Retired parole officer tells Carrigan kids to ‘think twice’ before breaking the law

WEST HAVEN (March 19, 2012) — Students in the Carrigan Intermediate School after-school program operated by the Community House learned the difference between “parole” and “probation” from a retired Connecticut parole officer recently, who added that the role of the parole officer in the judicial process “is one of the best kept secrets in law enforcement.”

West Haven resident John Kelly spoke to several dozen students a recent afternoon in March about offenders, and some of the issues and dilemmas that people who break the law must face after spending time in jail or being sentenced by a judge.

“With parole, you have to go to jail first,” Kelly said. To receive parole, individuals serving jail time may periodically have the opportunity to argue the merits of their release before a three-person panel. “Parole is a privilege,” Kelly stressed.

Probation, however, is quite a different thing, he said. “Probation is a sentence handed down by a judge.” Someone who is brought before a judge on charges may have their attorney ask that they be released on “probation” instead of going to jail.

Kelly’s discussion with the students touched on a number of related issues, including violent offenders, the use of tasers, illegal drugs, the placing GPS tracking systems on parolees and CT’s ongoing debate on the merits of the death penalty law.

Kelly encouraged students to pay attention to the debate on the death penalty in CT, explaining that the death penalty is rooted in the practice of taking “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” in some third world countries.

One student asked Kelly if his job was like “Dog the Bounty Hunter?”

“I could be ‘Dog the Bounty Hunter’ when I chase some,” yes, Kelly agreed, noting that some individuals and especially violent offenders need tremendous rehabilitative help before they can be released back into general society “and be productive.”

Kelly was asked, where do [released offenders] work? “It’s a problem. There are some opportunities out there. And some companies hired ex-offenders,” Kelly said. “But it’s hard,” especially when the overall economy is weak. He told students that they need to think twice before contemplating breaking the law.
Also, he said, “Some of these people were out there selling drugs and making a lot of money very quickly, so they’re not likely to be satisfied working at a fast food restaurant,” so the adjustment to “normal life” can be very difficult.

Kelly was asked what education was needed for his job, and he said that a B.A. degree in social work, education, psychology, criminal justice, and the like, is preferred. “You have to be able to interact with people, even love people, because you see people at the ultimate lowest point in their lives – after all, they’re in jail.”

Kelly also praised UNH, “right across the street” from Carrigan Intermediate School as one of the finest institutions in the country to study law enforcement.

He recalled that when he first began, there were only 17 parole officers in the state. In those days, caseloads were 200 up to 300 a month, but are now in the range of 50 to 100 a month. Kelly began his career as a correction officer, then became a counselor and after that supervised “people in the streets” as a parole officer.

For more information on the Carrigan after-school program, call (203) 934-5221.