

David Fellows: SCDJJ Broad River Road Campus Computer Specialist

That (BRRC Computer Specialist) is my current title. If I could, I'd like to take you back about 14 years when Gina Woods was in charge of our agency. I was volunteering then. I came to South Carolina in 1996 as an independent contractor, I had my own company doing international computer consulting. In working with DSS, I met Judge Byars while he was still at his children's law office during that period of time.

I have an unusual skill set. I do many, many things with children, I've worked with kids for going on 40 years in many different areas, in both the penal system and the juvenile probation system. He (Judge Byers) knew that I spent time out here as a volunteer, and he asked when he was chosen to be the director if I would sell my business and come work with him at DJJ. I asked him if he was going to leave it like it was with Director Woods, with the kids locked up—never messed with, never let outside, just locked up, very little in the way of recreational activity. He said, if you come with me we're going to make it a whole new process. And he did. I rehabilitated the 55-foot alpine climbing tower. We had started a computer program on campus, we do canoeing, we have camping, we have boy scouts, we have girl scouts, we have 4-H. Bill asked us to provide everything that the kids would have on the outside, inside the fence, and he would jokingly say, welcome to my gated community. That's basically what he wanted us to provide for him, for the children there.

One of the things that I have been doing over the years is working with woodworking. We have a lake on our property to do canoeing on our property. When Mrs. Barber (Former Director Margaret Barber) took over, she wanted to change things a little bit—she wanted to change our facility from probation facility to a rehab facility. As they said earlier, they changed the uniforms back to polo shirts and took our badges away. It was difficult to figure out who was in charge of what. At any one time you could have a juvenile hit a staff member and be back in the classroom before the staff member was released from the infirmary. That was a problem. I physically watched one of the kids walk up to one of our staff, look him in the eyes, and say I can hit you any time I want and nothing's going to happen to me. About six years ago I was attacked and nearly killed when I was with 7 kids in a van. The other 6 kids grabbed the 7th one and got me out of the van. About a week ago I was talking to one of our staffers and asked her the same thing—do you feel comfortable? The answer was interesting. She had a similar encounter when one boy was threatening her and two of the other boys got him out of the way and deescalated the situation.

With Ms. Murray, things are beginning to change. (Previously) there has been very little in the way of penalties for behavior. Its been very interesting to watch that pendulum come back to center where we actually have reasons for responsibilities and the kids have some sort of penalty for doing something. I have seen in the last 6 months a major change in the children, a respect that was not there before. They know, if we use pepper spray one time, that that's all it takes. They know it can happen again, and they don't want it to happen again. They automatically deescalate themselves. I asked Ms. Murray what she would like for me to say (today) and she said, tell me what you feel.

We have been hearing over the last 6 months to a year and a half all the bad stuff that's happened. I'm a member of the American Association of Wood Turners, and in our national magazine on page 8 (December issue), we have a picture of one of our students giving a bowl to the Governor. He wrote a letter to the President of our organization, in it telling what a tremendous job we did for him, and followed it up with a letter from a volunteer who worked with the group to build the bowls. That young man was honored by the group as an Outstanding Young Craftsman. So, we have some really good kids working with us. Senator Fair has our pen (that was made by one of our students), (and) Senator Shealy has been with us a lot—you (Senator Shealy) have furniture in your office from our children.

I'm very proud that I've been with this agency for 14 years, starting out as a volunteer, and I will happily come back as a volunteer when I retire. I could have retired three years ago, but I didn't, there is still a job to do.

November 1, 2016