

FREE

VENICE

paper



May/June 2005 ISSUE 27

venicepaper.net

Great With Milk and Cookies

VENICE

Teen Court Debuts at Venice High

By KaSondra Moore

Venice High School's first session of Teen Court on Wednesday, April 6, proved that teenagers are not necessarily soft on crime. The court's three juvenile defendants were each found guilty of charges that included battery, possession of a can of spray paint for the purpose of defacing property, and petty theft, by a jury of their peers.

Teen Court is a voluntary process in which youths charged with minor first offenses, such as petty theft or vandalism, have their cases heard by a jury of other teenagers rather than the juvenile court system.

Venice Community Housing Corporation organized the court, in conjunction with Venice High School and Mark Twain Middle School, as a project in its community safety initiative.

At Venice High School, Los Angeles Superior Court Judge David Wesley presided over the session. The student juries questioned the accused minors and their parents in finding each guilty.

In one direct exchange, a defendant accused of "possession of a can of spray paint for the purpose of defacing property"

was asked if he had a nick-name, or gang moniker, by a juror.

Sentences for the defendants included community service, curfews, letters of apology, anger management counseling in the battery case and a gang intervention program in the spray paint case. Each student found guilty may earn community service credit by returning to the court to serve on a jury.

Teen Court's primary objectives are to divert first-time offenders from the traditional court system, to prevent teens from developing a pattern of unlawful behavior, and to educate them about the legal system.

The process exemplifies the power of positive peer pressure to prevent juvenile crime. The recidivism rate for teens who participate in these courts is less than 3 percent. Student jurors question the accused under the supervision of a volunteer judge and then deliberate to determine guilt or innocence, as well as a sentence for those found guilty. The binding sentence includes a six-month probation in which the minor must comply with all of the sentencing conditions to avoid a criminal record.