**Why choose Youth Court? Because it works!**

Ella\* was scared.

She sat in the small, white-walled meeting room, waiting for her first appearance before Youth Court.

The high school freshman knew she was about to face a jury of her peers who would ask questions about her truancy charge at a Fargo high school. But she wasn’t exactly sure what else to expect.

Youth Court is one of Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota’s diversion programs designed to provide very young or first-time offenders with an alternative to formal court proceedings. While participation in Youth Court saves youth from a formal charge on their record, it still requires that they recognize and repair the harm they’ve done. If they don’t complete the program, their case will be sent back to juvenile court.

The youth court system has grown increasingly popular in the last 20 years – largely because it works. According to the Urban Institute’s Evaluation of Teen Court Programs, which assessed teen courts in four different states, the six-month recidivism figures among the diversion programs ranged from 6 to 9 percent. This compares to the traditional recidivism rate of around 20 percent among juvenile offenders. Studies also show that formally processing youth through the traditional court system may do more harm than good by “labeling” young people as delinquents and exposing them to the influence of more high-risk offenders.

When Ella’s day in court arrived, she was escorted from the small waiting room to a large, light-filled conference room where nine high school students sat in a circle. Her throat tightened as she sat down to answer their questions. But as court members introduced themselves and began asking questions, her nervousness dissolved. They were regular kids from other schools in the community, and they simply wanted to gather information on what happened.

They talked about values that were important to their group, such as respect and confidentiality. And they asked questions that helped Ella reflect on the consequences of her behavior: “Do you know what you’ve done wrong?” “What are you going to do to change?” “What do you want to do in the future?” “How could this incident affect your future goals?”

Ella explained that she didn’t like school, which was one reason why she had trouble going every day. She didn’t have many friends, she didn’t like some of her teachers and she was worried about her mom’s health issues.

Ella believed her peers had an empathy she would not have received in traditional court. For instance, they were more likely to understand why it was hard to get to class when she hated school.

After they collected information, the group met privately to decide her disposition, or sentence. A major goal in Youth Court is that dispositions are educational, preventative, and make the youth recognize the human impact of their actions. Dispositions can vary from apologies to victims to counseling, anger-management classes or drug and alcohol evaluations.

Ultimately, the group sentenced Ella to serve three sessions of Youth Court as a juror.

She found it fascinating. So much so that she actually volunteered to be on the Youth Court jury the following year.

After transferring to a different school, Ella liked it better and didn’t skip classes. She made friends with other jurors, and looked forward to Youth Court every week.

Ella says the experience also has given her insight on what life is like for other kids. For instance, one youth referred to Youth Court was caught stealing at just 7 years old. Ella has learned to be less judgmental about backgrounds that might differ from her own.

In short, Ella believes the experience set her on a healthier path, and Youth Court has made her more mature, responsible and empathetic.

“Bad things can turn into good things,” she says. “I probably wouldn’t be the person I am today if it weren’t for Youth Court.”

*\*Ella's name has been changed to protect her anonymity.*