

George Scott

Residents Talk About Life And Gain Confidence

By Lisa Leone

George Scott has figured out the key to success in working with the 14- to 17-year-old male residents at Audubon Youth Development Center — communication. The goal of the youth programs he runs is to instill confidence in the residents, and Scott does this best by speaking to them in plain language and by listening. “It’s counseling going on in these sessions. It’s not about Xs and Os. It’s about us coming together and talking about life — while we’re learning.”

Scott, the youth services program supervisor, is in charge of programs at the facility, scheduling outings and dealing with disciplinary problems. One of Scott’s greatest accomplishments is a reading program he developed that matches residents at low reading levels with more advanced residents. “We want to increase the interaction between some kids who wouldn’t normally interact with one another and also build confidence within the youths.”

The program focuses on reading, spelling and word comprehension through reading assignments and spelling tests on words from the selection. During the week, program participants work with resident tutors on the unit to study and complete assignments. To instill confidence, participants take a “blind” spelling test, and then after studying and completing their homework, they take the test again to see how they have improved. If a student scores 80 percent or better on his test, he can stay up an extra hour in the evening — and so can the tutor who worked with him.

This is a voluntary group program that meets once or twice a week for about an hour, and Scott said many of the residents choose to participate for months. This may be because it is a supportive environment where youths congratulate each other on

their successes. “There are no embarrassing moments in the class because everyone is in the same boat.” Besides, Scott said, “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about if you can’t spell. ... The key is: Are you willing to apply yourself to improve an area of your life where you’re lacking?” Scott said he wants the residents to understand that if they study and apply themselves, they can improve — not just in spelling but in life.

Scott schedules trips outside of the facility for residents who “deserve to go” because of their good behavior. They attend local basketball games, visit art and science museums, and even see plays. For residents who have disciplinary issues, Scott leads a “Straight Talk” group that has been successful in reducing the number of disciplinary incidents in the facility. These residents meet with Scott just to talk. “We talk about real life things — issues they want to talk about,” he said. “They want to be heard just like anyone else.”

Within the facility, Scott said he is directly linked with all staff, from counselors to teachers to cafeteria staff. “I think my personality and my position creates synergy for the rest of the building.” He said he knows that all the staff are trying to make a difference in the residents’ lives. “They understand the concept of giving and helping other people,” he said. Of his supervisor, Superintendent Roger Noe, Scott said admiringly, “He makes me a better man. Period.”

Scott said he owes the rapport he has with residents and staff to being consistent. He listens to them and always remembers what is going on in their lives. “They know I care,” he said. Scott’s impressive ability to inspire residents and co-workers may come from his own experience as a resident at the Green River Youth Development Center for about seven months in 1999. While at the facility, a mentor reached out to him and

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helped him believe in himself. Scott shares his story with residents he feels will benefit from knowing his experiences. He uses his story to show how they can change their lives and to give them hope that they still have a choice. “Many haven’t seen a success story,” he said.

Of his career choice, Scott said, “I knew this is what I wanted to be when I left Green River.” After he left the facility, he graduated from high school and went to work as a correctional officer. He was promoted to shift supervisor when his superiors noticed his success in working with juveniles. He brought his best effort to his early positions, which set him apart as an exemplary employee. “Any job you have, you want to do the best at it,” he said. Scott later earned an associate degree and then a bachelor’s degree in business management.

Although he tries not to bring his work home, Scott admits that he often brings what he learns from his three children to his job. He does the same things with the residents that he does with his kids, reaching out to them and encouraging them to learn. “We are their parents,” he said.

Lisa Leone is associate editor of Corrections Today.