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## Never give up on yourself, former youth offender urges troubled students

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Life is full of challenges. Even mastering "one-two-three-clap" can be difficult. Hasan Davis, a juvenile delinquent-turned lawyer/counselor, used the seemingly simple exercise to drive home a couple of points recently while talking to troubled youth. But at the end of his half-hour presentation one, two, clap! - the students were in sync and, hopefully for most of them, in tune with the message the counselor brought. Mr. Davis, invited to speak to youth enrolled/in Harbor behavioral HealthCare's Mayfair Achievement Program,



certainly could relate to his audience of male and female adolescents and young adults. Growing up in Atlanta, Ga., he was arrested to the first time at age 11 and was kicked out of an alternative school at age 18. He was, Mr. Davis told the youth, seemingly on the same road taken by five cousins, all who would die young and violently, and two of his brothers, one now serving 25 years to life for murder and another serving a 57-year prison sentence. "The reason I'm not buried like my



Hasan Davis talks with some of the students in Harbor Behavioral HealthCare's Mayfair Achievement Program after addressing an assembly at the school for troubled young people.

cousins or not in prison like my others didn't believe, that there was something important inside of me." Now 35, Mr. Davis is the proud lather of a 2-year-old boy, holds a law degree, chairs the Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee in his adopted state of Kentucky, and travels the nation giving talks and seminars through his Empowerment Solutions program.

His visit to Toledo included participating in a forum conducted by the Lucas County Youth of Color Task Force, which is looking into reasons for the disproportionately high numbers of troubled African American youth being conveyed into the court system.

His own transformation came about gradually, but Mr. Davis remembers a defining moment as an eighth-grader when, on a dare, he jumped out of second-story window at his school. He ached mightily afterward but fortunately broke no bones, and the pain subsided with the admiration he received from other students for being "cool" and "crazy."

Later that year, he watched as a third-grader went to a window ledge, but fortunately was yanked back in time by a teacher. His own daredevil act apparently had become legendary among the younger students. He asked the principal if he could address the third-graders, to tell them how stupid he had been for jumping out of the window and to warn them that they could seriously hurt themselves pulling a similar stunt.

"That was a real big step for me," Mr. Davis said. "I had never taken responsibility before for what I had done. Before, it was always somebody else's fault, somebody else's problem"

Fortunately for him, young Hasan Davis never had problems with asking questions. Despite the disadvantages of his home life, he managed to maintain self-esteem and was confident enough in himself to ask questions in class. Even though he knew classmates would call him stupid and other abusive names.

"But every time I asked questions, I noticed they all starting writing the answers down," he told the Mayfair students "I realized I was doing them a service by asking questions."

Asking questions was important to getting the hang of his "one-two-three clap" exercise. On the first try, Mr. Davis clapped as he called out "three" but most of the youth shouted "three," then clapped. After some explanation and practice, the roomful of youth tried again. But this time Mr. Davis clapped just before reaching three, and the students rushed their' rhythm to try to follow his lead.

It was his way of teaching the young people not to always count on those that they follow.

"It's good to have people to lead 'You," he said. "But it's more important to know where you're going."

Mr. Davis, who has dyslexia and as a youth was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactive disorder. said he always knew deep down he didn't want to follow in the footsteps of his brothers. He earned a G.E.D., then enrolled in Berea College in Kentucky, where he earned a

bachelor degree. Four years later, in 1996, he earned his juris doctor degree from the University of Kentucky.

He became successful by doing, not just by talking about doing. And he told the young people in the Mayfair Achievement Program that they are no different from him. And while their transformations also may be gradual, they will notice immediate results when they begin doing rather than just talking.

"The first time you start to show something different, people start to look at you different," Mr. Davis said.

Differences of another kind are being investigated by local officials, some who believe Lucas County is afflicted with what they call "DMC" - Disproportionate Minority Confinement. Pages of statistics support that belief, including a juvenile court administrator's finding that four out of every five local juveniles who were sent to Lucas County Common Pleas Court in 2000 were minorities. Dismayingly, the county's data only mirror national statistics gathered by the Lucas County Mental Health Board. In a report, called "And Justice for Some," the board notes that African American youth with no prior admissions are six times more likely to be incarcerated than white youth with the same backgrounds. And it found that African American youth are three times more likely than whites to be sent to juvenile lockups for drug offenses. "Unfortunately, the cumulative disadvantage of minority youth will continue to spiral as states continue to pass more punitive laws allowing youth to be charged as adults and, therefore, subject to adult sanctions such as prison and the death penalty," the report reads. "Thus, as legislative trends push beyond the boundary of juvenile justice, the continued amplifications of minority youth in the system... will continue as well, unless significant action is taken at the federal, state and local levels." With the machinery of the justice system seemingly pitted against them, and with socio-economic and health factors weighing against them, African American youth will need the same, type of inner strength Mr. Davis possessed to keep clapping on three.