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## New Home for Juveniles Recruited to Drug Trade

By JULIÁN AGUILAR



An abandoned World War II military base in Eagle Pass is the construction site of the Border Hope Restorative Justice Center.

EAGLE PASS, Tex. — Freddie knows he is lucky. If he were six months older, he could be in a state prison.

Or he could have been labeled a snitch and treated as such by Mexican cartel operatives.

Or he could be dead. Instead, Freddie will be free in December after finishing a year of court-ordered juvenile probation in his drug smuggling case. And he owes his good fortune to Bruce Ballou, the chief juvenile probation officer for Maverick, Zavala and Dimmit Counties.

Mr. Ballou, who has held his position for a year, focuses on a “restorative justice” approach to rehabilitation. He has helped Freddie and other teenagers who have gotten caught up in the drug trade that flourishes on the Texas-Mexico border, but who are willing to turn their lives around.

“It is a forgiving piece, not necessarily a judicial hammer, but a piece where we put the victims back whole and we put back into the system instead of take away from the system,” Mr. Ballou said of his approach, which includes teaching the teenagers skills

like construction, electrical work and carpentry at detention centers. “The benefit to the kids is that they are learning a trade.”

Mr. Ballou is also the driving force behind a planned South Texas juvenile detention village that will focus on helping others like Freddie. In November, six months before Freddie turned 17, he was on the banks of the Rio Grande in Eagle Pass, just across the border from Piedras Negras, Coahuila, waiting for what he thought would be an 80-pound shipment of [marijuana](#). After Freddie talked to his spotter, a Mexican soldier for the Zetas drug gang whom he knew only as Saul, a Mexican smuggler arrived with a load meant for Freddie. United States Border Patrol agents then moved in, and the teenager put his truck in reverse. In a panic, he ran into a pecan tree and was taken into custody, charged with possession of 400 — not 80 — pounds of marijuana.

“They counted everything, and it was worth half a million dollars,” said Freddie, whose last name is not being used for his own protection. He spent 14 days locked up in nearby Del Rio — where some Maverick County teenagers go because of a lack of bed space — before he received a year of court-ordered probation supervised by Mr. Ballou.

Mr. Ballou said the new facility in South Texas was necessary because the number of teenagers who were in jail because of smuggling cases had risen in recent years. It is scheduled to open this summer and will house up to 18 teenagers, most charged with serious drug-possession offenses.

Mr. Ballou said that when he had first arrived, it was not uncommon to see teenagers arrested and charged with possession of hundreds of pounds of marijuana, all destined for consumers north of Eagle Pass. He added that the year before he arrived, 560 juveniles were arrested in his three-county jurisdiction, including about three dozen caught with more than 50 pounds of drugs. Most of the larger drug arrests were in Maverick County.

Some teenagers on supervised release are already a fixture at the construction site, a former military base adjacent to the tiny Eagle Pass airport. Once complete, the village will also offer traditional classroom teaching and what Mr. Ballou called a “boot camp” component.

Fiscal troubles have placed Mr. Ballou in a unique bind. County leaders backed the project, but the buildings designated for the village have been abandoned for decades and are not usable. The annual juvenile probation budget for the three counties is just \$1.2 million, and Maverick County was spending \$500,000 annually to lock up juveniles in other counties. The detention village will cost about \$500,000 to build.

But money is coming in from some unlikely sources — like Clayton Brown, who owns Aguila Construction and has donated more than \$20,000 in equipment for the center’s roof. Thousands of dollars in plumbing supplies have also been offered, and county employees and church groups are often on site pitching in.

Half of the project is financed through donations, Mr. Ballou said.

“I have a colorful past myself,” Mr. Brown, who spent years in rehabilitation, said when he was asked why he had contributed. “But somebody has got to do something.

“The worthwhile projects don’t necessarily get a fair shake here, and Bruce is doing something that’s never been done before. Hopefully, this will catch on.”

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Jennifer Whitney for The Texas Tribune

Juvenile detainees help with construction of the new center, which will also teach skills like electrical work and carpentry.