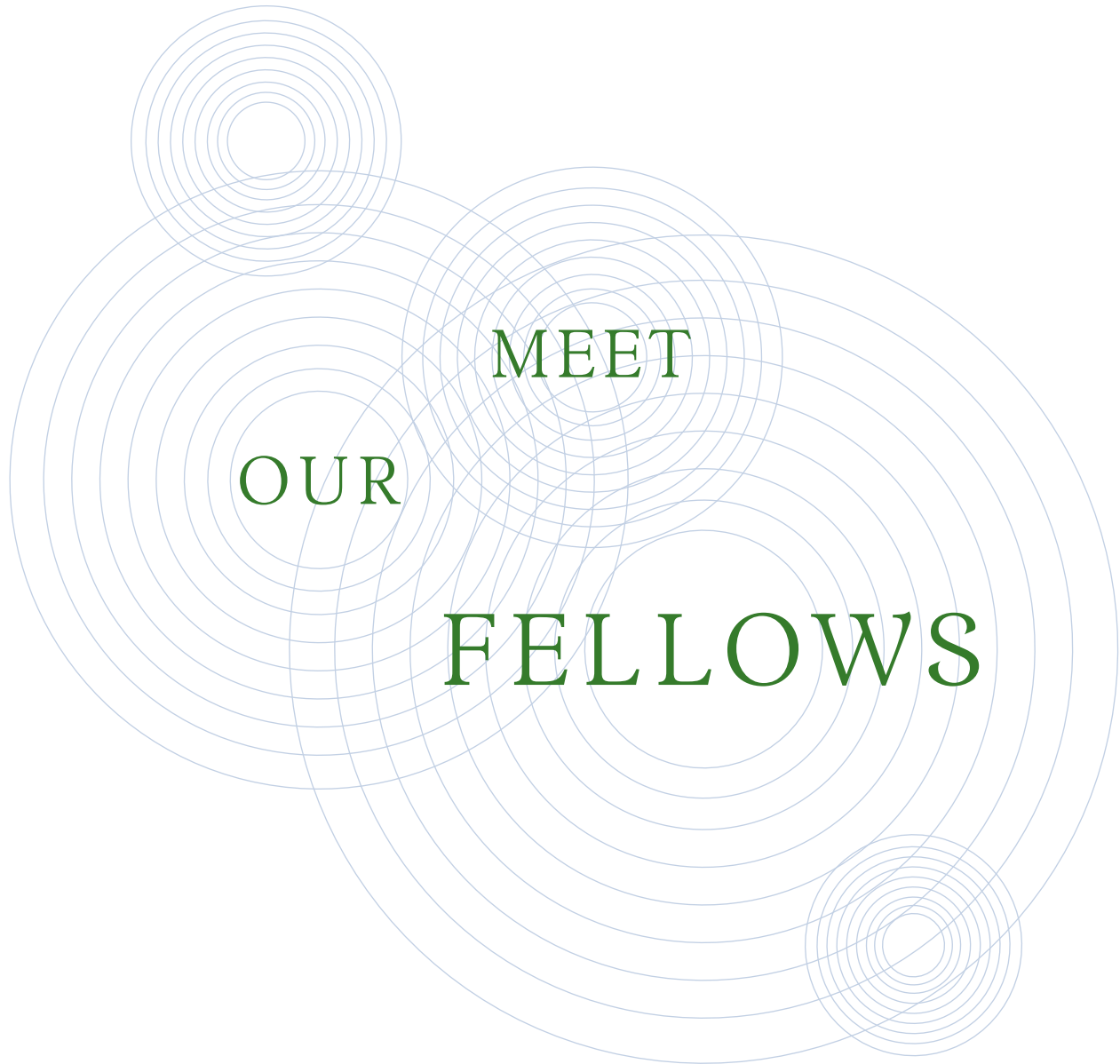




THE STONELEIGH FELLOWS PROGRAM



OUR

MEET

FELLOWS

GREGG VOLZ



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Fellowship Project: Youth Courts: A Peer Justice Platform for Youth Development
Sponsoring Agency: The Unity Center

If you walk into room C-221 in Chester High School on any Wednesday or Thursday around 2:30 in the afternoon, you might be surprised by what looks like a traditional court proceeding—a judge in a flowing black robe keeping order with a gavel; a group of jurors sitting together listening to testimony; a lawyer representing a client; a bailiff keeping a stern eye on everything. But this is no traditional court proceeding. This is the Chester High School youth court.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge and thank Bernardine H. Watson, the author of this article, who tells an inspiring story about Gregg Volz. Ms. Watson interviewed Mr. Volz and wrote this profile based on their conversations. This is the sixth in our series of “Meet the Fellows” profiles. The series is intended to provide readers with stories that describe our fellows’ motivation, goals and the philosophies that drive their work.

