

[January 23, 2018](#) > A chance to soar



A chance to soar

By Johnna M. Laird

A nonprofit organization, based in Milpitas, is whittling away at juvenile crime with a program to prevent criminal activity before it happens, reducing incarceration.

Fresh Lifelines for Youth (FLY) began nearly 20 years ago and, since incorporation in Santa Clara County in 2000, the county has experienced a 77 percent drop in juvenile incarceration rates, according to FLYs Director of Communication Claire Wagner. Nearby, in San Mateo County, where FLY began operations in 2012, incarceration rates have declined 65 percent. In the last three years, FLY has opened offices in Alameda County, serving youth of Fremont, Hayward, San Lorenzo, Oakland, and Berkeley.

California taxpayers shell out more than \$200,000 annually to incarcerate a youth, enough for four years at a top-rate university, yet recidivism rates are high: 60 percent nationally re-enter before age 18, and in California, 70 percent are rearrested within three years of release. FLYs cost per client is less than one-tenth the expense of locking up a young person, according to Wagner. Referrals to FLY come from probation departments and public schools, yielding a clientele that is 80 percent male and 86 percent of color from primarily high-crime, low-income areas.

Executive Director Christa Gannon, a Stanford Law School graduate, founded FLY, thanks to a first-year law school detour to Northwestern University.

At 16, Gannon charted her career to become a prosecuting attorney and put criminals behind bars. The choice fit her straight-and-narrow path growing up in the suburbs, heavily influenced by military values ? her father, a Vietnam and Persian Gulf veteran and both grandfathers World War II vets.

Gannon graduated from University of California Santa Barbara where her height and skill contributed to two university basketball championships and earned Gannon top female scholar-athlete from the National Collegiate Athletic Association. She headed for Chicago to study law at Northwestern University, although Stanford was her first choice.

Before stepping inside her first Northwestern law class, Gannon spontaneously signed up to teach law to hardened juveniles inside a maximum-security prison. Gannon says she thought volunteering would be impressive on a resume, plus satisfy her curiosity about prisons.

The decision transformed her life.

Showing up as a volunteer that first day in 1995, Gannon was handed a slip of paper and told, Teach this. The fourth amendment. Instantly, she realized this was a bad, bad idea. Her feeling of being the wrong person in the wrong place intensified as hardened young men walked in. What did I know, a white girl from the suburbs, that I could teach them? she wondered. She had never experienced search and seizure, laid out in the fourth amendment. In seconds, she admitted her inexperience and ended tentatively, Maybe we can learn together?

She spent 10 weeks working with the young men, 90 minutes a session. A new reality bombarded her, their words reverberating in her head: If only I had known how much trouble I could get in If only someone had given me a chance? If only someone had cared, then I wouldnt be here. Beneath their hardened exteriors, she discovered kids whose life conditions had trained them to believe that by age 18 they would either be in prison or dead.

When the 10-week session ended, she asked: What now? What can I do? The program supervisor tried to reassure Gannon, who found no solace with words: Youll figure it out.

The next year Gannon transferred to Stanford Law School and arranged for law students to teach in the juvenile justice system. She asked incarcerated juveniles how she could prevent others from entering the system. They issued a challenge: Teach at-risk young people the law and consequences of crime so they make better choices; assign someone who cares, a positive role model as a mentor; and create opportunities to give back to the community and change societal views.

In 1998, Gannon received a George Soros Foundation two-year fellowship for post graduate study. She traveled across the nation, learning the best practices in youth development and crime prevention, and implemented a pilot program in Santa Clara Countys public defenders office.

Serving ages 12-18, FLY is based on the premise that all children deserve the chance to become more than their past mistakes.

A 12-week law class forms FLY?s foundational program, taught to youth at high risk for criminal justice system entry and incarcerated youth, eligible for parole. Using engaging, nonjudgmental methods, FLY staff and trained volunteers educate youth on legal system aspects that could pertain to them: police encounters, accomplice liability, vandalism, drugs, gangs, arrest, three strikes, and consequences youth face once involved in the legal system. FLY recruits volunteers 21 and older, attracting a number from law schools and universities, particularly San Jose State Universitys Justice Studies Department, as mentors.

FLY reports 86 percent of their youth are not convicted of a new crime during a program year, and 83 percent of eligible high school seniors earn diplomas or GEDs.

Youth viewed at highest risk following the 12-week law class are referred to FLYs Leadership Training Program, which included 117 youth last year. In leadership training, participants identify their greatest barriers to living a healthy, productive life. With a FLY case managers support, youth develop action plans to address barriers. They meet bi-monthly for support activities and to plan service learning projects to build and redirect their strengths.

Adult mentor volunteers meet with youth leadership participants weekly to support development of attitudes, behaviors, and ambitions that are crime-free.

As FLY has evolved, a middle school program now works with seventh and eighth graders in high-crime, poverty areas to encourage students to remain in school and out of the criminal justice system. A Reentry Program serves youth in longer term incarceration camps in Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties.

FLY operates with a \$6 million budget, a staff of 60, and a volunteer core of 200 to serve 2,000 youth. It receives 30 percent of its funding from governmental entities, 45 percent from foundations, and 25 percent from individuals and corporations. An annual December breakfast showcases FLY and attracts 550 attendees at this fundraising event for the nonprofit that Charity Navigator gives its top, four-star rating.

Call it divine guidance, gut instinct, whispering of our souls, whatever you want, says Gannon. A detour took me in the direction I needed to go and the universe conspired in FLY?s favor.

For more information on FLY or to volunteer or donate, call (408) 263-2630 or visit <http://flyprogram.org>.

[Home](#) [Protective Services Classifieds](#) [Community Resources](#) [Archived Issues](#)
[About Us](#) [Advertising](#) [Comments](#) [Subscribe](#) [TCV Store](#) [Contact](#)



Copyright © 2018 Tri-City Voice