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**Troubled youth given a 'Reality Check' in program**

Excellent!  Rating: ★★★★★ 5 / 5 (8 votes)

Posted: 2008 Apr 18 - 00:41

By Tammy Roberts

Staff writer

In the past year, Larry Lawton has put hundreds of teens behind bars.

Not in the literal sense, but through a string of personal accounts, photographs and harrowing stories guaranteed to make anyone's skin crawl.

"They need to see it; they need to realize this is where they're headed," said Mr. Lawton, whose sizeable stature and bulging tattooed arms have the power to intimidate even the toughest teen. "Prison is no walk in the park."

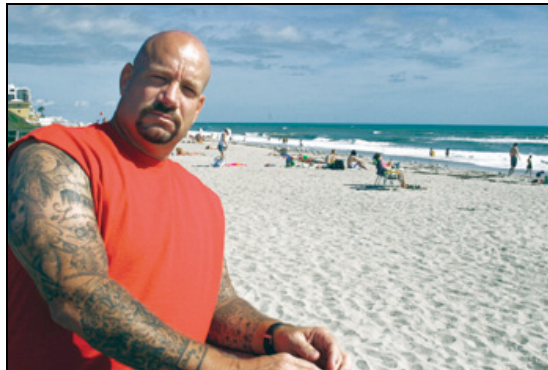
In his early 30s, Mr. Lawton seemed to have it made.

His involvement in organized crime gave him enough funding to start up a slew of New York City nightclubs, restaurants and limo companies. His bank account never looked better.

But in 1996, Mr. Lawton got a dose of reality when he was convicted of racketeering in connection with a jewelry robbery and was sentenced to 12 years in some of the toughest federal prisons in the country.

"In prison, there's predators and there's prey," he said. "I guarantee every one of these kids today are prey. I don't care how tough they think they are."

A mere month after being released last spring, Mr. Lawton wasted no time designing a way to help prevent today's troubled youth from facing this fate.



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His program, a four-hour in-your-face glimpse into prison life, encourages participants to change paths and start making better choices.

"I gave it the name 'Reality Check' because it's designed to do exactly that - wake kids up and make them see that this is where they could end up," Mr. Lawton said.

Leaving his New York lifestyle behind him, Mr. Lawton moved to Palm Bay to care for his father and to try his new program on Brevard County youth.

Since its inception, hundreds of local youth age 11-21 have undergone a "Reality Check" with Mr. Lawton as their guide. Currently, it's the only program in the state of its kind.

There are three ways his program is given: one-on-one through the request of a parent; in a classroom setting at an area school; or as one of the alternative programs appointed by the Brevard County juvenile court system.

From teens whose grades are slipping in school and those with bad attitudes to those with criminal records - the program has gotten results.

Melbourne resident Brenda Johnson saw the effect it had on her 15-year-old grandson, Brandon, after completing "Reality Check" earlier this month.

In the past two years, Brandon, who grew up in Bonita Springs, started getting mixed up with the wrong crowd - sneaking out at night, stealing small items and losing respect for his family.

So, last December, his mother sent him to live with his grandmother in Melbourne.

"I thought this program might help reiterate the things I'd discussed with him," Ms. Johnson said. "And it truly did."

Since completing "Reality Check," Ms. Johnson said Brandon has not been able to talk about anything else.

"I literally had to drag him into the place," she said. "Afterward, he didn't want to leave. I think his seeing the dark side has impacted his decision-making. I've heard him talking about it to his friends. I think it was a real wakeup call."

Brandon said he was most surprised about the lack of protection in prison.

"I was under the assumption the guards would help you," Brandon said. "But you're on your own."

Mr. Lawton uses a slideshow presentation to highlight the different areas of his program, including decision-making, juvenile statistics, penalties/losses and avoiding bad associations.

Mr. Lawton refers to his own experiences, such as missing out on 11 years with his two children.

He doesn't sugarcoat or hold back in his discussions, using rough language and blunt speech to relay his material and gain immediate attention from his audience.

"If there's one thing a kid knows it's when somebody's feeding them bull," Mr. Lawton said. "They see right through it. You have to get on their level to make them want to listen to what you have to say."

Mr. Lawton opens the program with his background and the events leading up to

his imprisonment.

He pokes fun at himself, showing photos of his days as a city "gangster" on the streets of New York.

But the laughter dies down when stories pour out of the 46-year-old ex-convict as he recalls the violence, sexual assault and abuse he witnessed on a daily basis behind bars.

"You're constantly watching your back and fearing for your life every day," Mr. Lawton said. "I don't think today's kids can make it. That's why I'm doing this."

While in prison, Mr. Lawton worked as a gang mediator and a counselor. He left prison with a paralegal license and the basis for his other business, LL Research & Consulting.

"I know the law very well." Mr. Lawton said. "I've learned how the 'system' works. Something needs to be done to prevent these kids from heading there in the first place."

At the end of his program, Mr. Lawton brings in local sociologist Julie Query to talk to participants about additional statistics and personal decision-making.

"This has been an incredible experience for me since the beginning," Ms. Query said. "But Larry is amazing to watch. You can hear a pin drop when he talks to these kids."

Before they leave, participants in the program are asked to fill out a survey as a chance to discuss what they learned and how it made them feel.

Some spend an hour filling them out, Mr. Lawton said. They really open up with their situations and many ask to keep in touch.

"Every kid knows right from wrong," Mr. Lawton said. "I just show them what can happen if they make the bad choice."

For information, visit [realitycheckprogram.org](http://realitycheckprogram.org), call (321) 626-3316 or e-mail [info@realitycheckprogram.org](mailto:info@realitycheckprogram.org).

Contact Tammy Roberts at (321) 751-5968 or [Roberts@hometownnewsol.com](mailto:Roberts@hometownnewsol.com).

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