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FEATURED

## **After years of bad choices, 15-year-old makes 'a big U-turn' with help of local treatment program**

By Laura Lane 812-331-4362 | llane@heraldt.com Jul 30, 2017



Desta Clark has seen his share of trouble with the law. Sexual misconduct, fighting, robbery, drug use, selling weed. He's been in and out of secure detention, on and off house arrest. He's currently walking a fine line on probation.

And getting ready to go back to school, and Bloomington North's football team.

He's 15.

Bad choices? Clark will tell you he's made more than his share. He was 13 when his family moved from Bloomington to Detroit, where he got into trouble. "I caught my first case then, for criminal sexual conduct. I had sex with a girl, and when you're 13, it's against the law."

He ended up in a juvenile detention center, and stayed there two and a half months until his mom saved enough bond money to get him out. "It was tough being in there, and I got into a couple scuffles." He turned 14 the day before he was released.

After that, he stayed close to home and started playing football for his middle school team, then a community league that went to the state finals. His older brother was expelled from high school, and the family eventually moved back to Bloomington.

"I got back with a group of friends and everything changed," he said. "It pulled me back to smoking weed, then I was selling. I took three or four Xanax some days just so I didn't feel so bad." He was still on probation from the Detroit case and knew he had to keep his grades up.

He started playing football as a freshman at Bloomington High School North, as had always been his dream.

A fight got him suspended for two games, he said, "then my grades started declining. I was a hothead. I got into more fights. I stopped going to practice and I wasn't starting anymore. I got on academic probation, then I got sent to in-school suspension. Then I got expelled for the rest of the year, because the suspension violated my probation."

He had a court date approaching, and feared being sent back to detention. He ran away. "I stayed with friends, and I texted my mom that I was OK, but I didn't tell her where I was. I was into drugs again, selling weed, stealing clothes and stuff, trying to make it on my own."

He got into big trouble — again — when he participated in a robbery. "I chose to go with a group of my friends and go into someone's home and take their things. Four days later, I go home and the police came knocking on the door and arrested me for armed robbery. The judge sent me off."

He spent two months at the Southwest Indiana Regional Youth Village in Vincennes. Kids call it "swirvy," and it costs \$148 a day. His bad attitude got him in more trouble there. "I disrespected the staff, but the judge told me if I started acting right, he might let me out."

In January, Clark got released on house arrest, an electronic monitoring bracelet around his ankle. He refused to attend mandatory therapy sessions and continued smoking marijuana. He was on a path back to detention. "My parole officer and my mom sat me down and had a serious talk with me," Clark recalled. "I was headed to the (Department of Correction), and they said I could do so much better than that."

He stayed on house arrest and continued failing drug tests. He said Monroe County Juvenile Court Judge Steve Galvin warned him he had to change his ways or be sent back to secure detention.

"This," he said, "is where my journey to do better for myself starts."

### **A change of heart**

Clark got enrolled in the probation department's new day treatment program through the private, not-for-profit agency Family Solutions and started home-bound school classes. He contacted his football coach, hoping to work his way back onto the team. He reluctantly went to church camp in Kentucky with his girlfriend, whose mom paid his fees.

"I had a real life-changing experience, and people told me I could stay on this path. At first, I wasn't much into the Gospel, but I came to see on the second night how people in your life can influence you, in different ways."

Some of the bravado started to fade. "I went back to the dorm room at the college where we were staying and I prayed before I went to sleep, thinking about all the people in my life who see some good in me. I decided most of my friends, well, they can't be my friends. I had to get right with God to get where I wanted to go. I made a big U-turn in my life."

When he returned to Bloomington, friends sent texts about partying that Friday night. "I texted back 'No.' I stayed home."

### **Working together**

This past Wednesday, Clark graduated from the Monroe County Probation Department's day reporting treatment program, an initiative started last year. The community-based alternative to incarceration targets juveniles who agree to abide by rules that keep them home instead of in a detention center.

Since Monroe County does not have a detention center for juveniles, those who require secure placement after being charged with crimes are sent to the Jackson County Juvenile Detention Center in Brownstown or the Vincennes center where Clark went.

Those facilities are more than an hour's drive from offenders' families and support networks, which exacerbates a family's stress and worry.

To address that issue and other concerns about jailing juveniles, Monroe County in 2014 became one of the 19 Indiana counties participating in the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, a nationwide program that started in Indiana's Marion County in 2006. Monroe and 10 other counties got funding in 2014 to develop local programs.

A 2012 report of the initial eight Indiana counties using the program had showed a 45 percent decrease in detention admissions and a 16 percent drop in the number of juvenile felony petitions filed. By the end of 2013, the number of juveniles being sent to Indiana Department of Correction facilities had dropped 37 percent.

Monroe County's probation department, the state's Department of Child Services, the Family and Social Services Administration and other criminal justice stakeholders and agencies all are focused on supporting programs that keep juvenile offenders out of detention centers.

Family Solutions, a Bloomington-based organization focused on preserving families when troubles arise, has a contract with the probation department through the Department of Child Services to provide programs to keep families together, reunite families or, in some cases, decide a family is better off if the kid does not return home.

The 25-year-old organization offers services ranging from parenting classes to mental health therapy. Its role in the juvenile detention alternative program is overseeing participants through day reporting and day treatment programs at its offices on Liberty Drive.

Clark is the fifth Monroe County juvenile to complete the day treatment program, which required him to spend a good portion of his days there doing school work and participating in counseling. On Saturdays, participants go out and do volunteer work for community agencies.

From July 2016 through June of this year, the day reporting portion of the program — where participants check in with staff daily — had 43 cases. Of these, 28 were successful, two are still active, 10 were unsuccessful and three left their homes.

Of the 17 youths served during that time in the day treatment program, where participants spend several hours a day on site and are more closely monitored, four were successful, nine are active, two did not succeed and two left home.

"These programs have greatly increased our chance to get kids out of detention sooner, and also provide a community corrections component that did not exist before," said Christine McAfee, who oversees the programs for the probation department. "We get them to think differently, and we help them break bad habits."

Family Solutions Director Nancy Hughes has been with the organization since it opened in 1992. "We are always willing to take on new challenges that can help families. We give the kids opportunities to get out and learn about the community and what they can do to be part of it, as opposed to house arrest and staying home. They complain," she said, "But they show up."

### **'Everything is looking up'**

It took a while, but Clark finally completed all 12 steps in the day treatment program's Moral Reconation Therapy course. MRT combines education, group and individual counseling and structured exercises to foster moral development and reasoning for people who have resisted more traditional kinds of treatment.

"I started to notice how MRT is in line with what I found out at church camp. That you always have to keep in mind the consequences of what you do in life. The consequences, they were never a concern for me before."

He hasn't been able to practice with the football team because of last year's expulsion. But once school starts up Aug. 9, he can suit up for practice. After 10 practices, he hopes to be eligible to play. He has a \$10-an-hour painting job working for his girlfriend's father, and wants more hours.

"Right now, everything is looking up. I had to decide: Do I want to be a criminal, or the kind of person who can affect other people's lives?"

When he graduated from the day treatment program last week, Clark received a framed diploma, and certificates for being the most vocal in the program, for being an overachiever, for being a flirt and for having the best hair.

And a handshake and heartfelt "I'm so proud of you, dude," from Judge Galvin.

Clark offered advice to half a dozen others like him working to complete the program. "Suck it up and get it over with, 'cause I'm telling you, getting this diploma and getting out of here, you'll have so much free time to do what you want."

He surveyed the young men in the room. "Decide in your heart you won't be bad. You – stop cussing people out. And you — stop cutting off your ankle bracelet."

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Laura Lane