

Justice Teaching: 'The perfect opportunity to make a difference in my community'

By Jason L. Odom

Special to the News

What have I done to benefit my community? That question lingered after listening to Florida Supreme Court Justice R. Fred Lewis deliver an impassioned talk about community service to our local bar association.

He talked straight from the heart about his own experiences after coming to the realization that he was entering the "fourth quarter" of his own life and wondered if he had made a difference in his community. As we all know, Justice Lewis has made an incredible difference in his community and the State of Florida through the creation of [Justice Teaching](#). Justice Lewis encouraged the audience not to wait until the fourth quarter to get started; the time is now.



After hearing Justice Lewis' talk, I realized that at 34, I was still in the second quarter of my own life and the time had come to get involved in Justice Teaching and to make a difference in my community.

I was so excited to begin work as a Justice Teaching volunteer that I signed up for the next available training session, even though it was four hours' driving time away. I did not expect to see Justice Lewis, but there he was leading the training session. The training lasted approximately three hours and provided the volunteers with the basic tools necessary to teach the various lessons.

Now that I was a trained Justice Teaching volunteer, I had to pick a school to adopt. There were several schools to choose from, some from affluent parts of town, and others from not so affluent parts of town. Then there was the Alternative Center for Education (ACE), which is tasked with the responsibility of educating students who were either removed from regular school for disciplinary reasons, or students at risk for dropping out of school.

It was easy to select the ACE. I decided that the best place to make a difference was with the school most in need. Most alternative education schools are stereotyped as holding facilities for troubled students. Not this school. When I contacted the school to let it know I would be their Justice Teaching volunteer, the staff was thrilled. The school had apparently tried without success for several years to get a volunteer. I met with the principal and his staff to develop a plan to reach every student in the school. The school is composed of three parts: the main campus, the Simon Youth Foundation, and the Piper Education Program. The latter two programs are designed to provide a basic education and vocational training for at-risk students to enter the workforce upon graduation.

We decided that the most pressing need for the students at the time (it was close to graduation) was educating them on their rights and responsibilities as adults in the real world. Justice Teaching has wonderful lesson plans on a variety of topics, including a lesson designed for young adults. I also contacted Justice Lewis and his staff for some assistance in

handling students that could arguably be referred to as "difficult." Justice Lewis and his staff were very helpful and provided me with great information and tips to make for a successful lesson.

When the morning came to teach my first class, I must admit that I was nervous. After all, I was not a professional teacher and I had volunteered to teach the students who were supposedly not teachable. I actually had three separate classes to teach; one session for each of the three programs. I had spent several hours preparing for the lessons, including *what* I wanted to teach and *how* I wanted to teach it. I was prepared for anything! There is a saying in the military that "no battle plan survives first contact with the enemy." My experience was no different. I was prepared for the students to scowl at me; they didn't. I was prepared for the students to sleep during my presentation; they didn't. I was prepared for the students to sit in silence; they didn't. I was even prepared for the students to heckle me; they didn't. I was prepared for the students to ask inappropriate or embarrassing questions; they didn't, for the most part. I was prepared for the students to ignore me; they didn't. They did none of those things.

Within the first five minutes of my lesson, I threw away my prepared remarks and put myself at eye level with the students. I ditched the microphone and took off the jacket. They loved it. We then spent the next hour talking and engaging each other about the various rights and responsibilities that young people will face as they enter adulthood. It was fascinating. Thanks to a wonderful brochure produced by The Florida Bar, the students were given an informative guide to help them during difficult times and a resource to use for help when they need it.

Almost every student actively participated in the lesson by either asking questions or providing examples from their own lives and what they learned from those experiences. The teachers were amazed. Before class started I was warned "these students are tough so we have an extra teacher to help with discipline." The truth is, while these students were indeed tough, all they really wanted was someone to talk to them in an honest manner about the important challenges they are going to experience when they leave school and enter the workforce and adulthood. I think the students expected me to *tell* them what they needed to know. Instead, we worked together to figure out what was important to *them* as they enter adulthood and we incorporated that into the lesson plan.

One student was an avid hunter and had questions about Florida's concealed weapons law. Another student had a young child and was concerned about child support. Some students were planning to rent an apartment and wanted to know whether they needed a written lease agreement or if the landlord could enter the apartment without notice. You could see the enthusiasm on their faces as they listened and asked questions about issues that were important to *them*. Hopefully, the students were able to see the enthusiasm on my face because it was a wonderful experience spending time with them in order to give them useful information that would help them navigate their way from childhood to adulthood.

The second and third lessons were just as successful. The school was so excited about the success of the first Justice Teaching lesson that we have already begun planning Justice Teaching lessons for the next school year. We plan to incorporate lessons on the Bill of Rights and free speech in public schools.

Justice Teaching gave me the perfect opportunity to make a difference in my community, and I am a better person because of it. If you are unaware of Justice Teaching or would like to get involved, visit the [Justice Teaching Web site](#) and sign up for a training session.

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