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## Children get dose of prison realities

In his class, ex-con spares no details

*BY JEFF SCHWEERS  
FLORIDA TODAY*

It's a cold, rainy Saturday morning, and 17 sullen teenagers wearing hoodies and ball caps slouch in a meeting room at the Hampton Inn off Interstate 95 in Viera.

No one wants to be here. Five followed juvenile court orders to attend. The others came because their desperate parents paid \$50 each for a session meant to shock their teens out of misbehavior.

Enter a stocky, muscular man with a shaved head and dark goatee. Ex-con Larry Lawton of Palm Bay removes a shirt to reveal a red sleeveless T-shirt and bulging arms tattooed with vines -- a legacy of 11 years in federal prison.

Today, Lawton will give these children his "reality check."

Nearly three years out of prison for a string of jewelry store heists in the 1990s, Lawton has enjoyed sudden business success with his Reality Check program, sharing his prison experiences with teens and adults to deter them from crime. The program is a hit with local judges, prosecutors, law enforcement chiefs and county officials.

Lawton, 48, has sold more than 1,000 copies of his DVD and now hosts a local talk-radio program. He has even attracted national attention, appearing on Comedy Central's "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" and working with an agent to scout reality television deals.

It's not your typical career arc for a former thief and gangster. And it surprises the Palm Bay jewelry store owners whom Lawton terrorized and robbed 16 years ago.

Lawton's presentation this grim Saturday at the Hampton Inn is ungrammatical and profane. He paints a visual picture of what could happen to the teens if they continue to sell marijuana, assault their teachers or trespass on neighbors' lots.

"I had my arms pinned down, and I was beaten and peed on -- by the guards," Lawton starts off. "I was kicked. My ribs were broken. I was beaten once a month."

A few of the children snicker. Some gasp.

One boy, Trevor McGuire, 17, asks Lawton if he ever received any sort of settlement for the abuse he says he took from prison officers.

"No. I was guilty," Lawton says.

## Qualifications

Despite Lawton's lack of formal training in childhood psychology, criminology or any other traditional field, his Reality Check program has caught on with law enforcement officials and judges trying to steer petty troublemakers away from jail terms. Fans include Brevard County Sheriff Jack Parker, Rockledge Police Chief John Shockey and County Judge David Silverman.

"Mr. Lawton came to see me, visited local judges, contacted everyone connected with the system, and we all said we'll give it a try," said Michelle Perlman, misdemeanor division chief for the Brevard-Seminole State Attorney's Office. "It appears to be a good program."

But not everyone has embraced it.

Betty Dunn, Brevard Public Schools' superintendent of student services, advised against using Reality Check after Lawton pitched the idea to the school board.

"While the program is well-organized and well-intentioned, it does not follow the scientific evidence-based research guidelines," Dunn wrote in a November memo to Lawton's business partner, Joe Reilly. "Reality Check is a one-time deal which uses objectionable tactics and an ex-prisoner to present his harrowing experiences. There are no demonstrated positive outcomes in terms of reducing or preventing drug use, violence or disruptive behavior among youth that have been subjected to this program."

Lawton objected, showing e-mails and letters from children who took his program. He says his experience is the best qualification.

He thinks he can connect with children better than their teachers, parents and counselors.

"I'm not here to tell you what to do," he tells his captive teenage audience. "I'm here to tell you what happens if you go this way."

Lawton's way began in the Bronx borough of New York City in 1961, led him to Florida and a career in crime and, now, to his new career scaring people with his experiences.

## Palm Bay heist

"I was a goodfella," Lawton tells the teens as he shows slides of him posing with beautiful women and former cruiser weight boxing champion Mark Randazzo, now a restaurant owner in Miami. Lawton had limousines, \$1,000 suits and horses.

After he finished a stint in the Coast Guard in 1983, Lawton fell into organized crime. While tending bar, he also ran a book and loan-sharked.

He got married and moved to Fort Lauderdale in 1987 to get away from that life, but it followed him.

"I robbed \$15 million in diamonds," Lawton tells the teens.

Lawton was nabbed in South Florida in late 1996 in connection with a jewelry store robbery-turned-shootout in Philadelphia. Lawton swears he used only a BB gun.

While he was in custody, the police and FBI connected Lawton with two 1994 jewelry store robberies in Florida at Diamond Brokers in Palm Bay and Carter's in Daytona Beach.

