

[NEWS JOURNAL](#)
[HOME](#) > [Local](#) > [Article](#)

[Local](#)
[Nation/World](#)
[Business](#)
[Sports](#)
[Life](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Obituaries](#)

[ENTERTAINMENT](#)
[TRAVEL](#)

Tough love puts teens on road to reform

History of abuse often sends girls on a downward spiral



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Angela Pala slouched into the courtroom and gave Judge Chandlee Johnson Kuhn the most contemptuous, I-don't-care-about-anything look she could muster. Kuhn, chief judge of Delaware's Family Court, wasn't intimidated.

"This is my courtroom," Angela remembers Kuhn telling her. "You will follow my rules. You're going to lose the attitude and listen to what I say. You're not going to disrespect me."

Angela, then 16 and in trouble for screaming at a police officer, squirmed a little in the courtroom's wooden chair.



THE NEWS JOURNAL/ROBERT CRAIG

Angela Pala, 17, of Pike Creek, has turned her life around since experiencing personal problems. She has gotten her GED and plans to attend Delaware Technical & Community College.

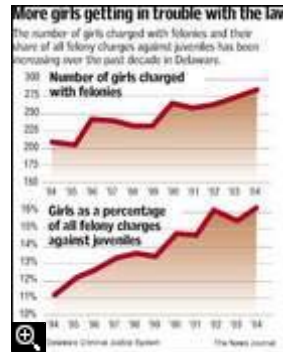




Judge Chandlee Johnson Kuhn leads an effort to reform the juvenile-justice system for girls.



Denise Bray of the PACE Institute, which helps improve programs for troubled girls.



"You can walk out this door or that door," Kuhn said, pointing to one leading to shackles and the juvenile detention center and the other leading home, "but you need to straighten out your act."

A few years ago, Kuhn and other judges might have punished a girl like Angela simply with fines and community service. But Kuhn came to the courtroom that day in January 2005 with a new understanding of why girls fight, steal and run away.

For the past year, Kuhn has led an effort to change the way Delaware deals with the increasing number of girls charged with crimes, which has nearly tripled in the past decade to reach almost 4,400 in 2004, according to data from the Delaware Criminal Justice Information System. Girls now make up a third of the juveniles charged with a crime, compared with about 22 percent in 1995. The figures are similar nationwide.

Girls usually are victims of physical or sexual abuse before committing crimes, Kuhn said. They enter court with more complex emotional and mental baggage than boys, and it takes judges and social workers a long time to peel away those layers of issues.

"We see the girls who've been abused," Kuhn said. "We see the girls who've been the subject of sex crimes by adults. Then you see the same girls going into the juvenile-justice population. And then the girls have babies, and the babies enter [foster care]."

Multimedia



AUDIO SLIDESHOW: Listen to inmate Tammy Eidslburger recount her experiences as a juvenile delinquent.

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An estimated 80 percent of girls in the juvenile-justice system previously experienced some kind of abuse or trauma that required the involvement of state child-protection workers or mental-health counselors, Kuhn said.

With that in mind, state child-welfare officials last fall proposed a four-year, \$11.8 million plan to update and enhance Delaware's juvenile-justice system, including the way girls' cases are handled. The proposal, by Cari DeSantis, secretary of the Department of Services for Children, Youth and Their Families, includes money for extra mental-health services, more prevention measures and additional staffing.

"We, traditionally, in the juvenile-justice system have been charged with keeping the public safe," DeSantis said. "There's a lot more to it than that. This department is about the business of rehabilitation, and that's what we're going to do."

Angela said she understands now that a beating at the hands of her father three years ago sent her into a downward spiral of drinking, drugs and run-ins with the law that someday would have landed her in jail or killed her. She once told her mother she felt like she was living at the bottom of a deep, dark, inescapable hole.

After an attitude change and months of counseling, Angela has turned her life around. She got her GED last month and plans to attend Delaware Technical & Community College. Her mother, Donna Pala, said Kuhn's understanding of the problems in Angela's life made a huge difference.

"We couldn't get past the night, let alone look towards the next day," Pala said. "Now we're looking years ahead at the future and a career -- things she should be looking at, at 17."

Focus on girls

Kuhn, a Family Court judge since 1998, said concerns about the growth and complexity of girls' cases spurred her to create the Delaware Girls Initiative, a gathering of government and private officials who have been studying the issue and looking for ways to improve the system.

The group got a \$100,000 grant from the philanthropic Jessie Ball duPont Fund to pay for a study of Delaware's juvenile justice system by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency in Oakland, Calif., and guidance from the PACE Institute, a nonprofit group in Jacksonville, Fla., that has helped agencies in 25 states improve programs for troubled girls. The group expects to release a report in April with suggestions for improving Delaware's system.

"Juvenile justice doesn't ask the right questions to really help these girls," said Denise Bray, director of the PACE Institute. "You can't paint the walls pink and call it a girls program."

One of the latest efforts to address the issue comes from the YMCA of Delaware, which launched the Building Strong Girls program last fall. It targets about 20 Wilmington girls ages 12 through 15 who are already on probation or are at risk for delinquency, dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy and other problems.

"Kids who are a little younger, we can have an impact on them," said Tim Brandau, executive director of the YMCA Resource Center.

