

## Girls ‘graduate’ from juvenile hall

By Yunmi Choi, Daily Journal Staff



May 13, 2004 – A first-ever graduation was staged under lock and key at Juvenile Hall yesterday, as five formerly incarcerated girls marked their completion of an intensive rehabilitative program that turned their lives around.

One of the beaming girls, 17-year-old Katie Lawson, wasn't too thrilled with the prospect when she was ordered by the court to enroll in the G.I.R.L.S. program a few years ago. At the time, she was only interested in feeding her destructive drug habit. She had also been caught trying to run away

from home on multiple occasions.

As she sat on the stage with her proud family looking on yesterday, though, Lawson was clearly a different girl.

The Gaining Independence and Reclaiming Lives Successfully (G.I.R.L.S.) program went into effect February 2003 to serve 90 young women in the criminal justice system. The program is funded by multiple agencies, including the Human Services Agency, Youth and Family Enrichment Services and the Sheriff's Department.

A key aspect of G.I.R.L.S. is going through intensive counseling and attending Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings at least twice a week. After the first phase of the program, the incarcerated girls are released under probation but continue to attend counseling.

One reason the program worked for Lawson was the bond she formed with the other girls.

“It gets to be this sisterhood because we're all going through the same thing,” Lawson said. “We went through the same losses and were trying to make the same gains.”

After completing high school at Peninsula High School next year, Lawson plans to go to the College of San Mateo to learn about cosmetology. She eventually wants to get her business degree and open a beauty salon.

The innovative program is an attractive alternative to the “revolving door syndrome” often found in the court system, said MaryAnne O'Shea, juvenile division director.

“Granted these girls are ordered into the program, but they have to make the decision within themselves to succeed,” O’Shea said.

Although the graduating girls are no longer incarcerated at the facility, eight younger girls currently enrolled in the program filed into the gym to watch the ceremony. Probation Officer Joyce Foong said the idea was to show the younger girls they could turn their lives around too.

“It’s absolutely like night and day — they’ve matured so much,” Foong said. “They know to make the right decisions now.”

Katie Lawson’s father agrees. Richard Lawson said the change he’s seen in his daughter is “remarkable.”

“It’s much more pleasurable watching her go up then seeing her go down the spiral,” Richard Lawson said.

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