

Iowa View: More options are needed for kids who get in trouble

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For a number of years, we lived in Harcourt, Ia., and came to know a good man named Cy Nordblom. Cy was a choir director, community leader and maker of fine clocks. When I knew him, he was 80 years old and lay leader of the church I served.

One snowy morning, he came to my office and simply said, "We have to go to Albert Lea." I said, "That is in Minnesota, and they have lots of snow."

Then he told me a boy in the parish, one that we had recently confirmed, was in trouble with the law in Albert Lea. So Cy, the boy's father and I drove through the snowy Midwest to bring the boy home.

I was a bit apprehensive. The boy, 15, had indeed gotten into some trouble. He had been speeding, and there was some beer in the car. We arrived and sat down together with all interested parties to figure out what was to be done.

In the informal process someone asked what Cy's relationship was to the boy. Cy simply said, "I am a member of his church. He was recently confirmed, and as a member, I am here to offer my support. This is a good boy, and if given a chance, he will behave in the future."

They listened to Cy and then said to all of us, "We will release this boy in Mr. Nordblom's care." And to the boy, they said, "You will do what Mr. Nordblom tells you to do, and we never wish to see you in here again!"

A fine was paid, and we took the boy home. And Cy simply said, "Now I expect to see you in church next Sunday, and you can clean the church for a few months to cover the cost of this trip." The congregation took responsibility, and the incident became a growth experience for the boy.

The folks in Albert Lea recognized that with people like Cy around, the boy had an opportunity to grow up and be a good citizen. They also knew that most of us in our young years do some very dumb things that in these days would have us all before law enforcement.

I often tell people that in my growing-up years in a small community in Texas, kids had 200 enemies surrounding them. They were called adults. And if I were in trouble, my parents would know all about it before I arrived home. These days, with cultural shifts and an impersonal world, we assume that persons like Cy Nordblom are few and far between. But that is not true. Given opportunity and an invitation, we have many adults who would play such roles with kids in trouble.

That is really all that AMOS is asking the Polk County attorney to do: Help us create a means to keep kids who do dumb things out of the court system. Over the last two years, petition filings on juveniles (the process we use to put kids in our court system) have gone up dramatically without any corresponding increase in juvenile crimes. We've met with the county attorney and asked him to consider other options.

Our prisons are full of young people who might have made it had there been a proper program of restorative justice in Des Moines. Churches are willing to work with the county's attorney to build such programs. We've already started a court watching program and a school mediation program to aid this process. We could do a lot more.

We are told there is not a problem and even if there was, there's no funding. But we also know that it cost \$30,000 a year to keep a young person in prison, about the same amount that a year in a good college costs. Some believe that

we have lost the art of neighborliness in this community. The truth is, we as citizens have not insisted upon ways to be helpful. That really is our interest in the court-watching program and our insistence upon fairness for kids.