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### **TeeJay Britton**

Cross Check Connection Director TeeJay Britton has created a highly successful program and alternative education setting for high school teens who are on long-term (10 days or more) suspension or who have been expelled from school because of behavioral issues.

### **Turning down the right road at Cross Check Connection**

Talking to Teejay Britton the Director of Cross Check Connection, it's clear to see why the program is working. CCC is an alternative education setting for high school teens who are long-term (10 days or more) suspended or expelled from school due to behavioral issues. The two year old program is a combined effort of Grand Lake Mental Health, and Partnership for Ottawa County Youth (POCY), and the county schools.

Britton's own story and drive is inspirational, his success and determination is motivational, and obviously key to the program's success.

"There's not one kid who comes through here that I don't sit down with and spend time with," Britton said. "This is not a school, it's an alternative setting."

Britton grew up very poor in east St. Louis in the inner city, the son of an abusive, alcoholic father and paralyzed mother.

"I was one of those kids, kind of like a lot of these kids," Britton said. "I was kicked out of school, suspended, you know fighting, grew up around drug abuse at home.

"It's a rough life. I think that's the biggest thing, that I connect very well with them. I've been on both sides, I've been where teachers told me you'll be dead or in jail, you won't graduate, you'll never make it, and then I had those teachers that pushed me to do better and told me I was worth something. So, I really understand and what I try to do is help them not make the same mistakes I made and break that cycle at an early age."

Life changed for Britton around age 14, after his father gave his life to Christ and went to rehab, he said.

"He stopped but I had been through years of hell, I had to change. You've got to want to change," Britton said. "I was labeled and I wanted to defeat the odds and prove to people I was worth something."

He also lost a friend, living a similarly bad lifestyle, who was murdered. Britton said when he saw his friend's mother's face he knew he never wanted his own mother to feel that way.

His life is a testament to adapting and overcoming. Britton eventually ran professional track, played professional basketball overseas, and now is a cage fighter, youth minister, director of a gym and married with four children—two of them adopted.

Britton was asked by Ottawa County District Court Judge Robert Reavis, whom he met when coaching his children's soccer team, if he would be interested in directing the program. Britton accepted and was given the opportunity to develop the CCC program.

Britton explained the way CCCs works. To be accepted both the students and parents have to agree to the rules, drug testing at any time, daily searches before entering for safety, the building is locked with access by coded pass only, and if a student misses more than two days a parents must come to class with the student.

“The parents are held responsible with them because that’s where the problem starts,” Britton said.

Students arrive by 8 a.m. and the first thing he does is sit with them in a casual setting listening as the students discuss their evening, making a personal connection.

“We have no clue what someone has been through the night before or what they’re going home to. I have about 14 kids in there right now and if I said, ‘Run through the wall,’ they’d try, they believe me,” Britton said. “Many of them don’t get support at home, but they get it here.”

Students spend time outside, or listening to music to de-stress to help them start the day ready to learn.

“We talk about what we’re going to accomplish during the day,” Britton said.

The students then enter a classroom complete with a kitchen area and a structured classroom setting, and under the guidance of instructor Tyler Jacobs, they begin academic work for at least four full hours. Class work counts toward their high school credits, keeping them up with school work instead of at home possibly watching TV or getting into trouble.

The students work in a home-school type structure, and are taught life skills by shopping and preparing the group’s lunch and doing laundry and other chores, building skills and relationships.

“If the kids are having a bad day they get counseling,” Britton said. “These are kids that are struggling, so here it’s easy to call the counselor to work with them to see what’s going on.”

Britton tells the kids at CCC it’s a privilege to attend the program and expectations are high, but help and understanding are in abundance.

He tells the story of one student, normally a good student, becoming troubled one day and lashing out.

“She told me, ‘Why do you blanket, blank care about me so much!,’ she said ‘I’ve been doing meth since I was 12 years old and you make me want to stop, but I can’t!’ That’s why she was doing bad in school,” Britton said. “It took my breath away.”

She told him she was afraid to tell her parents. He helped her tell them and found a rehab for her.

The girl has changed her whole life, going to church, graduating and has a job.

Britton says support, structure and flexibility are crucial to success at CCC. The program changes both the students and the parents as they see the success of their children.

“I could have turned either way, it takes someone who cares,” Britton said. He said a teacher who had been through abuse herself as a child reached out to him when he was young helping him to see his own self-worth.

“That’s why I do this,” Britton said.

Funding for CCC comes from grant sources and private donations. The Miami Tribe of Oklahoma granted \$70,000 to help provide a full time teacher. Anyone interested in donating can contact POCY or Britton at the Grand Lake Mental Health Center in Miami at (918) 540-1511.