

Re-Entry Coalition gets boost from local eighth graders

Students organize panel discussion with two former inmates for breakout project

Mark Reimers
Tribune reporter

EVERSON — What does it feel like to be in prison? What does it feel like when you are released? What opportunities are available to you while you're inside? What kinds of decisions did you make to get put into prison?

Those are some of the questions students and teachers at Nooksack Valley Middle School got to ask former prison inmates at a June 8 forum hosted by the Whatcom County Re-Entry Coalition.

The entire eighth grade class of 130 students attended the event that was organized by six of their fellow students.

The organizers, who used the event as the centerpiece of their eighth grade breakout projects, had to accrue six full hours of community service and do research into a topic related to the U.S. Constitution.

Originally, when Irene Morgan, a coalition founder, was contacted by three of the students for help, it was to find information on the death penalty.

As the students learned more about the coalition, they soon realized that something far more applicable could be accomplished by working with the local

nonprofit group.

In the end, six students organized the forum while three others organized a fundraising car wash for the Re-Entry Coalition, raising \$286.

But ultimately, it wasn't about the money, said Morgan.

"The coalition always talks about prevention and intervention. This is it," Morgan said, noting that by every measure, all the students in the audience gave their full attention to the information shared by the two former inmates.

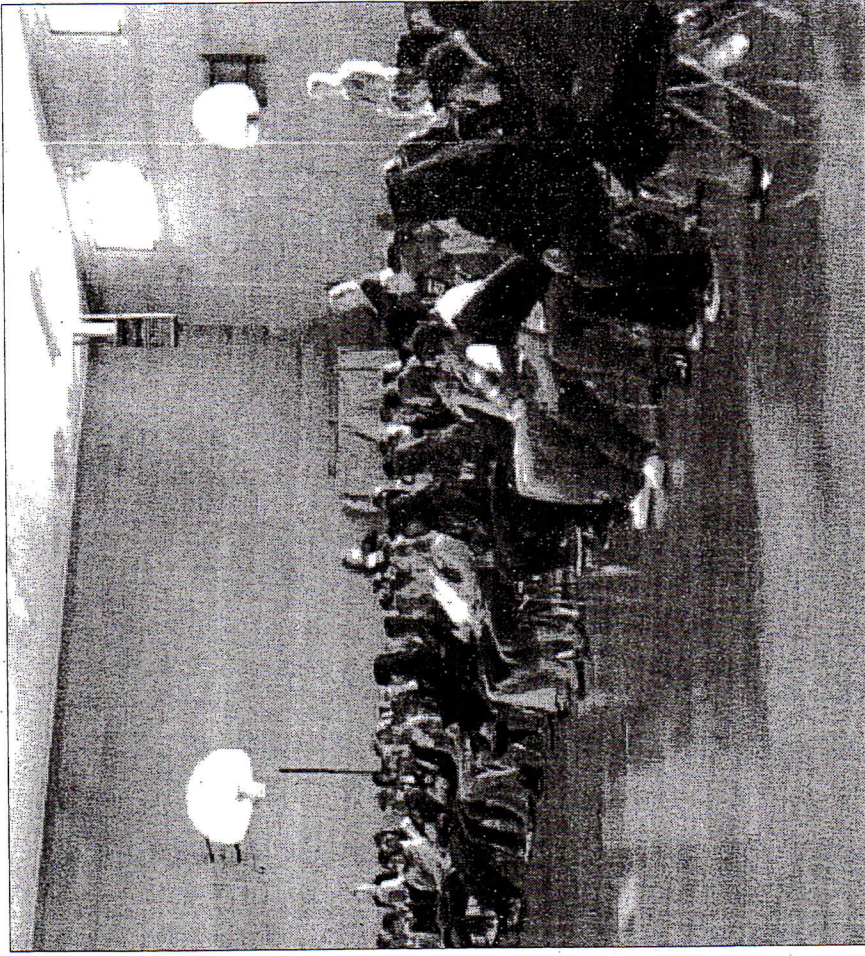
The panelists were joined by coalition member Debbie Davidson as well as Everson and Nooksack Police Chief Erik Ramstead, and they all shared the helpful bits of information they had.

Davidson said the forum was exactly what is needed to help young people, and the not-so-young, make right decisions about how they shape their lives.

"We need new tools to help educate young people about decisions," Davidson said.

Davidson said she has a unique perspective, given that she worked for many years in the Wisconsin Department of Cor-

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At their June 8 event, students benefited from hearing first-hand accounts about life in prison and the struggle to reenter society. — Lynden Tribune | COURTESY PHOTO