



# Youth Court Journal

*A Quarterly Publication of all news related to Bethlehem Youth Court*

## Developing a Future Career

I never particularly liked the legal system. I never particularly enjoyed reading. I never particularly cared about serving justice in our society. Now I do, greatly.

The Bethlehem Town Youth Court System is a peer-led alternative sentencing program available to young people who have committed low level offenses or crimes. It is comprised of specially trained student volunteers who participate in hearings by assuming the roles of attorneys, judges, jury foreperson, victim advocates and bailiffs.

I had no background information on Bethlehem Youth Court, so I naturally was ambivalent about signing up for the Youth Court training seminars last spring. The description of the six week course was far from inviting. "Thursday 6-9, lecture from Albany University Law School Professor!" I'd rather study my SAT's. However, I decided to be adventurous and become involved.

I didn't know what to expect when I first walked into the Town of Bethlehem's Court room. "How many murderers have been arraigned here?" was probably my first thought. I found a seat in the back of the room, and waited for the class to commence. Everyone was warmly welcomed by Stacey Whiteley, Bethlehem's Youth Court Director. Little did I know at the time that Stacey was a heart warming dedicated member to our small suburban town

of Bethlehem.

Over the six week period training sessions, we learned from many professional lawyers including Albany County's District Attorney, David Soares. He was definitely one of the most memorable public speakers I have ever listened to. Also included in our training was homework! At least 1 hour homework study sheets, which was far from exhilarating.

I survived the training and I was ready to defend my first case! The case involved possession of a weapon, possession of marijuana, and a speeding ticket. "Yeaaaaahh baby," I thought to myself, I was ready to get my hands dirty. After watching *Law and Order, Philadelphia* starring Tom Hanks, and *A Few Good Men*, memorable quotes such as "I want the truth. You can't handle the truth," loomed in the back of my mind.

After studying the case, talking to the offender, and receiving guidance and help from my appointed attorney mentor, I was ready to present my case. I confidently rose in front of a jury of my peers and knowledgeably presented facts to protect my client. My adrenaline was pumping and I felt important. I was protecting one of my peers. How cool is that?

By Andrew Marler

From that moment on, becoming a lawyer was now in the realm of possibilities for a future career. Bethlehem Youth Court also has also built and strengthened many of my attributes. I am now a much more confident and experienced public speaker. I have learned to interact and utilize interviewing skills with important members of society such as Police Officer's and lawyers. Most importantly, I am a part of improving the society in which we live in.

I'd like to give a special thanks to all the members of Bethlehem Youth Court for establishing and maintaining such an important youth building system. Also, I'd like to thank Youth Court Director Stacey Whiteley who oversees all the community service activities and youth court hearings. She has definitely impacted my life, along with everyone involved in the youth court system.

*Andrew is a senior at Bethlehem Central High School and has been involved with BYC since completing training in the Spring of 2006. Andrew is planning on attending SUNY Binghamton in the Fall of 2007, with perhaps a law degree in his future. Andrew is also a proud founding member of the famous "BC Hooligans", a fan club dedicated to Bethlehem High School Soccer.*



*Andrew during training*

**Interested in being featured in the BYC Journal? Submit an article or photo to [byc261@yahoo.com](mailto:byc261@yahoo.com). It could be YOU on the front page!**



## Message from the Director

First off, I would like to apologize for the delay in getting this newsletter published and posted to the web. My only excuse is that BYC has been so busy over the past few months conducting new case intakes, holding hearings, and coordinating community service projects that there has been little time to put this newsletter together. Thankfully several youth court members and participants were generous enough to compose articles for the newsletter, which eased my workload and enabled me to get the newsletter to you sooner rather than later.

Which brings me to my next point. It would be great if the entire newsletter was composed by youth court participants, both members and offenders. The newsletter was started as a means for information about Bethlehem Youth Court to be

shared with all of our supporters, contributors, and the young people involved. Who better to present what is going on in Youth Court than those doing the work, the youth? So if you are reading this and would like to have your thoughts and experiences published in the BYC Journal, please submit them to me at [byc261@yahoo.com](mailto:byc261@yahoo.com). Or if you're a parent, and your child has been involved with Youth Court and you would like to comment regarding their Youth Court experience, or even conduct an interview of your child and submit it for inclusion in the newsletter, that would be terrific.

I would like to take a moment and thank the Town of Bethlehem for their continued support of the Bethlehem Youth Court program. BYC's financial situation became very tenuous two years ago, when major grants we were receiving phased out and there

were no new funding sources to take their place. The Town stepped in and included funding for BYC in the Town's budget and saved the program from severe cut backs and perhaps even from closing. Theresa Egan, Judy Kehoe, and the Town Board are to be thanked for their belief in BYC, and their understanding that this program is a benefit to our community; providing a resource to those in need, providing an educational opportunity like no other, and providing community service to those agencies and individuals who need it most.

Thank you again and don't forget to submit your articles!!!!  
Happy Holidays!

*Stacey*

## Results from the 2005 Offender/Parent Survey

Each year, BYC sends out a follow up survey to the prior year's offenders and their parents in order to assess their opinions regarding the program and to see how the offender has benefited from their involvement in BYC. Below are highlights from this year's survey. The response rate was 33% for the offender surveys and 41% for the parental surveys.

### Offender Results

- 67% responded that it was very important that they choose youth court because it was a positive way to be involved in the criminal justice system.
- 100% responded that they felt their sentence was fair.
- 78% responded that they feel BYC had a positive affect on their behaviors.
- 90% responded that they have had no further law enforcement contact since their Youth Court experience.
- 90% responded that they were satisfied/highly satisfied with the BYC program.
- An interesting fact came to light in the comment section, which was nearly half the responses suggested that to improve the program, harsher sentences should be imposed.
- Other comments: "very positive", "friendly and understanding", "very educational", "the everybody makes mistakes nature of it".

