

AN OFFER THEY CAN'T REFUSE

Invited by the chief to the city police station, four accused of street-level drug dealing get a rude greeting. Under a new program, they are offered a chance to clean up their acts. OR ELSE.

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In a photo taken by police, a young woman whose features are blurred, is questioned by retired judge Michael Georgelis. At left, is U.S. Attorney Mark Miller, and middle, county District Attorney Craig Stedman.

Diane Johnson locked eyes with the four accused drug dealers who sat nervously before her.

"I am the mother of a drug dealer," she declared, her voice rising. "I am the mother of a DEAD drug dealer. I am the mother of a 29-YEAR-OLD DEAD drug dealer.

"When the two police officers and chaplain came to my house and told me my daughter was dead," she said, her voice breaking, "I wasn't crying. I was screaming, 'My baby, my baby, my baby'"

District Attorney Craig Stedman took a different path. Something about the 19-year-old sitting before him — the look on his face, his body language — pushed Stedman's buttons.

"I'm tired of looking at autopsy pictures of people like you, your faces peeled back, your chest spread open," the district attorney growled.

"When you're laying in the street dying, what are the last few things you're going to think about? I bet you're not going to be thinking, 'Oh, I'm glad I was dealing drugs.'

"No, you're going to be thinking of your mother."

The young man's mother, seated behind him, began to sob.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Stedman said quietly, then launched back into the grilling.

"If you don't respect yourself, respect your mother. You don't have the right to do this to her, to put her through this. You don't have the right to make me do this to her... ."

The three young men and one young woman sat in stunned silence, probably wishing they could be anywhere else.

But they were out of options. If they left the room, they had only one other destination: jail.

They are the "fortunate four."

Caught dealing drugs, they are the first given the opportunity to take part in a new city program that lets selected small-time dealers (with minimal prior records) caught in direct sales to undercover police avoid jail if they agree to abide by a long list of strict guidelines.

The program, they were reminded often, is not a "Get Out of Jail Free" card. One misstep and they're done.

"We have you," said city police Captain of Detectives Pete Anders. "We have you on a felony charge. You mess up, you go right in for the two-to-four minimum."

Before they could decide whether to opt in, the four had to take part in a "call-in" at police headquarters.

The Sunday News was invited to attend the call-in with the stipulation that it would not release the names of the four accused dealers.

Over the weekend, each of the accused received a hand-delivered letter from police Chief Keith Sadler, telling them that he knew of their drug dealing and asking them to be at the station on Thursday afternoon. If not, his letter said, they would be arrested.

They had no idea what they had gotten into.

At 3 p.m. Thursday, the three young men and one woman filed nervously into a conference room at the station, each accompanied by a family member or mentor.

They tried to stifle surprise at what they saw, but their darting eyes betrayed them.

Why, they wondered, were more than 30 people — civilians and officers, men and women all staring back at them?

Some lined the back and side walls. The rest sat behind tables in a large square. In the middle of that square were chairs for the "invited guests."

On a screen above them scrolled oversize copies of the charges that could be filed against each of them. Directly in front of them were placards with the mug shots of arrested and convicted dealers.

They didn't know it, but 19 speakers were waiting to take their shots. They were in for some of the most uncomfortable 2½ hours of their young lives.

They entered the room with differing attitudes. A 33-year-old woman seemed humbled. A 24-year-old man looked defiant. A 21-year-old man tried to look cool. And a 19-year old man kept looking toward the door.

As the call-in progressed, their demeanors softened. Most of the time their gazes fell to the floor or they stared numbly ahead.

Except for one young man who looked each speaker in the eye with rapt attention.

Successful model

Anders led off with a brief explanation of the program, modeled after a successful one in High Point, N.C.

He asked each of the accused dealers to give their identities, state how long they had lived in the city, and tell one thing about themselves. Only one young man could answer that last request.

The one who followed every speaker's word said simply, "Determined."

Sadler spoke first, at times stern, at other times sounding sympathetic, but always firm.

"Looking at you, I don't think any of you have the potential to be a hardened criminal," he said. "But if you want to try, be my guest."

