

# 23 YEARS OF YOUTH EMPOWERMENT:

## WHY TEEN COURT IS MORE THAN SECOND CHANCES

Today's youth are living in one of the greatest periods of this country's history as innovation, ingenuity, and entrepreneurship are an everyday part of life for them. They are growing up as digital natives and are exposed to all types of opportunities to create and innovate at such a young age. They are content creators on YouTube and TikTok as well as gaming and app entrepreneurs. With access to both traditional career paths and emerging ones, hands down today's youth have the greatest choices before them.

**W**ith that said, all youth still need access and exposure to see the full breadth of potential available to them. They need mentorship and guidance, and when they mess up or make mistakes, they need a second chance and an opportunity to try again.

That's the beauty of Miami-Dade Teen Court. It has given more than 7,800 youth over the past 23 years an opportunity to correct their wrongs as well as an opportunity to be exposed to new career pathways for an up close and personal experience that otherwise could not be afforded to them.

At the surface, Teen Court seems to be just a juvenile justice program. The typical entry point is usually a referring agency such as the Juvenile Services Department after the youth gets in trouble for a misdemeanor. The hope is that instead of getting a blemish on their record, Teen Court would instead try them in a court of their peers - other youth who also act as jurors and attorneys under the guidance of professional judges and attorneys - and the result would be an alternate sanction, such as a letter of apology, counseling sessions, or community service hours, among other possible sanctions.

For the youth on the volunteering side of the table, many of them have aspirations of a career in the judicial system or may be uncertain about their future career goals. So they come to Teen Court for a chance to experience all parts of the legal system from defense or prosecuting attorney to juror, clerk, and/or as a bailiff. While the entry point may be the judicial system, MDEAT eventually navigates the youth to other areas, including paid summer jobs, the Youth Intern Partnership Initiative (YIPI), entrepreneurship workshops, mental health services and family counseling, and so much more. So essentially, it's teens helping other teens while being shaped, molded, and mentored while getting access to opportunities. And that's what our youth need more than anything else.

That's why Teen Court is under the direction of MDEAT. The agency defies the typical boundaries and definitions of economic development, which is traditionally tasked with job creation and company recruitment. Given our uniqueness as a small business community and the economic disparities among our Black communities and designated Targeted Urban Areas (TUAs), MDEAT stretches outside of this typical definition and instead focuses on improving the economic conditions of young people, families, and

small businesses. It's the three gears that work together to create thriving communities.

And we've seen the success stories with Teen Court to know that it works. For example, Leonard Thompson serves as Miami-Dade County Assistant State Attorney, but he first came through Teen Court as a high school volunteer aspiring to be an attorney someday. And today, he continues in service as a volunteer judge.

Miami-Dade Teen Court is part of a national network of teen/peer courts and the largest chapter in the state. While it's the Homeownership Assistance Program (HAP) that MDEAT has become known for, Teen Court is really one of the agency's best kept secrets. Over the past 23 years, the program has poured into the lives of adolescents and helped to develop leadership skills by allowing youth to participate in problem-solving and decision making. If every youth can have this type of exposure, access, and second chance, then their future can become like Attorney Leonard Thompson's or the next technology innovator.

MDEAT thanks all 7,800 youth that have come through Teen Court and the volunteer judges and attorneys who have given out of their passion and commitment to this community. |