Ms. Watson is a social policy consultant living in Washington, D.C. She writes for and provides strategic advice to foundations, think tanks and nonprofits.



“THE UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY BEHIND YOUTH COURTS IS THAT KIDS LISTEN TO OTHER KIDS MORE THAN THEY LISTEN TO ADULTS.”

According to Gregg Volz, who started the court at Chester High School, youth courts are peer justice disciplinary systems that operate on the power of positive peer pressure. “When students come before the court and see their peers in judicial robes, it just stuns them—it’s very powerful,” he says. “The underlying philosophy behind youth courts is that kids listen to other kids more than they listen to adults.” Volz says that the “sentences” handed down by these courts, which can include a letter of apology, volunteer work or anger management classes, are not necessarily designed to punish young people. The goal is to help change behavior through positive interaction with peers. The students who run the Chester High School youth court understand “peer power” very well. Their slogan is: *Students Helping Students Make Better Decisions.*

Volz calls himself a non-traditional public interest lawyer. For much of his career, he has worked for organizations that provide housing, medical and legal services for the poor. “The kind of poverty we have in America is unacceptable,” he says. Volz’ political views are rooted in two life experiences: his Catholic upbringing which he says gave him a strong sense of right and wrong and the social change movement of the 1960s. “When I was a young man in the 60s, I thought there wouldn’t be any poverty by the time I was middle aged. I thought, eventually, every American would benefit from the prosperity of this country.” Volz sees his work on the Chester youth court program as a way to continue working toward that goal.

Volz was executive director of Delaware County Community Legal Assistance in the late 1990s when he first heard about a youth court program operating in Washington, DC. He was drawn to the youth court model as a strategy for working with troubled youth in Chester, where over one-quarter of the population lives below the poverty line and many of

the youth drop out of school before graduating. Volz spent years researching how youth courts could be implemented in Chester and even received a foundation grant to explore how the program could be operated within the Delaware County juvenile justice system. However, before he could get the county youth court started, Volz was invited to start a court at Chester High School by a teacher who had Pennsylvania Department of Education truancy funds. Around the same time, he was offered a job by a law firm well known in Chester for its commitment to community service. Foehl and Eyre offered to let Volz split his time between the firm and the Chester youth court program. Volz grabbed the opportunity and the Chester High School youth court held its first hearing in November, 2007. Unity Center, a non-profit organization started by the principals of Foehl and Eyre, became the program’s sponsoring organization.

Getting a youth court up and running at Chester High School was not always easy. As in any large, urban high school, staff at the school are often overwhelmed with day-to-day operations. Volz says it took a while for him and school staff to sort out the many details associated with running the court—such as what types of student “offenses” should be referred to the youth court. In addition, there were minimal resources available to staff to develop the court. “Yet,” says Volz, “we somehow cobbled together a program. We took help from wherever we could get it. There was a school police officer who liked the program very early on and was very instrumental in helping us. There was a mother, who didn’t even have a kid in the school, who found out about the court and would bake cakes for the kids. Students from the Black Law Associations at neighboring Widener and Villanova Law Schools volunteered to train the youth court participants.”



Since opening the first youth court at Chester High School, Volz has been on a roll. By the end of 2010, he had started a second youth court at Chester High as well as court programs at Allied Health High School, Science and Discovery High School and Village Middle School. Currently, approximately 100 students participate in operating youth courts across the four schools. Volz attributes this expansion to local partnerships he's worked very hard to develop. "We've had lots of people working with us to get the courts up and running," he says. "I tell my students all the time, together we can do anything."

Over the past two decades, youth courts have become one of the most commonly used alternative juvenile justice practices in the country. According to the National Association of Youth Courts, in 1994, there were only 78 programs in the country. Today, there are over 1,000 youth courts operating in 49 states. The majority of these programs are based in juvenile justice systems and schools. The remainder are operated by community-based and other non-profit organizations. Illinois has 154 youth courts; and New York has about 100. Pennsylvania lags behind with only 15 courts, something Volz is intent on changing—beginning in Chester. "The potential for youth

courts is huge," he says. "When seen through a juvenile justice lens, youth courts can help students stay out of the school-to-prison pipeline which so often starts with trouble in school. And by relying on student resources for operations, these courts are very cost effective."

