



Donald P. McCullum Youth Court

“I have always wanted to do something positive with my life.”

How do you improve the relationship between youth and the law? McCullum Youth Court’s (MYC) restorative justice and peer accountability approach is the answer. MYC has been redefining this strained relationship for 15 years.

One of the oldest youth diversion programs in the nation and a leader in peer justice programs, MYC is a response to communities facing disproportionate police contact, high incarceration rates and persistent underrepresentation in higher education. The organization was founded by a diverse group of concerned attorneys, judges and educators who developed this unique blend of restorative justice and peer accountability.

MYC offers students a second chance by providing an alternative to the traditional juvenile justice process. In addition to being a vehicle for restorative justice, MYC serves as a stepping-stone for aspiring youth attorneys. It provides a unique opportunity for youth volunteers and interns to experience themselves as positive agents in the legal system. The program helps them focus on developing a number of invaluable skills such as leadership, public speaking, critical thinking and diplomacy.

Three years ago, when Marcel Nelson was arrested for drug possession, he never imagined that he would be a valued employee or role model to other youth offenders at MYC. Life could have taken a very different turn for Nelson.

When Nelson was presented with the opportunity to participate in MYC in lieu of entering the traditional juvenile justice system, he was skeptical but decided to give it a try. When he arrived for his Wednesday evening court date, he was completely surprised to see so many young people and even more shocked to see a youth-run court. The only “official” adult in the courtroom was one of the many attorney volunteers who act as judges; the prosecuting and defending attorneys are youths, as are the bailiff and jury.

Nelson recalls sitting in that courtroom listening to cases and then sitting on the witness stand defending himself, thinking, “I want to be a part of this.” Now a 20-year-old college student at Diablo Valley Community College, he credits MYC for opening his eyes to a life full of possibilities: “I have always wanted to do something positive with my life but wasn’t surrounding myself with people who believed in me.” Today, the Oakland native has forged a new path and sees a bright future for himself.

With the support of partner organizations like Clorox, MYC is able to offer more than 450 youth offenders a second chance. MYC serves more than 4,000 youth and families each year.