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**Reality Check program hosts youth golf tournament**

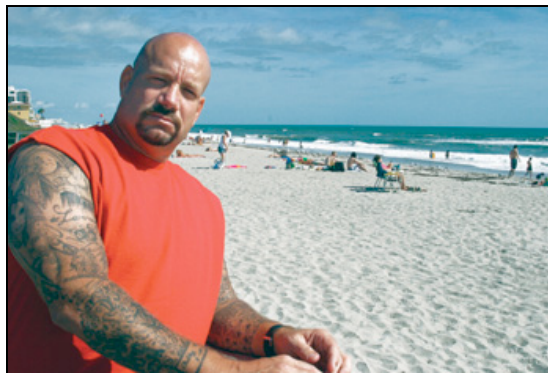
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Posted: 2008 Aug 08 - 00:27

Inspirational golf outing scheduled for Aug. 17

By Tammy Roberts

Staff writer



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Last year, 15-year-old Joseph Castagna was headed down the wrong path.

While he performed fairly well in school, had a good relationship with his family and had only a few behavioral issues, Joseph started to make some bad decisions as a high school freshman.

That was until he got a "Reality Check."

Larry Lawton, a Palm Bay resident with a passion for bettering the lives of teens, developed the Reality Check program earlier this year as a way to show youth where they can end up if they make the wrong decisions.

In 1996, Mr. Lawton, 46, was convicted of racketeering in connection with a New York City jewelry robbery and was sentenced to 12 years in prison.

While behind bars, he developed the idea for his four-hour program, which provides youth with an up-close glimpse into prison life and encourages participants to change paths and start making better decisions.

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

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are."

Since its inception, Mr. Lawton has mentored hundreds of local youth through group presentations and one-on-one sessions.

His technique sticks in the minds of participants, as Mr. Lawton shares striking stories of violence and abuse and shows photos of his life in prison.

"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 do this."

Joseph, who will attend Viera High School this school year, was one of many Reality Check participants to change paths after completing the program.

"Larry and Reality Check opened his eyes," said Joseph's mom, Andrea Castagna. "He has a lot of admiration and respect for Larry and listens to what he has to say. You don't always get that response from your child when you're parenting him."

While Reality Check has pointed the area's youth in a more positive direction, some parents of teens are struggling with finding positive activities for their children to do.

"There is not a lot available to kids of this age, especially over summer break," Ms. Castagna said. "They have outgrown the camps run by rec centers, they can't drive and don't have jobs yet, so they wind up with too much time on their hands."

Unfortunately, many of these teens turn to drugs, alcohol and other crimes as an alternative, Ms. Castagna said.

This situation inspired Mr. Lawton to take a more hands-on approach in his mentoring through a series of local activities.

The first is the Reality Check Program Golf Outing Aug. 17 at Viera East Golf Club.

The event is a nine-hole, four-man scramble, and features a catered lunch, prizes and a clinic, led by the club's head golf professional, Pat Patterson. The cost to attend is \$100.

Participants will be divided into groups of three, accompanied by one adult mentor. Mr. Lawton will give a 20-minute inspirational speech and will visit each group for one-on-one sessions during the tournament.

"No golf experience is necessary," Mr. Lawton said. "It's meant to be fun and to expose kids to an activity they may not have tried otherwise."

Mr. Lawton said the Viera East Golf Club staff has been instrumental in making the event a reality, as well as various members of the community.

Businesses and individuals who want to help or who may know of an at-risk youth who might benefit from this event may choose to sponsor a child, by covering the \$100 admission price.

Parents who wish to accompany their child may also participate in the event for an additional \$25.

"This event is meant to open the eyes of these kids to something different," Mr. Lawton said. "It's to show kids that fun can be had without getting into trouble."

The Reality Check Program Golf Outing will be Aug. 17 at 11:30 a.m. at Viera

East Golf Club, 2300 Clubhouse Drive, Viera. Space is limited.

For information about the Reality Check Program or golf event, call (321) 626-3316 or visit [www.realitycheckprogram.org](http://www.realitycheckprogram.org).

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