

Rankin County Project Impact Youth Leadership graduation is March 28

March 25, 2014

Five Rankin County teens who landed in Youth Court last year will soon graduate from a youth leadership program. Rankin County Project Impact Youth Leadership graduates will be honored at a ceremony and reception at 10 a.m. March 28 at the Juvenile Justice Center, 100 Court Cove in Pelahatchie.

The goal of the program is to identify at-risk youth and provide them with experiences and direction which can help them develop leadership skills and discover their own potential.

Rankin County Juvenile Detention Administrator Michelle Rhodes modeled the program on a similar Rankin County youth leadership program started for high achievers. "The fact that kids have been in the juvenile detention center does not mean that they can't be successful," Rhodes said. "A lot of programs are out there for kids that make A's or are doing everything right, but there's not much out there for the kids that we deal with. There are not a whole lot of opportunities for them."

The Rankin County Sheriff's Department, Youth Court, Chamber of Commerce, School District and community sponsors partnered to fill the void. Three local businesses funded the youths' expenses. No government funds were used.

The Rankin County Chamber of Commerce scheduled and coordinated the trips. The six-month program started with a retreat at Twin Lakes with motivational speaker Dr. Jim Cook. Students learned about academic and technical programs, scholarships and job opportunities on trips to the Mississippi Air National Guard base and Hinds Community College. Hinds CC recruiters talked to the youths about what they need to be doing now to prepare for college, and discussed technical programs and financial aid.

Rankin County Chamber Executive Director Mandi Arinder said, "A lot of these children feel like there's no hope, there's not a way out." The college exposure was intended to raise their own expectations for what they can attain.

They saw law enforcement training and the prison system on trips to the Mississippi Law Enforcement Officers Training Academy and the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility. Early in the program, they visited the Governor's Mansion. Last month, they visited the Capitol and had lunch with Sen. Dean Kirby of Pearl, Sen. Perry Lee of Mendenhall, Rep. John Moore of Brandon, Rep. Ray Rogers of Pearl, and Rep. Tom Weathersby of Florence.

Rhodes said, "We are trying to give them opportunities that they would not normally get." Two have found part-time jobs while in the program.

Arinder said, "They feel like they are a part of something important, part of an elite group."

Members of the news media are invited to attend the graduation. Reporters, photographers and editors are reminded that participants are juveniles enrolled in a Youth Court program. **Because of the confidentiality required by law in Mississippi Youth Court matters, members of the media are asked to refrain from publishing or broadcasting information or photographs which would identify any individual juvenile participant or family member.**

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