

## Project Rebuild celebrated third graduation



JUNE 11, 2014 4:30 PM • [CARMEN MCCOLLUM CARMEN.MCCOLLUM@NWI.COM](mailto:CARMEN.MCCOLLUM@NWI.COM), (219) 662-5337

GARY | A Gary Roosevelt junior who was referred to Project Rebuild following issues with truancy thanked the program's sponsors for helping him turn his life around.

Elijah Nolan, who just turned 16, wrote a short note, which he read to Gary City Court Pro Tem Judge Inga Lewis-Shannon, addressing her as "Your Majesty."

He said the Indiana Parenting Institute, which also is involved in the program, helped him and his mother to develop a better relationship. "I really liked the program, but I hope I don't ever have to come back again," he said drawing laughter from the crowd in the community room at Gary Police Department headquarters.

The third annual Project Rebuild graduation was Tuesday. The program, created by Lewis-Shannon, is a collaborative effort between the Gary City Court and the Gary Police Department to address the growing problem of truancy among Gary students. It is open to any student who lives in Gary and attends the Gary Community School Corp., Lake Ridge Schools, private schools, charter schools or the Merrillville Community School Corp.

Students and their parents are asked to sign an agreement to participate in the 90-day program, aimed at keeping students in school and improving their grades.

Nolan's mother, Tammy Weatherspoon, said her son missed many days of school before and after the death of his father in November following an illness. She said she didn't do what she should have done and send in a note about the absences.

"The truancy officer called me and sent me to court," she said. "It's made a big impact in our relationship, and the importance of my being active in his life. He was an honor student through seventh grade. I thought when I sent him to high school, I'd be able to do that without having to check on him as much, but that's not true. He needs me in high school just as much or even more than he did before that."

Weatherspoon said she enjoys the classes and wants to visit as an inspiration to others. Weatherspoon, who will graduate from the program July 29, sat with other parents and their children as they listened to the different speakers who shared their own experiences.

Guest speaker the Rev. Pharis Evans said he's qualified to speak because he "was a misfit who God made fit." Evans said there has been a breakdown in the family relationship and programs like Project Rebuild are designed to "build it back up." He encouraged parents to develop a relationship with their children and communicate with them regularly.

Gary City Court Judge Deidre Monroe said parents were sent to her court first, then referred to Project Rebuild. "Some of you had to be prodded, but look at you now. I'm glad parents and students have found common ground. I'm glad you understand the importance of being involved with your children," she said.

Gary police Cmdr. Kerry Rice said the program received more than 400 referrals and served about 300 citations last school year. He said this was the first year it received referrals at the elementary level. Rice said there are some issues with the school district that need to be ironed out. In some cases, he said the "curriculum is not strong enough to hold the students' attention." He said there also are problems when parents send their student to a school outside the district, then the car breaks down and they can't get the children to school.

"Call us and let someone know you are having a problem; otherwise we will come knocking at your door with a subpoena," Rice said.

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Carmen McCollum, The Times

Gary parent Tammy Weatherspoon and son Elijah Nolan, who will be a junior at Edison Learning's Gary Roosevelt, participate in the Project Rebuild program. Weatherspoon, who has faithfully attends the program's parenting classes, said they brought her and her youngest son closer together.

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