

Career expo aims to turn around juvenile offenders

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Ileana Puente, 16, attended an education and career expo for juvenile offenders yesterday. (Eduardo Contreras / Union-Tribune) -

SAN DIEGO — George Coe began drinking his parents' stash of alcohol when he was 10 years old.

He started dabbling with drugs — many of which he got from his dad — at age 12.

His addictions led him to drop out of school, and when he wasn't yet a teenager, George got involved in a fight that landed him in Juvenile Court with a felony conviction for assault with a deadly weapon.

Yesterday, George, now 15, was one of about 500 juvenile offenders who attended an education and career expo at **San Diego City College**.

Nearly all the students, who ranged in age from 14 to 18, were on probation for crimes, typically theft, drug possession or assault.

The idea for the event came from San Diego Superior Court Judge Carolyn Caietti, who was disappointed to keep finding teens in her courtroom who had given no thought to their future. Maybe they just hadn't received the right encouragement and exposure, she thought.

Caietti suggested the idea of an expo to other judges, and soon they partnered with **City College**, the San Diego Workforce Partnership and the county Probation Department.

The event was a mix of pep talks and panels filled with advice about reaching out to college counselors and sealing juvenile records. Officials were so pleased with the turnout that they hope to hold another expo next year.

Students heard stories from speakers such as Adam Jeffers, an ex-felon who now works as a career counselor at San Diego State University and is earning a doctorate.

"You are all nonconformists," Jeffers told the students. "If you ever find a way to put your energy into something positive, you'll be successful."

Chelsea Goudreau, who has been on probation for three years, said she went to the event looking for inspiration, and that's what she got.

"There are so many stories about not giving up," said Chelsea, 17, who was convicted of breaking and entering and petty theft.

Some students were more motivated than others, forcing probation officers to yank the disruptive ones from panels.

George, who is living with his aunt and uncle in Santee, spent the morning hearing tips on navigating college and making good first impressions. In one panel, his crisp, blue dress shirt and slacks caught the attention of a former teacher.

"You cleaned up," Linda Eerebout said as she gave George a hug.

"I got a year, clean and sober," George said, smiling.

"You're going to be just fine," Eerebout said.

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