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# Career expo aims to turn around juvenile offenders

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Ileana Puente, 16, attended an education and career expo for juvenile offenders yesterday. (Eduardo Contreras / Union-Tribune) -

SAN DIEGO — George Coe began drinking his parents' stash of alcohol when he was 10 years old.

He started dabbling with drugs — many of which he got from his dad — at age 12.

His addictions led him to drop out of school, and when he wasn't yet a teenager, George got involved in a fight that landed him in Juvenile Court with a felony conviction for assault with a deadly weapon.

Yesterday, George, now 15, was one of about 500 juvenile offenders who attended an education and career expo at San Diego City College.

Nearly all the students, who ranged in age from 14 to 18, were on probation for crimes, typically theft, drug possession or assault.

The idea for the event came from San Diego Superior Court Judge Carolyn Caietti, who was disappointed to

keep finding teens in her courtroom who had given no thought to their future. Maybe they just hadn't received the right encouragement and exposure, she thought.

Caietti suggested the idea of an expo to other judges, and soon they partnered with City College, the San Diego Workforce Partnership and the county Probation Department.

The event was a mix of pep talks and panels filled with advice about reaching out to college counselors and sealing juvenile records. Officials were so pleased with the turnout that they hope to hold another expo next year.

Students heard stories from speakers such as Adam Jeffers, an ex-felon who now works as a career counselor at San Diego State University and is earning a doctorate.

"You are all nonconformists," Jeffers told the students. "If you ever find a way to put your energy into something positive, you'll be successful."

Chelsea Goudreau, who has been on probation for three years, said she went to the event looking for inspiration, and that's what she got.

"There are so many stories about not giving up," said Chelsea, 17, who was convicted of breaking and entering and petty theft.

Some students were more motivated than others, forcing probation officers to yank the disruptive ones from panels.

George, who is living with his aunt and uncle in Santee, spent the morning hearing tips on navigating college and making good first impressions. In one panel, his crisp, blue dress shirt and slacks caught the attention of a former teacher.

"You cleaned up," Linda Eerebout said as she gave George a hug.

"I got a year, clean and sober," George said, smiling.

"You're going to be just fine," Eerebout said.

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In the Union-Tribune on Page B8

**Find this article at:**

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The North County Times - Californian

## REGION: Expo offers option to juvenile offenders

COLLEEN MENSCHING - [cmensching@nctimes.com](mailto:cmensching@nctimes.com) | Posted: Thursday, August 13, 2009 7:40 pm

Hundreds of San Diego County teens, most of them in the juvenile court system, got their "Passport to Life" stamped Thursday at San Diego City College.

Judge Carolyn Caietti said the idea for the Passport to Life career and education expo struck her earlier this year while she was on her way to court, where she hears juvenile delinquency cases.

"Kids were telling me that they can't go to college, that they can't achieve their dreams, because they're on probation," Caietti said. "I thought, 'You're way too young to think that way. What can we do, aside from sitting on the bench, to help these kids?'"

On Thursday, the City College quad was home to dozens of booths for schools, employers and youth service clubs. Students ventured indoors for workshops on how to meet educational goals, how to make a favorable first impression during a job interview and how to keep a juvenile criminal record from being an obstacle to adult success ---- such as getting court records sealed.

Jerry, a 17-year-old from Oceanside, said he spent two months in a juvenile detention center and is still on probation after seriously hurting another kid in a fight. The names of the teens involved cannot be published because they are younger than 18 and involved in a legal matter.

He said he's finding it easier to focus and avoid peer pressure in an alternative high school program compared to traditional school. He wants to become a marine biologist.

"I love water, the ocean, pools, everything. You can be so stressed out and then go walk on the pier and forget about your problems," he said.

Nikole, 17, of Escondido, said she's thinking about becoming an occupational therapist.

Nikole said that after a childhood car accident left her with broken bones all over her body, an occupational therapist helped her walk and talk again. In recent years, she admitted, she's made mistakes that landed her in the juvenile court system.

"But I want a second chance," Nikole said, stopping at a booth with information about nursing careers. "I realize that life is not all about drugs and stuff like that."

Teens such as Nikole and Jerry face challenges when it comes to getting jobs, especially in an economy where so many people are looking for work, said Derryl Acosta, spokesman for the San Diego County Probation Department.

"As an employer, you may say, 'Why should I hire someone with a troubled past?'" he said.

But it does happen, sometimes because business owners who got into trouble when they were younger want to help teens in a similar situation, Acosta said.

At the San Diego Zoo & Wild Animal Park booth, human resources manager Adriana Sitz said applications that include a criminal history are reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

"We've had a few," she said. "It just depends on the felony they've had, and how long it's been and what job they're being considered for."

Program officials said Thursday's expo was unique because it was a "one-stop shop" designed especially for kids who aren't in custody but who are still in the court system and need to gain additional skills to be successful.

"We're talking about next year, already," Caietti said. "We're going to do it again."

Thursday's program was sponsored by the San Diego Superior Court, San Diego City College, the Probation Department, San Diego Workforce Partnership and the County Office of Education.