

# *Enhancing Families Through Literature*

An Innovative Way to  
Decrease Conflict

Kids First Center Professional Conference  
Honorable Richard A. Simons  
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# Objectives of the Presentation

- To introduce the program, *Enhancing Families Through Literature*
- To illustrate how this program is used in the Family Court
- To begin a discussion of how we measure the success of this program.

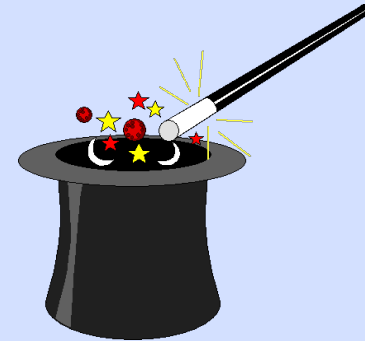
## Based on *Changing Lives Through Literature*

- A program established in 1991 in New Bedford District Court as an alternative sentencing program.
- Judge Robert Kane and Professor Robert Waxler posited the idea that a discussion of literature can be used as a tool to rehabilitate criminal defendants.

## History of *Changing Lives* Through Literature

- First class involved Judge Kane, Professor Waxler and Probation Officer St. Pierre with 8 males
- Met at UMASS Dartmouth for 12 weeks
- Probationers had among them a total of 148 conviction's--many had not graduated from high school

The Magic began....



By discussing books such as *Deliverance* and *Sea Wolf*, the men began to:

- ✓ explore aspects of themselves
- ✓ Listen to their peers

## The Magic continued....

- ✓ Increase ability to communicate ideas and express feelings to men of authority they thought would never listen
- ✓ Engage in dialogue where all ideas were validated
- ✓ Open up their world to different perspectives

*Literature became a vehicle to gain the insight that they have choices in life*

# One of the Massachusetts Trial Courts Success Measures

**Recidivism Rate:** The number of individuals on probation who are arraigned on a new criminal charge during a specified follow-up period expressed as a percentage.





# Recent evidence of *Change Lives Through Literature* in Massachusetts

- 1998 study of the New Bedford program which found that 19% reconviction rate for the first 40 program participants, compared to a 45% rate of a matched group who did not participate in CLTL.

# Recent evidence of *Change Lives Through Literature in Massachusetts*

## Qualitative and Quantitative impact study

Sample consisted of 604 CLTL participants from five programs compared to 614 probationers not in the program.

# Qualitative Process

- All “feel better about themselves”
- Most reported improved views of fellow Probationers, P.O.’s, and Judges
- Sense of accomplishment reported
- Improvements for those at all education levels



## Quantitative Study Results:

Compared the number of arrests in the 18 mo. prior to participation and the number of arrests 18 mo. after participation

### CLTL Participants

- Before 2.24 arrests in 18 mo.
- After .98 arrest in 18 mo.
- Reduction of -1.44 (-60%)
- 47% had one or more arrests after

### Comparison Group

- Before 2.18 arrests in 18 mo.
- After 1.61 arrests in 18 mo.
- Reduction of -.57 (-26%)
- 64% had one or more arrests after

For those who had one or more new charges compared the severity of the offenses before and after CLTL participation

**SEVERITY RANKED FROM LEVEL 1 (low) to LEVEL 9 (high)**

Shoplifting is level 1

Assault and Battery is level 3

Rape is level 4

Murder is level 9

• CLTL participants

- Avg level of 3.57 before
- Avg level of 3.09 after
- Reduction of -.48



• Comparison Group

- Avg level of 3.20 before
- Avg level of 3.38 after
- Increase of +.18



# Overall Conclusions

- Participation in the CLTL alternative sentencing program appeared to reduce both the number and severity of criminal incidents for which the participants were charged compared to those who did not participate
- Authors believe the efficacy of the program is “due to its ability to influence both cognitive and social dimensions of probationers’ lives

How could the Probate and Family Court transform the magic of *Changing Lives Through Literature* to meet the needs of our families?

