
JEFFERSON AWARD / Presented to Ina Gyemant

Retired juvenile court judge turns focus to treatment, not jail time

By *Shelah Moody*

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Ina Gyemant's passion for justice extends beyond the gavel and the bench. The retired San Francisco judge heads the Youth Treatment and Education Center Academy, an alternative high school for juvenile offenders.

Gyemant began reaching out to at-risk youth in 1969, when she

joined the San Francisco Bar Association's juvenile court panel as a young attorney and represented juveniles in court pro bono. As a result, Gyemant took in four foster children who were delinquent wards of the court.

In the mid '90s, while serving as a judge in the criminal courts, Gyemant found herself sentencing 19- and 20-year-olds to state prison for drug offenses when they had violated probation. "I started asking them, 'Have you ever had a job? Have you ever interviewed for a job?' And they would say, 'no.'"

Gyemant had them come back to court on a weekly basis with job applications they had filled out, proof that they had an interview and finally paperwork to show they got a job. After that, she had them follow up with progress reports. "It worked with some of them," she said. "They kept their jobs and didn't go to prison."

In 1995, Gyemant was assigned to juvenile court, where she dealt with youth between the ages of 14 and 16 who had dropped out of high school, were using and dealing drugs and came from dysfunctional family backgrounds.

"I thought, 'This is the time to get them off the track to state pris-

on, or being shot and killed on the street,'" said Gyemant. "I called a meeting and invited all the departments that worked together at Juvenile Hall: the district attorney, the public defender, the San Francisco Unified School District, the Department of Probation, the Department of Health, the sheriff and the police. We all worked together for two years planning a juvenile drug court. We called it Youth Treatment and Education Court, and opened in November 1997.

"The new court required that the district attorney and the public defender, as well as the private defense council, take off their traditional hats — which require them to be adversarial in court — and to sit down and to decide what was in the best interest in the youth that were coming before us."

The Youth Treatment and Education Court combined drug treatment with academics on site at Juvenile Hall. Youth attended an intensive after-school program that included drug treatment, case management, weekly court appearances, therapy, family support and other services. Gyemant monitored the young people's behavior on a daily basis and got to know them. If they remained



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Ina Gyemant, a former juvenile court judge, created a Youth Treatment and Education Court in 1997 to “decide what was in the best interest in the youth that were coming before us.”

clean and sober and met their curfews, attended school regularly and completed the entire program, the charges against them were dismissed.

The Youth Treatment and Education Court proved to be so successful that in 2000, Gyemant, in conjunction with the SFUSD and other community partners, established the Youth Treatment and Education Center Academy, which is located at 43rd Avenue and Judah Street, in trailers that have been set up in the yard of the old Francis Scott Key Elementary School in San Francisco.

The alternative high school accepts teens ages 14 to 18 who are on probation. The goal is to get them to graduate, help them get

into college and provide them with vocational skill to find employment. Gyemant, who also works as a private mediator and arbitrator, serves as board chair.

“It’s a very comprehensive program,” said Gyemant. “Drug treatment is part of the curriculum, as is socialization and anger control and moral reasoning. The teachers are cross-trained in behavioral techniques, and YTEC provides behavioral counselors who are in every classroom.”

According to the school’s Web site, www.ytecsf.org, 98 percent of the teens enrolled at the academy for six months increase their grade point averages, 74 percent improve their reading scores, and school absences decrease by 72



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percent per student per semester.

“I think the ultimate goal of (the academy) is for the young people in the juvenile justice system to have the proper support and intervention and consistent boundaries that they need to succeed in life, and to become our leaders of tomorrow,” Gyemant said. “I think they really can do that. It’s basically turning kids away from the path to state prison and giving them the education and vocational skills to have good lives.”

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