



"Tim" — not his real name — looks out the windows of the cafeteria of the Monroe County Children's Center. He believes ultimately his success or failure will depend on the people with whom he associates and the activities he engages in after his release.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The names of the teens interviewed for this story have been altered to protect their identity.

On the surface, Tim and Jill may not seem like the type to wind up at a children's detention center. "I was going to school and playing sports. I like school very much," said Tim, a bubbly 16-year-old.

But gradually, he said, he began going to parties and experimenting with alcohol. He and his friends began getting into fights.

"I was always, like, one of the kids leaning off the edge but not falling. I didn't see it coming," Tim said.

Story by Mike Latona

Photo by Greg Francis

ON THE MOVE

*The level of juvenile violent crime arrests in 1996 was 60 percent above the 1987 rate, compared to a 24-percent increase of adult violent crime arrests from 1987 to 1996.

Tim was eventually arrested for assault. "I made a stupid decision," he remarked.

Jill, an articulate teen, struggled to keep her composure as she told a similar story.

"I had this feeling I would never land in (a detention center). I was doing good in school," Jill said.

However, Jill grappled with a turbulent family life. She, by her admission, also began "hanging out with the wrong people." Before long, Jill was heavily into drugs.

"I took almost everything — pot, alcohol, coke, crack, pills, opium, LSD. I was totally out of control," Jill remarked.

Jill was sent to detention facilities after she assaulted her mother. She has also spent time in drug detoxification.

And Jill is only 14 years old. But, she said, what happened to her could happen to anyone who begins to make risky choices.

"It doesn't matter how pretty you are, or how old you are," Jill said. "You can be a 'perfect' person in school,

and then one day you can go off."

Tim and Jill were recently interviewed at the Monroe County Children's Center in

Rochester. The detention center serves as a temporary, 24-hour secure (locked) facility for children who have been charged with crimes. Serving Monroe and 12 surrounding counties, it is one of six such centers in the state.

Children who are held at the center are classified as either juvenile delinquents

*Juvenile arrests for violent crimes (murder, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault) declined 6 percent between 1995 and 1996.

or juvenile offenders, or they are in the midst of court cases to determine their status.

Juvenile delinquents are youths over the age of 7, and under 16, who have committed acts that would be considered criminal offenses if they were 16 or older. Their cases are handled in Family Court, with the court determining where youths will go from the Children's Center. Possibilities include home, foster care, group homes, drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, and psychiatric centers.

concerned that the numbers will rise again shortly. He explained that the Children's Center, which accepts children ages 10-15, is handling a larger amount of children in the age 10-11 range who are committing crimes.

In addition, the overall mental and emotional capacities of youths placed in the facility is worsening — thus increasing the odds that they'll become repeat offenders.

"They're very, very damaged. They've been abused or neglected," Rosati remarked. "Thirty-five percent of our kids have significant mental health problems and need treatment."

"Over 70 percent have drug and alcohol problems."

Rosati blamed these conditions on poverty and lack of supervision.

"It's everybody's responsibility to help raise

arrests for drug abuse violations increased by 120 percent.

Juvenile offenders are youths ages 13-15 who have committed very serious acts, such as murder. A juvenile offender is treated legally as an adult, but cannot be held in an adult facility. If convicted of charges, the offender is transferred by the New York State Division for Youth to a juvenile facility within the state. At age 18, the offender enters an adult prison if his/her sentence has not expired.

Jill has been charged as a juvenile delinquent, and Tim has been convicted as a juvenile offender. While staying at the Children's Center, they have taken academic classes and participated in counseling as well as recreational activities.

Many times, Deacon Tony Caruso noted, youths in detention need a dose of encouragement more than anything else.

"I try and give them hope. That's number one. I try to tell them that the choice they made is not a life-ending choice," said Deacon Caruso, who ministers to Children's Center youths on a weekly basis.

And Tim and Jill emphatically declare that they seek a better future.

"I definitely feel I can succeed if I put my mind to it," Jill said. "It's going to take me having respect for my family, respect for authority. I'm going to do what I have to do, rather than do what I want to do. Otherwise, I'll just be in detention centers or jail all my life."

Jill said she'd like to live with her mother again and return to school. And Tim said he's hoping to enter a career in landscaping, and also be involved in athletics.

"They say everybody has their ups and downs. I've got hope. I'm getting through. I'll make it," Tim said.

His success, he added, will depend on the people and activities he chooses once he's released.

"There's going to be a lot of temptation," he said. "It's all on me. If you know someone who's got a gun in their pocket, you have to say, 'I'll check you later when you do the right thing.'"

*Juveniles were involved in 37 percent of all burglary arrests; 32 percent of robbery arrests; 24 percent of weapon arrests; 15 percent of murder and aggravated assault arrests; and 14 percent of drug arrests in 1996.

*National statistics from the Federal Bureau of Investigation

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Personal space

these kids," he said. "Clearly, the family has the greatest responsibility. But it's going to take concerted effort by the whole community."

The Children's Center, he said, attempts to do its part by giving youths positive reinforcement that might help them avoid crime as they grow older.

"We try to deal with their spiritual, emotional and educational needs," Rosati said.

Yet Rosati also warns youths that if they don't turn their lives around quickly, it might be too late to change in a couple of years.

"(Officials) at the (adult) prisons will tell you emphatically that they're not there to rehabilitate people. So I say that we're the first chance at rehabilitation for a lot of these kids, but we're also the last chance," Rosati said.

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