*Enhancing Families Through Literature*

# Challenges Facing a Family Court

- Our litigants are not on probation  
We lack the same “hook” that exists in criminal court
- Who attends? If we ordered both parents to participate, who would watch their children?
- If we involved children, we needed a program for them
- Timing for families with your children was challenging



# Outline of Enhancing Families Through Literature

## **Judge and Probation Officer remain active participants throughout every aspect of the program**

- 12 week program
- Two hour sessions once per week
- Dinner from 5:00p.m. to 5:30p.m.  
Sit down family meal
- For the first 8 weeks, from 5:30p.m. to 7:00p.m., parents study literature and children participate in Every Child Ready to Read<sup>®</sup>
- For the final 4 weeks parents and children are engaged in a program led by childhood educators

## The Role of a Facilitator and Reading Material

- The facilitator should be someone who is enthusiastic and experienced working with students of varying aptitudes and experiences
- Someone who understands the goals of the program and will work as a team

# How It Works

## ***My Papa's Waltz***

By Theodore Roethke

The whiskey on your breath  
Could make a small boy dizzy;  
But I hung on like death:  
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans  
Slid from the kitchen shelf  
My mother's countenance  
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist  
Was battered on one knuckle;  
At every step you missed  
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head  
With a palm caked hard by dirt,  
Then waltzed me off to bed  
Still clinging to your shirt.

Theodore Roethke, "My Papa's Waltz" from *Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*. Copyright 1942 by Hearst Magazines, Inc. Reprinted with the permission of Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc.

## Location of the program

- Traditional *Changing Lives* programs use college campus
- Public libraries better meet the needs of this program



## Number of Sessions and Number of Participants

- Determined that the ideal number of participants is 10
- Found that 8 sessions with college professor are necessary to establish a comfortable and safe place for sharing
- Established that the second portion of the program is best suited for 4 sessions

# SCREENING

Decide on the target audience you're trying to reach

## Criteria we used

- Appeared in court on contested issue
- Young parents
- Lack of experience in co-parenting
- Couples where one parent has been marginalized



## Court Order

- It is not feasible to have parties volunteer to participate
- Requires some “judicial arm-twisting”
- Parties are ordered to attend

# Intake

- Probation completes intake procedure
  - ✓ Domestic violence
  - ✓ Educational background
  - ✓ Special needs of children
- Assigned a Probation Officer
  - ✓ Conditions of probation



# The Program

- Every participant receives a welcome letter
- Session 1: A soft introduction as to the goals of the program
- Quiz is given at the start of each session
- Sessions include discussions of reading and writing exercises
- Each participant earns a college credit from Berkshire Community College
- Participants complete evaluation
- Program ends with a graduation

# Collaboration is the KEY

- Department of Early Education and Care
- Local United Way
- Local library
- Local public school system
- Local community college
- Head Start
- Local museum

# Costs

- \$750.00 stipend to college professor from *Changing Lives* Program plus costs of materials for course
- \$3,000 to \$4,000 for early childhood educators, materials, meals, and travel vouchers
- Court staff volunteers

“ As the weeks went on, I began to correlate themes from each piece of literature to not only [relate to] my everyday life, but my relationship with my daughter and her mother. ... Not only did this class open my eyes to important aspects of my everyday life, it also brought me closer to my daughter and her mother after a rocky two years of emotional pain and confusion.”

- Isaiah, a father

“In the beginning of this program, I doubted its capability and its methods. I was confused on how taking a literature class filled with unrelated material could possibly help fix my parenting relationship. Looking back at it now, I find this program to be strategic and slightly genius...

The stories, although irrelevant were relevant. They all involved some sort of relationship conflict that involuntarily would make you reflect on yourself and help you understand more of your own character. ... Through this program you realize the possibility of a parenting team. And although broken, you are still a family and that is what really matters in the eyes of your child. ...

- Taylor, a mother

# Contact Information

## Honorable Richard A. Simons

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