

Walsh, Indian River students learning from each other

By ERIN PUSTAY

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When two worlds collide, the impact can be life-altering.

Lauren Zerner, for one, will never be the same now that her world has collided with that of a dozen Indian River Correctional Facility juveniles.

Zerner, a Jackson High School graduate, has seen the world through someone else's eyes and her entire outlook on life has changed. Her role as an adult in the Stark County community has been redefined and her understanding of what she can do to make the community a better place for every person is stronger than ever before.

And it's all because of a general education class she took at Walsh University.

This semester, Zerner, a sophomore at Walsh, was thrown for a loop when her sociology course tackled a really tough question: What do we do to ensure that the students at Indian River have all the resources they need to transition back into society with little risk for recidivism?

Zerner and 23 other students in Dr. Shauntey James' "Social Problems" course partnered with students at Indian River to seek answers to the toughest questions facing troubled teens.

James' class was divided into small groups. Each of them worked directly with a couple of Indian River students to come up with community programs that would directly serve Indian River youth.

"This is really, truly a blessing," James said of the partnership. "This is two populations looking at the same situation from two different perspectives and answering a powerful question."

Three of the programs developed by Walsh and Indian River students will be funded by a \$4,500 grant given to Walsh University through the Ohio Campus Compact. One program received \$2,000 and two others each received \$1,000. The remaining \$500 was used by all the groups for supplies.

Open minds, open hearts

The first thing that Walsh University students learned from the collaboration is that next to our hearts, our ears may be our greatest asset.

“Being from the outside and being a person who doesn’t work with juveniles every day, you tend to label (Indian River youth) as bad people right away,” student Natalie Ezzie said. “When you take a step back and give a little of your time to listen to what they have to say, you realize ... they are really amazing people, who refuse to let their pasts dictate their futures and, I think, that is very brave.”

The future, Ezzie said, could be very bright for the young people at Indian River. They have great ideas and dreams like any other young adult. The difference between them and others is that the Indian River students don’t always have access to the resources they need to attain their goals.

“Many people do not know the potential that they have,” Ezzie said. “It is just the lack of resources that has blinded their ability to achieve the unachievable.”

Something as simple as going to college is hampered by the lack of resources. These students, Ezzie said, have never been told how to look for a college, how to apply for financial aid, what to expect from a campus setting or even that the college dream is attainable for them.

Ezzie and Zerner’s group came up with SMART – the Student Mentoring And Rehabilitation Team. The project calls on student volunteers from Walsh University to mentor students at Indian River. In doing so, Walsh students can provide them with positive peer support and guidance for some of the teen’s most complicated questions about issues such as college.

“All they needed was help, someone to believe in them and someone to give them those first few steps,” Ezzie said. “Some of them were neglected and abused and no one ever believed in them. ... Once I saw an eagerness in them, I couldn’t help but become passionate about being the one to help.”

Change, Zerner discovered, starts with her.

“I came from a good background where my parents and other people supported me and are still so proud of me,” Zerner said, adding that her mother was as touched by the Indian River teenagers stories as she was. “My mom was crying and saying ‘Where are their mommies and daddies? They need someone behind them.’”

“We need to be the ones who show them that they can succeed,” Zerner added. “We have to be the ones to tell them they are doing a great job, that we believe in them 100 percent and that we are willing to lead them. That is what they are crying out for and that is how we tried to answer their needs.”