



Learning About Restorative Justice

YOUTH COURT MEMBERSHIP
A WIN-WIN FOR ALL INVOLVED

After shadowing Geneva attorney Jessica Bryant for two days in Wayne County Family Court two years ago, Alexandra Briggs, then an eighth grader at Newark Middle School, was pretty sure she wanted to become an attorney.

Now, Briggs, a Newark High School sophomore who has served for three months as a member of the Ontario County Youth Court, and who in August became of member of its Steering Committee, is certain she wants to pursue a career in law and become a defense attorney.

After all, the defense attorney role is the one she most enjoys on Youth Court, where she likes advocating for the best “sentence” for so-called respondents that can range from community service to restitution, substance abuse education, shoplifting education, and/or writing essays or apology letters.

Youth Court is a voluntary alternative to the traditional criminal justice system for first-time offenders, ranging in age from 10 to 17 people who have confessed to committing certain school code of conduct breaches, violations, or misdemeanors. All cases are non-violent and non-sexual. Respondents who choose to come before Youth Court have their case heard by a jury of their peers, avoid attorney fees and are not labeled a juvenile delinquent and have no criminal record.

Referrals come from the Ontario County Probation Department, Ontario County School Resource Officers, Ontario County school districts, the Ontario County Sheriff’s Department, the Canandaigua City Police Department, or the Geneva City Police Department. Past cases have included: shoplifting (petit larceny), harassment/bullying,

trespassing, criminal mischief, alcohol/drug possession, burglary, arson and vandalism.

Ontario County Youth Court follows restorative justice practices. Restorative justice follows three main guidelines that are detailed on the Ontario County Youth Court website at <http://ontariocountyyouthcourt.org/>

Youth Court members are students in grades 8-12, including from outside Ontario County, that have completed a rigorous 20-hour training program to prepare to fill the various roles of the courtroom. Conducted by real judges, attorneys, probation officers, law enforcement, and other professionals, Youth Court members after meeting the training requirements, passing a “bar exam” and being interviewed and inducted, can then assume the roles of judge, bailiff, prosecution or defense attorneys and or jurors.

Yvonne Vazquez, Ontario County Youth Court program director, says Briggs shines in the courtroom.

“She’s an amazing young lady and very mature for her age. I’ve seen her in the courtroom and she’s amazing. She’s not shy. She asks amazing questions. She thinks outside the box,” said Vazquez.

Students who participate in Youth Court develop leadership skills and a greater level of confidence, Vazquez said, noting most Youth Court members begin as freshmen in high school and continue for all four years until they graduate. That’s Briggs’ plan.

“I’ve always been interested in helping others, and fortunately, Youth Court gives me the ability to learn the law as well as help others,” she said. “This challenges my thinking to create statements and questions on the spot, which may happen when I am a lawyer in the future. The one thing I have learned from Youth Court is not to judge someone because of their actions, but to hear them out. I will forever be grateful to be learning at such a young age, and I couldn’t be more thankful for this opportunity.”

Briggs became interested in participating in Ontario County Youth Court last March after she read an article about it that NHS Principal Tom Roote posted in his newsletter *“The Reds Tale.”*

An avid diver, Briggs is a member of the NHS Girls Varsity swimming and diving team and a member of the Blue Wave Diving team based in Geneseo, is busy typically four to five afternoons and evenings a week with the sport. So being involved in Youth Court is an additional time commitment, but one she feels is well worth it.

Briggs has the opportunity to participate in a maximum of 4 Youth Court sessions each month, but will most likely do 2-3 depending on her schedule.

“It’s kind of humbling to help other people who have made some poor choices. It’s changing me as a person. I represent them and am their voice. It’s also an eye opener to see what can happen when peer pressure kicks in and sometimes leads to bad decisions,” she said

Briggs also said Youth Court has made her more confident, bolstered her public speaking skills and given her a sense she's doing something really worthwhile. She plans to continue on Youth Court until she graduates.

"It just makes you a better person," she said.

Briggs was happy to learn that a youth court is being launched in Wayne County . The Wayne County Youth Court which will hold it inaugural court session at the Lyons Town Court October 10th.

James Schuler, Program Coordinator of the Wayne County Youth Advocate Program (YAP), who is also coordinator of the newly-formed Wayne County Youth Court said there are 11 students from Clyde-Savannah, Lyons, Newark, Sodus and Williamson high schools participating. They have completed the 12 hours of required training provided by the Wayne County Attorney's Office, Wayne County Probation and the Wayne County YAP. Schuler (YAP), Erin Hammond (Assistant Wayne County Attorney), Greg Caster (a Wayne County Probation supervisor) and Jay Roscup (Coordinator of Community Schools Services for Wayne-Finger Lakes BOCES) provided the training. Students from NHS who are new Wayne County Youth Court members are junior Tajmere Greene and senior Connor Robbins.

Under the sponsorship of Wayne County's My Brother's Keeper program, the new Wayne County Youth Court will begin training for more student members at a later date to be announced.

According to its mission statement, the Wayne County Youth Court "will seek to hold youth responsible for their actions while also helping them become positively connected to their peers and the community. Youth volunteers will learn about the legal and judicial processes while also serving as positive role models for their peers and encouraging them to engage in pro-social behavior. Youth Court will be based in restorative justice principles emphasizing accountability and the repair of harm. Youth Court will serve as an alternative to formal diversion programs and school disciplinary practices."

Students who are in grades 10-12 and are interested in becoming a member of the Wayne County Youth Court should contact Schuler by phone or text message at 315-226-2555 or via-mail at <mailto:jschuler@yapinc.org> . They can also pick up an application at their high school guidance office.

Both Vazquez and Schuler noted the many benefits for students to be a Youth Court member including:

- *It's a way to build community service hours*
- *It demonstrates community service involvement on college applications.*
- *It helps students learn about the legal system and related careers.*

