes on "hold" until more information on the juvenile's grades and attendance are available.

"When a youngster goes out of the room, you are pretty sure you failed," Thomas feels, although statistics do not bear him out. Five percent of his juveniles get in trouble again, a much lower percentage than repeats in other courts, which, of course, handle more serious charges in the first place

Some Cases End Well

Thomas glows recalling cases which turned out well. "One young man we knew went around with a gang, all of whom had been served with complaints of various kinds. This boy had 50 per cent truancy and spent most of his days at bowling alleys and pool halls drinking beer. It was a question of time before he would be in trouble."

The boy's mother, who wore the pants in the family, was a steadfast church-goer who spent little time at home.

"We called in the boy to warn what lay ahead," Thomas recalls. "He just sat there, hanging his head, not answering. We were sure we were not getting through, and I finally recommended he go into the Army to get into a new environment."

Thomas did not hear of the young man for several years until one day, leaving church, he spotted him with a baby in his arms and young wife beside him. The young man introduced himself and thanked Thomas for his past help, and "we knew we'd saved at least one!" admits Thomas.

How The Committee Operates

Although it is not mandatory to appear before the committee, juvenile offenders know the alternative is to go to court. There is neither official court record nor written testimony. There are no official witnesses and a complainant never appears in the room with the defendant.

"We just want to get the truth in the matter from the juvenile and his parents, who appear both with him and separately," Thomas says. "We ask the juvenile whether he wishes to be treated as adult or child. All prefer the former although their actions may not say as much."

The committee may ask that property damage be reimbursed and recommend the money not come from the parents. Cases are referred back to court if the committee cannot handle them or is concerned with its lack of power in enforcing a recommendation.

Although Thomas might prefer to see a child taken from his home and placed in a foster home, this is not possible and the committee must live with realities.

Primarily he hopes to change the thinking of the juvenile. "Behaviour cannot be changed from A to Z, but maybe from A to D. It is up to each youngster whether or not he will change," Thomas believes.

The soft-spoken Thomas advises parents to discipline with love, making certain the child knows it is done in his best interest. Thomas believes a child cannot be prevented from seeing certain undesirable friends, and he acknowledges the importance of an engrossing sport or hobby in keeping a child out of trouble.

The committee's busy chairman, a Midwesterner, attended Iowa State and graduated from Purdue University. He has lived in Cherry Hill for 16 years. Among his accomplishments is starting the Junior Chamber of Commerce of Camden County, interesting young friends who have since gained prominence William Dickey, William Hyland, Kenneth McDonald, Bud and William Stretch.

His energies have extended in many directions. Thomas rose from President of Camden County Rotary to District Governor of Southern New Jersey and Delaware, and was Young Man of the Year in 1952. He has been President of the West Jersey Society of Architects, State Vice President of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, County Chairman of the Red Cross, and President of the Camden County United Fund in addition to lay reading at St. Andrew's Methodist Church, fishing, bridge, flying and hunting.

Thomas speaks enthusiastically about the Juvenile Conference Committee. "I have enjoyed every organization and position, but the committee holds something special, a knowledge that your own personal effort may have made the difference in the life of a young man or woman."

(T. Waring)

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