He finished his remarks with the warning: "I hope your heart's into it, because your heart and mind is what will get you through this."

Mayor Rick Gray told them of his time as a defense attorney, letting them know they had little chance in court.

"What did we try to do when you had a direct delivery to a cop? Direct delivery is easier to prove than a DUI," he said. "We said, 'You'll say guilty.'"

"That's a two-year mandatory minimum," he said, "That's two to four years in state prison."

"A lot of times, the mother's in the office. She's crying, saying, 'This is the first time he ever did anything,' and we'd say, 'Yeah, it was the first time he got caught, because if it was the second time he'd be looking at five years, minimum.'"

Strict state laws against dealing, Gray said, meant that "as defense attorneys, we didn't do a lot of lawyering, we did a lot of begging."

Of the program, Gray said, "some of us have qualms about this, but I know one thing: The current system isn't working. I'm taking my lead from the police on this. The police feel there's a chance you can straighten out from a stupid mistake.

"Take a chance on yourself. We don't want to see your life destroyed."

Before the one accused dealer attracted Stedman's ire, the district attorney told them his experience showed if the dealers continued dealing, they'd end up dead.

"You'll be dead from an OD [overdose]. You'll be dead from a deal that went the wrong way. Or you'll spend the rest of your life in and out of jail, and you'll end up dying there.

"There's no happy retirement community for drug dealers."

Stedman admitted his own misgivings about the initiative.

"I'm skeptical of this program," he said. "You're getting a break nobody else is getting."

Looking each in the eye, he assessed their chances.

To the one who said he was determined, Stedman offered, "I like your chances. You're listening. You seem to get it. I have hope for you."

He told the young woman, "I'm not so sure about you. You keep things close."

To another young man, "You look like you'd rather be at a Phillies game right now."

And to the fourth, the one who annoyed him, Stedman began, "I'm worried about you. You look like someone who thinks they're going to get a deal, then go out and get back to doing what you were doing before."

Stedman restated his skepticism and challenged, "Go ahead, prove me wrong."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Mark Miller maintained Stedman's intensity.

"Pay attention," he told them. "I do not like to waste my time."

Miller warned if they got into the federal system, "You get flushed down the toilet.

"I could pick a hundred men and women I have prosecuted who would chew you up and spit you out."

He concluded, "I believe in second chances, but whether you're worthy is up to you. Remember the faces around you. Remember mine. Because yours are burned into my brain, and if you are given this second chance and don't make it, I'm going to be seriously ticked, and I'm going to make you all personal projects of mine."

Looking directly at the young man who described himself as "determined," Miller charged, "You think you're determined? Well I am the most determined SOB you ever met in your life."

A mother's tears

The testimony of Diane Johnson, whose daughter was killed early this year in a drug deal gone bad, followed.

"January 23rd will never be the same for my family. Today is my granddaughter's birthday, and she doesn't have a mother to say happy birthday to her.

"When that man got killed last week on his way to work, I hurt all over again," she said. "Who are his children going to show their report cards to?"

She recited her address and phone number for the four.

"You can call me anytime, day or night. I will listen, I will be there."

Her husband, Al Williams, talked of his arrest for drug dealing when he was young.

"The reason I'm here is because I had a few people who supported me," he said. "Look around you, you got a whole damn city.

"What's toughest for me is the whole police department is here for you — that's what's blowing my mind."

Williams also said he understood that support could be fleeting.

"This program ain't for you, it's for the other knuckle-heads out there. You screw this up, you screw it up for everybody."

A judge's verdict

Retired Lancaster County Court Judge Michael Georgelis warned them, "Incidentally, two to four years is a minimum. You could get 31-w to seven, or five to 10. The judge can go above the mandatory minimum."

He told them, "You need to get up and look in the mirror and ask if this is who you want to be."

He then read the charges against each accused dealer and interviewed them individually.

To the first he said, "I'd give you three to six." Then he asked, "How old are you?" Finding out the accused was 19, Georgelis said, "How old will you be when you get out? Twenty-two? Let me tell you how old you'll feel when you get out — 35."

