Welcome Letter
Creating a culture of collaboration and creativity through programs that combine art and education.

Positive Youth Justice
Dr. Jeffrey Butts explains the role of creative expression in a Positive Youth Justice approach.

Music Meets Community
For over 17 years, Mr. Willie Peacock has changed lives through music and marching.
It’s Not About the ART; It’s About the ARTIST

By: Dr. Jeffrey Butts

Several years ago, my colleagues and I articulated a different approach for youth justice. Rather than focusing interventions on what is going wrong in a young person’s life, we proposed a Positive Youth Justice (PYJ) model that would build on what is going right. Drawing on the still-growing body of scientific knowledge about adolescent development and the rich practice principles of positive youth development, we proposed PYJ as a different way to think about youth behavior and how social service agencies should be working with justice-involved young people.

We designed the PYJ model as a framework for intervention strategies. The model encourages justice agencies and their partners to focus on protective factors as well as risk factors, strengths as well as problems, and positive outcomes rather than negative outcomes. A PYJ approach should facilitate each young person’s transition to adulthood by focusing on their health and well-being, their sense of belonging, and ample opportunities for skill-building, work readiness, civic engagement, and creative expression—even creative expression that adults don’t particularly enjoy. PYJ reminds us: It’s not about the art; it’s about the artist.

Positive youth development concepts are compatible with all youth programs, but they have to be customized in justice settings. The most common frameworks presume that young people possess conventional attitudes and a ready willingness to cooperate with pro-social peers and adults. These are not qualities that one finds in abundance among the youth involved in justice systems. Almost by definition, justice-involved youth have a greater inclination than other youth to violate rules, to disregard convention, and to defy authority.

These adolescent characteristics are challenging, of course, but they are also assets. In fact, societies only flourish when young people are encouraged to think of new solutions to old problems. How different would the world be today if Bill Gates and Steve Jobs had followed the rules and did exactly what IBM executives suggested? What kind of music would we have today if Chuck Berry, the Beatles, and Public Enemy had listened to their music teachers and stuck to classic forms rather than inventing their own?

We actually need young people who are bold, willing to challenge conventional thinking, and to break rules, but we also need them to respect others, to rely on logic rather than force, and to appreciate the corrosive effects of violence and exploitation. In short, our communities need powerful and creative young people who want to improve us and not simply to fight us. These
should seem like obvious concepts to anyone working around the youth justice system, but it is often surprisingly difficult to implement them in practice.

PYJ is not a one-size-fits-all solution, but all youth—especially those involved in the justice system—need basic supports and opportunities that facilitate their successful transition to adulthood. Even youth who require specialized interventions like trauma-informed services and substance abuse treatment still need basic developmental supports if they are to avoid future criminality and go on to lead positive, productive adult lives. The PYJ model was developed for youth justice systems working to conceptualize and implement such interventions.

Jeffrey A. Butts is director of the Research and Evaluation Center at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City. Previously he conducted youth justice research at the University of Chicago and the Urban Institute. Dr. Butts began his career in Oregon as a juvenile court substance use counselor and public child welfare worker. He earned his Ph.D. at the University of Michigan.

For more information about the PYJ Model, visit: www.johnjayrec.nyc/positiveyouthjustice