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'A ray of sunshine' First lady Deal tours Juvenile Justice in Murray

Mark Millican
markmillican@daltoncitizen.com



When young people who have run afoul of the law in a minor way enter the offices of the Department of Juvenile Justice in Chatsworth, they're welcomed by a news clipping with a tacked-on headline that says, "Stay in school — You never know what you can do!"

The clipping details how Gale Buckner of Murray County, who served until the end of last year as the chairwoman of the State Board of Pardons and Paroles, was tapped by Gov. Nathan Deal in November as commissioner of the state Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ).

On Wednesday, the youth got to meet the woman behind the headlines.

When Buckner and Georgia first lady Sandra Deal — who traversed Murray and Whitfield counties throughout the day to visit selected schools and the Elbert Shaw Regional Youth Detention Center in Dalton — visited the Chatsworth DJJ office, Deal met with office staff and made an observance from her time as a schoolteacher.

"I've noticed that test scores begin to drop around the seventh grade," she noted. "By seventh grade they're getting bored with school, and are braver and more mixed-up about what to do and what not to do — and they want to hang out with older kids."

Deal spoke with the teens who were in the midst of a service learning project that involved hand-stitching a blanket.

One young man detailed the situation that led to him visiting the DJJ offices for services, and Deal responded, "I'm sorry, and I hope you're learning to do better."



L. Gale Buckner

She shared a school experience where one of her former students brought a toy gun to school and got in trouble since it resembled a real gun.

"Lots of us make mistakes, but we can't let those mistakes mess us up for the rest of our lives," Deal said.

Margaret Cawood, regional administrator for DJJ, said the service projects have a dual purpose — teaching skills and helping the young people learn of needs in the community.

"It helps them have ownership, a feeling of 'I did something for my community,'" she said. "When they have ownership, they are less likely to re-offend. They feel good about being successful, because some of them have not had success. It helps them to be valued, and it's better than picking up trash on the side of the road."

Danielle Jones is a probation officer in the Chatsworth office. She noted that Deal took time to speak with each of the young people who were present.

"I thought it was great for our kids," she said. "I could tell they were excited and they were impressionable to the stories the first lady was sharing with them. She took time to talk to each of them, and they appreciated that."

Buckner told Deal in front of the youth learners she was a "ray of sunshine" in an economically affected community.

"It was wonderful to have Mrs. Deal come up and see our facilities in motion, to see our court services office, to see the way that we're trying to get these young people back on track," Buckner said after Deal departed.