

Tully: Inside a tough prison, teens struggle to find peace



(Photo: Matthew Tully)

PENDLETON, Ind. — There's nothing youthful in spirit about the maximum-security Juvenile Correctional Facility here. It sits across from an adult penitentiary and a set of railroad tracks, along a rural highway. The prison is surrounded by razor-wire fences and the teenage boys inside have, in many cases, committed the sorts of brutal crimes that send men away for decades, or even life.

Some of the teenagers will move across the street or to another adult prison to finish their sentences once they turn 18. But most of the 151 who now spend their days and nights within these fences will return to their hometowns within months or a few years, their futures uncertain, and their pasts clouded by violence, neglect and dysfunction.

Mental health problems and severe learning disabilities are rampant. And as the prison superintendent, Linda F. Commons, sat in her office Tuesday afternoon, she said that while the crimes many of the young men committed were undeniably awful, the childhoods they endured also are heartbreaking.

"Most of these kids," she said, "when you hear their stories you almost stop breathing."

A lot is at stake for Indiana in the futures of the young men housed in this facility. Once they leave, they will return to the neighborhoods of Indianapolis and Evansville, Granger and Kokomo, and other dots big and small on the Hoosier map. They'll meet up with old friends and old rivals; they'll face tough choices and whatever vulnerabilities and vices they carry with them on their way out of the prison gates.

The recidivism rate will be high, even prison officials acknowledge that. Those who work here see, in some faces, success stories: young men who have grown up and seem ready to put their pasts behind them. But that's far from universal. An official told me of one young man who has committed horrific sex crimes and who, she said, simply cannot be trusted in the free world.

All of the classes and programs for inmates cannot overcome all of the immense obstacles — obstacles buried deep within these young men — that surface after a visit of just a few hours. The deep-seated problems help explain the violence that is marring the state's capital city this year, and they underscore the challenge of changing the paths of those who have been given little in life, and who in many cases have committed crimes that are hard to forgive.

That's what makes a program operated by the Indianapolis-based [Peace Learning Center](http://peacelearningcenter.org/) so inspiring.

Run on a shoestring budget, the program is based on a simple concept: rehabilitation is possible, and not trying is not an option. It tries to infuse the inmates with the ability to think about their actions and the consequences, and a sense of empathy and self-control.

"We try to help kids find peace within themselves so the peacemaker can emerge," said Tim Nation, head of the Peace Learning Center, which runs programs throughout the Indianapolis area. "Many of these kids believe they are going to die by 25, so they live that way."

The \$120,000-a-year Pendleton program, funded largely by the state Department of Correction, provides every boy here — and, yes, they are still boys — with meetings with Peace Learning Center staff when they first arrive. The center continues to work with dozens of inmates throughout the year. The staff tries to convince the young men that they are responsible for their mistakes, and that only they can choose to get an education and make better decisions.

"There is a lot of victimhood, a lot of thinking that, 'I am not responsible for my actions'," Nation said. "That has to change."

Prison officials say that in four years, the program has contributed to a dramatic reduction in the number of fights and disciplinary actions. It's done so through counseling, a deep understanding of the young men with whom the staff works, and meetings like the one held Tuesday in the facility's toughest unit. The inmates kept there are a danger to themselves or others and, thus, are segregated from their peers in tiny rooms with reinforced metal doors.

As I walked into the unit, several teens banged on the doors from inside their cells, shouting to each other and at me. One called me a "four-eyed bitch." Others questioned who I was and why I was there.

[Darren Bunton](http://peacelearningcenter.org/about-us/darren-bunton/), a Peace Learning Center worker, walked from door to door, talking with each inmate through a small window. You're in charge of your own choices, he told one. Keep working, he told another. With one more, he ended the conversation with a fist bump, although it was blocked by the window. It was clear that he had found ways to connect with many of the teens.

Later, Bunton gathered six of the inmates in a room to talk about choices and what they've learned in recent weeks. Some students jumped at the chance to talk; others stared down at the table. But everyone adhered to the rule of not judging others.

An 18-year-old named Dustin smiled broadly and said he was 19 days away from heading home. In the unit more for his own safety than anything else, he said he was shocked at how much he has improved in recent months.

"I actually saw a video of me on the floor from when I first got here, cussing people out," he said. "It was really embarrassing, like I was looking at a different person. Like it's not even me."

"You've made a lot of improvement," Bunton said, as the sounds of shouting and banging on metal doors echoed in the background. "We've tried to challenge you to look at the whole picture and the consequences of the things you say and the things you do."

All six teenagers soon stood up to participate in a game called "[The Hassle Line](http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/ten-reasons-to-love-hassle-lines/)." Even those who hadn't talked or looked up earlier were eager to take part in the game, in which two inmates stare at each other and ask questions aimed at knocking the other off balance — questions such as, "Why is the sky purple?" The first one who fails to return a question loses.

Just about any question is allowed, but the game prohibits obscenities, words of violence, disrespect, or anything about the other's appearance. The goal is to get the young men to think about what they are saying, and to find different ways to react to what others say.

The six teenagers laughed and congratulated each other as the game ended. They listened as Bunton told them that too often people react to situations based on a limited view of what's possible and what they've experienced. And too often, he said, those reactions have cost them a lot — even their freedom. They then gathered around a table and stacked their hands together.

"If we think about what happens based on how we react," Bunton said, "we'll be better off in life."

Most of the teens returned to their cells, but Dustin remained to talk about the freedom he'll soon receive. With a buzz cut and a smile that appears naturally, he said his time here has been nerve-wracking. He's tired and ready to go.

He's filled out job applications from within the prison walls and, armed with his GED, he hopes to go to college eventually. Commons, the prison superintendent, later told me she is as certain as she can be that Dustin will make it on the outside. And although promises are often empty inside a prison, Dustin insisted he is ready to move beyond his past.

"Sometimes my mind gets the better of me and I don't know whether to follow the right path or the wrong path," he said. "But I want to change from who I was. I want to do good."

Change doesn't come easy at the Pendleton Juvenile Correctional Facility. But the stakes are too high, for young men like Dustin and the communities they will soon reenter, to give up.

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