The woman, a mother of two children, told Georgelis she was "at the wrong place at the wrong time." Georgelis scoffed, "No you weren't. You knew where you were. You knew the time."

He asked the young mother, "What if someday one of them [her children] gets arrested and she says, 'What's wrong, Mr. Police Officer? Mommy does it.' Is that the type of role model you want to be?"

Georgelis exploded when he learned from one of the accused that he had made \$20 on the sale to the undercover officer.

"You made 20 bucks?" Georgelis asked. "Twenty bucks for two years in prison? Isn't that asinine?"

State Parole Officer Damien Mcisz, who will be in charge of monitoring all four, warned, "We have a lot of cards, probably more than the police.

"We can stop you at any time for any reason. We can search your home at any time for any reason. We can search your car at any time for any reason."

Among the stipulations of the program, participants may not possess weapons. They may not associate with drug dealers or gang members.

"I drive around the city," Mcisz said. "If I see you hanging with the wrong people, I'm calling you in."

City Councilman Joe Morales said, "You will remember this day the rest of your life. Either it will be the day that changed your life forever, or it will be the day when you blew it."

Freda Hall-Gray, the mother of Tyquan Hall, who was an innocent bystander killed at a party in March 2007, also took special interest in the young mother.

"When you are a mother, you have to be strong for your kids," she said. "I am going to pray for you to get yourself together."

Record is forever

Anthony Valentin, Manos House supervisor, talked of the years he spent in prison for drug dealing before he went to college. "This is a golden opportunity. My record stays with me forever. Yours hasn't been signed yet. I wish I would've had that chance," he said.

City Council President Louise Williams said sternly, "As city residents, we have said we want a livable community,

and we are going to have [it] . If you think you got away with something and can go back to doing what you were doing, you are mistaken.

"The city police have gone far out on a limb for you," she said. "You are never going to get this opportunity again."

The Rev. Phil Hernandez, senior pastor of In the Light Ministries, asked each one what they needed. Three said GEDs.

"Come to my church," he said. "You'll get your GED, and it won't cost you a dime.

"Those fools that you connected with out there, they're not here for you. They're not standing here behind you saying, 'Don't pay attention to all of these people. I got your back.'

"Today, I care."

Pastor Gerald Simmons, of the Faith Tabernacle Church of God in Christ, represented CareerLink and encouraged all four to use the center to get jobs or training.

He concluded, "You are looking at the elders of our community, and we are saying we can't keep sending our young men and women to prison.

"We love you, but we aren't going to fool around with you. If this doesn't work, I'll be praying for you when I come to see you in the state prison."

Higher power

Luis Torres, of the Lancaster County Council of Church's Clergy Youth Empowerment Succeed or C-YES, will serve, he said, as "a guru" to the accused dealers in this process. "I'm not going to hold your hand," he told them, "but I am here to help you, to guide you."

He was also blunt about the future if they failed.

"I believe in a higher power, but I also believe in prison ministry," he said. "If that's where you need to go to find Jesus, so be it."

Anders concluded the program by reading each accused dealer the contract.

"If you're not strong enough to do this, we need you to tell us now," he said.

He asked each to read the contract and, if they accepted, sign it, and give it to Chief Sadler to countersign.

The room fell silent as they read.

The first to stand was the one who described himself as "determined."

"Are you ready to sign?" Anders asked.

"Yes," he nodded resolutely, as a buzz went around the room.

One by one, the three others stepped forward. Family members hugged them, and the speakers stepped forward with their own hugs or handshakes.

The four looked dazed by the events of the evening and by the sudden commotion.

Torres quickly moved in and began talking with each one individually, exchanging contact information and explaining what would happen next.

The crowd continued to watch in a mixture of relief and awe. It seemed most in the room hoped the four had the strength of Diane Johnson, who will always live with her daughter Mary's death.

"My daughter is dead, five bullets in her back" she earlier told the accused dealers through tears. "She thought she was smooth; she thought she knew the streets.

"When her daughter came home from school and I told her that her mommy was dead, she screamed and I never heard a scream like that in my life."

She dropped a face tormented by the memory into cupped hands.

"Please. Don't do that to your family."

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