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Monday, May 19, 2003

A pound of prevention for violence

O.C. judge receives \$1.5million grant to teach students how to stop abuse before it starts.

By **BARBARA KINGSLEY**

The Orange County Register

LAGUNA NIGUEL – The sorry stories coming from Judge Pamela Iles' chambers never seem to stop.

All morning, jittery lawyers help themselves to jelly beans and chocolate from one of six enormous jars on her desk as they embark on the dreary business of plea bargaining.

It's the usual stuff of domestic-violence cases, the only ones Iles handles: The father was drunk; he threw his wife against a wall while the kids were there. He's in jail; she's going to counseling.

Iles, a blunt-spoken jurist with a salty tongue, has been nurturing a project she hopes will slow the trail of tears into her chambers.



Judge Iles

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Five years ago, she started a project to teach teachers and members of the clergy how to recognize and deal with violence in families. Now, she has launched a program to show every 10th-grader how to recognize violence at home, at a friend's home or on a date.

Iles' Family Violence Project recently won a \$1.5 million, three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to teach about healthy, and unhealthy, relationships in three south-county school districts and at Mater Dei.

"I'm trying to prevent domestic violence. I'm trying to stop it before it comes into my courtroom," Iles said.

Curing the disease of domestic violence was Iles' passion even before she took the bench 20 years ago. She has held seminars for clergy and teachers for five years.

And she talks to high school students. One of her more-popular chats is called "How Not to Date a Jerk."

She counsels girls, who make up 80 percent of the abuse cases, in how to recognize signs of a bad relationship. That could be a date who demands control, who orders her to abandon her friends, or perhaps gives her a cell phone or pager so he can always reach her.

Iles said she is realistic about what education can do. "It's not like we're going to save everyone. We tell people not to drink and drive, and they still do it."

The newly created Family Violence Project will train teachers and peer mentors to recognize dangerous relationships - while dating or at home - and try to get victims some help. It will start in the Irvine, Capistrano and Saddleback Valley districts and in Catholic schools this fall.

"It just seemed like a good program," said John W. Gillis, director of the Office for Victims of Crimes for the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. "I think it's an exceptional program, and Pam is very dedicated, very passionate about it."

Iles, 57, didn't encounter violence as the eldest child in a "hopelessly normal family," growing up in Long Beach's Belmont Shore.

What Iles saw in the courtroom shocked her. She spent six years as a public defender in juvenile court, "the endless river of pain" of kids taking drugs and drinking and driving. She spent five years as a district attorney before Gov. Jerry Brown appointed her to the bench in 1983.

She believes kids dealing with the violent fallout of their parents' breakups are the ones who eventually will troop into juvenile court.

Everyone around Iles' chambers has heard the "Lisa tape" - a 911 call from a polite, articulate 6-year-old in San Diego screaming and begging police to come stop her stepfather from beating her mother and carrying away her infant brother. When she plays the tape at seminars, she often leaves the room.

She plays it to show how domestic violence "tears the skin" off kids who witness it.

The story that launched Iles' advocacy involves a 17-year-old boy's testimony in a 1994 trial. The boy, a good student, told the court he was in the next room and could hear his mother's body slamming against a wall and a fist hitting flesh.

He didn't see it. He heard what he always heard, he told the district attorney. So what did you do, he was asked.

"The same thing I always do," the boy said. "I turned up the TV to drown out the screaming."

Iles had heard enough. "This is over with," she remembers thinking. "Children should not be languishing in these violent homes."