Making a difference

Don't tell Kenneth Boudreaux today's youth can't be saved

By RUTH FOOTE
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LAFAYETTE — Don’t tell Kenneth Boudreaux that the youth of today are a lost generation. He doesn’t want to hear such “an unfair statement” because he doesn’t believe it.

“That could be considered a ridiculous statement. These kids have more potential than any other generation; they just haven’t had much opportunity to express it,” says the 27-year-old director of Youth Services and Programs for the Lafayette Parish District Attorney’s Office.

Providing “opportunities” for youngsters is a challenge that Boudreaux has undertaken during most of his young adulthood.

His appointment in March to the newly created position is a result of his years of experience as the former director of the Domingue Recreational Center and as the current organizer of an annual youth conference.

In his role at the DA’s office, Boudreaux is busy establishing programs to curb juvenile delinquency. Simultaneously, he is working to reduce the number of repeat offenders among those youngsters who have had encounters with the 15th Judicial District.

Even with hundreds of active cases on juvenile offenders in the Lafayette Parish Courthouse, he will not describe today’s youth as “a lost generation” or “Generation X.”

“You will never hear such words from Kenneth Boudreaux,” he says.

“We have simply failed the kids,” he says. “Society, as a whole, has pushed young people back as a level of importance. Yet they remain the same — looking for love, compassion and understanding. They’re all looking for that.”

“But from yesteryear to now,” he adds, “they’re more isolated from their parents. Parents are working two to three jobs; they’re too tired to show love, compassion and understanding, or they just don’t care.”

He says the school system, the church and community have not responded to the needs of the youth.
With his evening job as supervisor of the Dupuis Recreation Center, Boudreaux encourages youngsters to become more involved in recreational activities. "A recreational activity gives a child an opportunity for structured programs as an alternative rather than getting caught up in illegal or unjust activities," he says.

As chairman of the non-profit Lafayette Youth Conference Committee, Boudreaux targets at-risk middle and high school students with educational and inspirational seminars during an annual conference. This year's 8th annual "Stepping Up! Stepping Out! Stepping Into! Stepping On!" Youth Conference will be held in September or October.

The growing attendance over the years has forced the committee to move the event this year from Lafayette Middle School to the larger Heymann Performing Arts & Convention Center. Yet even a conference like this is not enough, according to Boudreaux. To be effective, he says more mini-conferences are needed and even younger children must be targeted.

"We're going to have to start with infants up to six years, because these are the most important developmental years of children; they can make or break their potential," he says.

Understanding today's youth means relating to them, according to Boudreaux, who also serves as co-director of the McComb-Veazey Neighborhood Health Resource Center. "I understand what they're going through, and I know without a doubt they're not being treated fairly," he says.

As an analogy, Boudreaux likes to compare the plight of today's children with that of African-Americans in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.

While he doesn't believe violence is the answer, he adds that it was nonetheless the reaction of some blacks after years of being beaten down by water hoses, attacked by dogs and lynched from trees. Likewise, today's kids are reacting, he says.

After all, Boudreaux says, times are not the same as when he grew up one of eight siblings in a two-parent household. While he may not have had what he wanted, he adds that he had what he needed.

But today's youth find themselves in struggling single-parent households in drug-infested neighborhoods where hope is faint.

Also, he adds, youngsters today may share fathers with other neighborhood children, which doesn't help with their self-esteem.

Alternatives for youth must always be present, and moreover, doors must be opened when other doors are closed, according to Boudreaux.

"The parish curfew is fine and dandy. I realize that kids shouldn't be on the streets at certain ages and time brackets, but there is not one recreational center in the parish, no, not even in the towns of Broussard, Duson, Scott and Carenco."

"There are no youth facilities once schools are closed by 4 p.m., and there are no other organized facilities for youth to go and take part in."

"When we don't give them something to do, they'll go and look on their own. Curfew must coincide with proper programs. The curfew only serves as an emergency medical treatment, but we need to solve the whole medical problem."

"These kids want to learn and can learn. They're capable of leading if we offer alternatives. I see great leaders in these children. Tough times bring out tougher people," he says.