On most days, there are only about 40 to 50 girls in Delaware's detention centers, compared with more than 300 boys. The small size of the female population is an advantage, Kuhn said, because officials can give girls almost individual attention. Plus, she said, any new programs designed to help girls could help boys with similar problems.

"These kids don't just wake up with behavior problems," Delaware Child Advocate Tania Culley said. "We need to have the resources for these girls or they're going to become the criminal-justice system of tomorrow."

Tammy Eidsburger, an inmate at Baylor Women's Correctional Institution near New Castle, knows that too well.

She was raped at age 13, followed by a 20-year addiction to alcohol and drugs. Her criminal record starts at age

15, when she beat up two girls, and extends through the present. She's now serving a two-year sentence for stealing a car.

"My history is so long with criminal activity, between robbery charges and theft charges and stolen vehicles," Eidelsburger said. "People always look at me and say, 'You don't look like somebody who would do stuff like that.' But I did because of the drugs. I didn't care about anything."

Jessica Graziosi, a juvenile-probation officer, said she encounters girls like Angela Pala and Eidelsburger all the time.

"The girls," she said, "there's always some long story."

Losing control

Angela Pala's story starts about three years ago after a fit of teenage rebellion.

When she was 14, she ran away from her home on a quiet Pike Creek cul-de-sac. Police found her and took her home. They soon came back to the house to charge her father, Ernest Pala, with offensive touching after he punched and pushed his daughter upon her return. He went through a first-offender program and domestic-violence classes, but her parents divorced soon after that.

"Everything went downhill from there," Angela Pala said. "I just didn't care about anything after that. I didn't care if I went to school or not. I didn't care who I talked to or how I talked to them. I wouldn't have cared if I died. Nothing mattered. I figured if a dad can beat up his daughter, what good am I?"

Abuse often leads to emotional and psychological problems because it throws a child's understanding of the world into turmoil, Bray said.

Angela Pala's behavior got her kicked out of three high schools. Her drug and alcohol use became more hardcore and more frequent.

"Weed, alcohol, a lot of different kinds of pills, acid, PCP, coke," she said. "I didn't do all that on a daily basis, but I did it every once in a while."

When she was 15, she went for a joy ride in a car owned by another girl's mother. She crashed into another car, was charged with driving without a license and had to pay \$1,700 in damages. It was just one more incident in Angela's out-of-control life, her mother said.

"When the police called me and told me they had her, I wasn't a bit surprised," Donna Pala said. "I just very calmly drove to the scene, picked up my daughter and left. We had been through so much, I was just numb."

Resisting help

Donna Pala took Angela to counseling but grew increasingly desperate to help her troubled daughter.

Angela Pala again ran afoul of the law in December 2004, where a run-in with police earned her a disorderly-conduct charge. A police officer approached her and a friend and arrested her friend on an outstanding warrant. She said she tried to hug her friend goodbye, a move the officer saw as threatening. She screamed at him, and he charged her with disorderly conduct.

That's the charge that landed her in front of Kuhn, who put her on probation and ordered her to complete a three-phase treatment regimen at Aquila of Delaware, a state-contracted counseling program for teenagers with drug and alcohol problems.

The teenager refused to attend counseling sessions at Aquila, insisting she wasn't an addict. She continued smoking marijuana and drinking every day. A social worker noted she showed no desire to get sober or go to Aquila

Last May, a judge filling in for Kuhn grew impatient with Angela Pala. He sent her to the New Castle County Detention Center near Prices Corner until she agreed to go to Aquila.

Many times, that is the point where a troubled girl falls into the deep end of Delaware's juvenile-justice system, Kuhn said. Their time in the detention center can lead to more anger, lower self-esteem and more strife with their family.

Also, detention and punishment only go so far, said Nancy Pearsall, director of the state Division of Youth Rehabilitation Services.

"Some people think something magical happens when you lock a person up," Pearsall said. "Yes, we teach them some structure, we get their attention. But the real work happens in the community. The community has to be ready to accept them back."

A life renewed

For Angela Pala, one week in detention was a glimpse at a life she didn't want.

"It's horrible," the teen recalled. "The food is horrible ... the cells are dirty. You can pee when they tell you you can pee. You eat when they tell you to eat. If you don't like it, you just don't eat that night. Showers are five minutes. If you're not out, they'll open the door.

"It was a reality check," she said.

She started treatment at Aquila, at first attending all-day sessions five days a week and gradually working her way down to just a couple of days a week. She and her mother learned the drug abuse and angry outbursts were symptoms of much deeper troubles.

"Once we found it was more of a mental-health issue, rather than a behavioral issue, that's when things started to click," Donna Pala said.

Angela stopped using drugs, stopped drinking and started thinking about keeping a job and earning her high school diploma.

"Once she became clean, the maturity kicked in," Donna Pala said. "She started to realize she needed to shape up. She started seeing her future differently."

In October, Kuhn ended the teen's probation because she was doing so well. Kuhn said Angela Pala represented "a classic girls case" because abuse was behind what used to be seen as just a behavior problem.

For Donna Pala, the difference in approach was crucial to helping her daughter.

"Her life is not disposable at all," she said. "There was nothing more important than getting her back on track. Nothing at all."

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