After working on youth court programs in Chester, however, Volz has come to believe that the real value of the program is the development of young people who run the courts. "Students who participate on the youth court change in incredible ways," he says. "They begin to understand how the law works; they start to appreciate our legal system because they develop a stake in it. I love seeing these kids begin to understand that the law can be a positive rather than a negative force in their lives."

Further, Volz says that participating on youth courts can make students excited about learning. "I've seen students on youth courts learn public speaking skills. They learn the discipline it takes to ask probing questions and to make good decisions. I've seen them learn how to make solid opening and closing arguments. In an economically distressed community like Chester, where many students are not learning the academic and social skills needed to be successful in life, these are very important accomplishments." And while he doesn't have the data yet to back this claim, Volz is convinced that youth courts keep students in school. "I know this because I've seen it," he says. "Youth court kids don't drop out. They want to go to college. Some of them say they want to become lawyers." This is all very gratifying for Volz. "I've spent much of my career working with disadvantaged adults," he says. "Now, I feel very fortunate to have the opportunity to use the law and the principles of justice to help young people break the cycle of poverty."

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Still, Volz is painfully aware of the challenges youth face growing up in Chester. In talking about his students, he says “many of these kids grow up with a lot of chaos, a lot of violence—in the home and in the streets. The streets of Chester are dangerous. Two of the kids I taught one year got killed the next summer. They were just literally in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is just not the way a kid is supposed to grow up.” It’s certainly not the way Volz grew up. “When I was growing up in Evansville, Indiana, my community was very cohesive,” he says. “Most people went to the same Catholic church and all the children went to the same school. Everybody was working, everyone had two parents. There was a sense that we were all in it together. It is just so different for kids in Chester.”

Volz knows that participating in the youth court won’t change current circumstances for the youngsters he works with or provide them with the kind of childhood he experienced growing up in Indiana. Sometimes he’s reminded of that fact when he least expects it. As part of the Chester youth court program, Volz teaches social studies classes where students learn how to run a youth court. “One day in class we were talking about the American Dream,” Volz recalls. “I asked the students what the American Dream meant to them. One kid raised his hand and said: *Mr. Volz, you want to know what the American Dream is, I’ll tell you what the American Dream is. The American Dream is when you can get up in the morning and get out of bed and you can go outside and not think you’re going to get shot. That’s the American Dream. I think that speaks volumes.*”

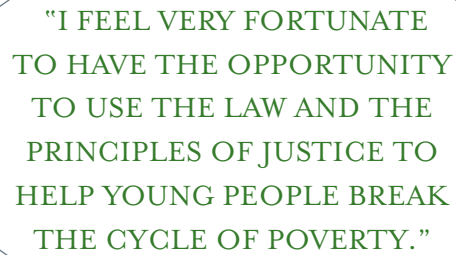
Volz does everything he can to provide Chester youth court participants with developmental opportunities and positive adult role models. Every year since 2008, he’s taken participants to summer camp on the Chesapeake Bay. According to Volz, “We started the summer camp because we didn’t want to lose momentum from the school year.” The camp is a combination of work and play. Students review the previous year’s court and discuss changes they want to make when school starts in the fall. They look at court related movies such as *Twelve Angry Men* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* and discuss their reactions. But they also have fun. “The kids go boating, they eat hot dogs and hamburgers, they swim—all that stuff,” Volz says. “We reward them during the summer camp.”

Last summer, the Chester youth court program hit what Volz calls “the mother lode.” Six judges from the Delaware County Court of Common Pleas each agreed to take one Chester High School youth court student for a six week internship program. The purpose of the internship was to help the students better handle cases that come before them at school. The students had the opportunity to watch judges formulate questions and make rulings on complex issues. The judges were so impressed with the students that they want to work with Volz to improve the program for next summer. “I think, through these internships, the judges realized that there are pretty good kids in Chester,” Volz says. “They are so used to dealing with kids who are in trouble. This program gave

the judges the opportunity to work with students who are doing good and trying to make the community better.” One judge who participated called the internship *a great program* and told the youth court members, “I am very impressed with all of you. As much as you have learned from us, we have learned from you.” Two other judges have co-written an article about the internship program that will be published in the Pennsylvania Bar Association magazine this spring.