Brad Roshto, the owner of the Palm Bay jewelry store that Lawton robbed in 1994, was surprised to see Lawton mentioned recently in his local newspaper.

Roshto remembers Lawton's face and gruff, violent demeanor. He remembers the way he bossed around his crew of robbers, kicked Roshto and cleared the store's display cases of more than \$400,000 worth of jewelry.

"If he can do some good for somebody, that's great, but I don't know what to think about the other people," Roshto says. "If he knows who they are, he should say."

Lawton won't tell. He says he was offered a three-year sentence in exchange for the names of his partners, but he refused.

He was even convicted in 2002 of giving false information because he wouldn't implicate his brother in the heists. Not telling means he gets to live, Lawton says.

"It's why I can do what I do," he says, "because I did not rat."

## Grim recollections

"Any of you know what suitcasing is?"

Lawton looks around the room. Silence.

"I'll tell you."

He launches into a graphic and mostly unprintable description of how he used to insert a shiv -- a piece of metal or plastic ground to a sharp point -- encased in a toothpaste holder inside his body to get it beyond prison guards into the yard. Once there, he would find a semi-secluded spot to whip off his pants, squat down and push the toothpaste holder out of his body.

"You think you can do that?" Because that's what it takes to survive, he explains. The teens stare, seemingly stunned.

Lawton spent 11 years in some of the toughest federal prisons -- Edgefield in South Carolina, Jesup in Georgia, Yazoo City in Mississippi. He saw inmates stabbed, friends die. He saw young men raped and turned out as prostitutes for other inmates. He stabbed people and was stabbed himself.

"It's a wacky world in prison," he says.

He also tells the teens that he studied to be a paralegal through a correspondence school in prison. He became a gang mediator and filed writs and claims on behalf of other inmates.

After the first 45-minute segment of the three-hour class, Lawton seemed to be getting through to some of the children.

"He seems to know what he's talking about," says Louis Guadalupe, a big 17-year-old with a beard and shaved head, earrings in both ears, who was prosecuted for assaulting a teacher and ordered to take Lawton's class.

"This taught me what could happen if I put my hands on a teacher," Guadalupe says.

Sandra and Robert Benhanania flew from Alpharetta, Ga., with their 16-year-old son, Cory.

"We had to get him help," Sandra Benhanania says. "We were afraid he was going to get arrested."

## New career

"How many of you can pass a piss test? Be honest."

Five hands go up from the group of 17.

Lawton tells them that he undergoes testing once a month under terms of his probation.

"If I don't pass the test, I go back to prison," he says.

When he got out, Lawton asked the courts to send him to Palm Bay. That's where his parents have lived since 1983 and where two of his sisters live. He still owes \$74,000 in restitution to the victims, including Roshto.

He started LL Research and Consulting out of his parents' house. And he quickly began making important connections.

He ran into childhood friend Dennis Broderick, a vice president for Primerica Financial Services whose wife, Glenda Broderick, is the school services coordinator for the Brevard Achievement Center.

Broderick asked his wife if Lawton could speak with some of her students, who are at-risk children with learning disabilities. She agreed.

"His education comes from the streets, a lot better than mine," Broderick says.

Lawton also met former County Commissioner Jackie Colon, who included him in a crime workshop.

Another friend, former City Limits owner Joe Fraumeni, arranged a meeting for Lawton with Joe Reilly, who had just sold a drug-screening business and agreed to bankroll Lawton's DVD. Reilly also owns the office building on Palm Bay Road that houses Reality Check's headquarters.

Together, they plan to profit from Lawton's checkered past.

"My role here is the business role . . . so Larry can run the program," Reilly says. Reality Check now has accounts on Twitter, MySpace and Facebook.

Lawton also is looking to parlay his story into something even bigger. His New York City talent agent is negotiating book and reality television deals.

"It's rare we'd find characters that genuine with that big story to tell and want to help him get out there," said Adam Liebner of N.S. Bienstock, a talent agency that deals in unscripted reality shows.

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## Additional Facts

Lawton quotes

### LIFE AS A CRIMINAL

"I was very wealthy. I had horses. I led the wrong kind of life. I was doing everything for all the wrong reasons."

### **PAST BUSINESS VENTURES**

"I opened a pizzeria in Fort Lauderdale. It didn't go well. I burned it down for the insurance money. I didn't get that, either."

### **THE NO-SNITCH CODE**

"I did my time, took the fall. I didn't name names. I was offered three years to get out of prison to give up the wise guys."

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