### Parental Results

- 91% responded that BYC had a positive impact on their child.
- 91% responded that the sentence their child received was appropriate. The one response that indicated the sentence was not appropriate followed with a comment that the sentence was "too light."
- 100% responded that they were satisfied/highly satisfied with their experience with the BYC program.
- Comments: "our son appreciated being given a chance to atone for his mistake", "this is an excellent and valued organization and we are glad our son participates", "my child had a very positive experience that he will always remember", "a great system", "very well organized", "I was impressed by every aspect", "thank you for being there as an alternative system that works."

Overall, offender and parental responses were extremely positive in nature, as noted by the results above. There were a few comments regarding improving the follow up on offenders and ensuring that the members are trained; which will be used as guides to help BYC improve its services.



## An Insider's Look at the Bethlehem Youth Court

By J.D., A Past BYC Offender

*This article was written by an offender who chose to write an article based on his experiences for the newsletter. He has successfully completed the Youth Court program and is now a volunteer juror.*

"My mother made me do it," my friend B. explains about his involvement with the Bethlehem Youth Court. "She thinks it would look good on my college application." B. is in the tenth grade at BCHS and has been a participant for about a year. So far he has served as a jury member in two cases.

But he does admit that he sees the experience as more valuable than just another item for his college search. He feels he learned about the court system and how the "real courts" work for the accused and for the community.

Another tenth grader talked about his experience on the Youth Court which he has been involved with for two years. When I asked S. how he feels being in the court he said, "Sometimes I felt sorry for the kids who were on trial." S. has served in several roles in the program. He has been defense attorney, victim's advocate and judge.

When he acted as defense attorney, he spoke to his clients many times and tried to provide the best defense for them. "I always called them a bund of times to get the whole story." At times he felt very sorry for the parents of the kids who were brought before the court to answer for their crimes. "I knew their moms and dads were suffering for what the kids did. It was really sad."

Maybe, this is why he preferred the role of judge. "The lawyers and juries made the arguments. I just had to be like a referee and listen. That's why I like judge best." He plans to continue with youth court and wants to help other younger kids see the benefits of the program.

Recently, I learned first hand how the Bethlehem Youth Court works. One Sunday afternoon, in late spring, I skateboarded illegally at a construction site at the high school. I was with some friends and got caught up in the fun of skateboarding. At the time I knew I was doing something bad. I had this uncomfortable feeling right from the start, but I did not stop myself and I skated for a little less than an hour. But I was where I shouldn't have been. Within a week, we all got caught and formal charges were brought against me. I had never been in trouble with the police before. It was a really awful time.

And so, on a Saturday afternoon several weeks later, I came before the Bethlehem Youth Court as a defendant. I had agreed to accept the judgment of my peers as a result of my agreement with the Albany County Department of Probation. Before the trial, my lawyer met with me and I told him what happened. He asked many questions, took notes, and then wrote up his remarks for the jury. I felt confident with him as my defense attorney. I had to

take the stand and tell my story. My mother also took the stand in my defense. The detective who arrested me gave his account of what happened. My attorney recommended to the jury a sentence of 10 hours of community service. The prosecuting attorney was also well prepared and told the jury I should receive 30 hours of community service. The jury deliberated and I was sentenced to 15 hours of community service. I was relieved to have this part of the experience come to an end.

Over the past teen weeks, I have compiled my hours; volunteering for a Halloween festival at the Town Park, walking for breast cancer awareness, and attending educational classes on peer pressure and skateboarding safety. I will now be serving as a jury member for the Youth Court so I will get another look at how the process works.



The Bethlehem Youth Court is a voluntary sentencing alternative to the criminal justice system for young people who have made mistakes. I have made a big mistake and I'm glad that this alternative was available to me. I know that I was treated fairly by this system. I'm also glad to learn that other kids I know and respect from school are involved in a positive way and are volunteering their time.

### Did you know?

- Bethlehem Youth Court is one of almost 100 youth courts in New York State.
- BYC is one of over 1200 youth courts in the United States.
- Connecticut is the only state with **NO** youth court.
- Petit Larceny is the most common criminal offense heard in youth courts.
- In a few states, crimes as serious as DUI are heard in youth court.
- Recidivism rates (re-offending) are as much as 10% lower in youth that successfully complete a youth court program.



## Bethlehem Youth Court, Inc.

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Bethlehem Youth Court, Inc. is a free of charge service provided for youth regardless of race, creed, color, sex, disability, national origin or religion.

If your agency is in need of volunteers, please contact the BYC office at 478-9544 to submit your request. Our young people will come to your site and complete whatever tasks are needed; such as office work, yard work, or staffing events for your agency. The youth volunteers are fully supervised and eager to help.

### Attention Interested Students in Grades 8 through 12

- Want to experience Youth Court but can't wait until training next fall?
- Want to help your community and earn some community service hours?
- Want to listen to real criminal cases and make decisions that will influence another's life?

Then become a volunteer juror. Applications are accepted continuously, no training is needed, and you volunteer based on your schedule. Applications can be found on our web site; [bethlehemyouthcourt.org](http://bethlehemyouthcourt.org), at the town park office and at town court.

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**Here are web sites that have additional information about Youth Courts:**

**[www.youthcourt.net](http://www.youthcourt.net) This is the Federal Youth Court Center's web page. A comprehensive site regarding Youth Courts across the county.**

**[www.nyyouthcourts.org](http://www.nyyouthcourts.org) This is the Association of New York State Youth Courts' web site.**