Gregg Volz doesn’t like to talk about himself much. But he *will* say that he’s persistent. “If I am going to do something, you’re going to get 100% of me,” Volz says. That persistence is reflected in how much the Chester youth court program has grown over the last four years. Not only are there five youth courts operating in Chester schools, but Volz has trained school staff at Chester High to run their two programs so he can devote more time to the newer programs at the other schools. He’s gained the confidence of the school district administration, which Volz says makes working in the Chester schools much easier. Volz has also obtained AmeriCorps volunteers who help staff courts across the four school sites. Recently, about 15 students from Swarthmore, a nearby college with a strong community service program, formed an organization called Chester Youth Court Volunteers to help support the high school students running the courts.

Drawing on relationships he has developed in Chester over the years, Volz brings judges, trial lawyers, probation officers and other law enforcement officials to work with students who are running the youth court. These professionals give the students the benefit of their court room experiences, telling them stories about interesting trials and explaining court practices. Last spring, Volz received a call from the president of the Delaware County Bar Association, asking how he could help the program. “I told him that we needed even more volunteer lawyers, and he put the word out,” Volz says. “The response has been great.”



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Studies have found youth courts to be an effective approach for reducing recidivism among youthful offenders. However, few studies have focused on school-based urban youth courts like the one at Chester High School or looked at the effect of youth court participation on volunteer jurors. In 2007, Volz and a team led by Widener University professor Nancy Hirschinger-Blank conducted an eight-month assessment of the Chester High School program. The study’s findings, published in the spring 2009 volume of the *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, indicate that participation on the youth court helped Chester High School students develop citizenship and conflict resolution skills as well as self-confidence and maturity. While the study’s small size limits the degree to which these findings can be generalized, Volz believes this research points to the benefits of the Chester youth court approach. He also understands that more research is needed—not just on the Chester model, but on youth courts generally—if the approach is to reach its full potential. Currently, the Chester youth court is one of about 20 organizations taking part in a year-long quality improvement program being conducted by the National Center for Juvenile Justice in Pittsburgh. The goal of the program is to help juvenile justice programs around Pennsylvania develop data collection systems and operate more efficiently—both prerequisites to additional research. Volz has also written a proposal for the National Association of Youth Courts to secure funding to conduct a national cost benefit analysis of youth courts. Both of these tools will help Volz make the case that youth courts are not only good for young people, but good for cash-strapped school districts and states.

Over the past four years, Volz has received numerous accolades for his work with the Chester youth court program. Articles about his work have appeared in newspapers across the state. He has also received the President's Award from the Pennsylvania Council for Social Studies and the Pro Bono Award from the Pennsylvania Bar Association. But Volz considers his biggest prize an invitation to testify before the Pennsylvania Senate Judiciary Committee. On June 10, 2010, Volz and two Chester High School youth court participants, Brian and Jamar, testified before the committee's hearing on best practices in the juvenile justice system. In his testimony Volz recommended that Pennsylvania create a youth court statute that would provide stable funding and administrative support for youth court programs across the state. Volz says he was politely received, but the chair of the committee, Senator Geenleaf, made it clear he wanted to hear from the students. "I was really nervous," Volz says. "I didn't want to tell the kids what to say. So when they testified, I was hearing it for the first time, just like the senators and representatives were. Brian told the committee that he would probably be in a juvenile detention facility if not for the youth court. Jamar told them he had gone from being a 'D' student to an 'A' student because of his participation on the court. Everyone in the room was visibly moved."



Since the testimony last June, Senator Greenleaf has invited Volz back to Harrisburg to work with his staff on developing a youth court statute for Pennsylvania. Volz is certain that the invitation is in large measure a response to Brian and Jamar's testimony. "I am so impressed with these young men," he says. "They make me look good, but the reality is that they have done all the hard work. Their testimony drove home to the committee that troubled youth can change and that we have to find ways to help kids before they drop out of school or get into serious trouble. Students like Brian and Jamar make you believe in the potential of this program nationally. Just think about all the kids out there who could be accomplishing great things with youth court."

Stoneleigh Foundation is a Philadelphia-based foundation established to help improve the well-being of children and youth. Focused on work that promotes change in our country's youth-serving systems, we meet our mission through fellowship awards that support outstanding individuals whose work unites research, policy and practice.

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123 S. Broad Street, Suite 1130 • Philadelphia, PA 19109 • tel: 215.735.7080 • fax: 215.735.7089

March 2011