

COLUMBIA

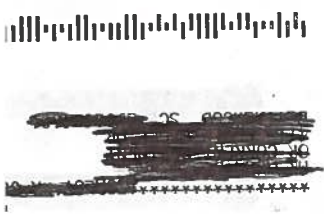
TROPOLITAN

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Hands-On H.O.P.E.



Melanie Pompy, manager of the Store of H.O.P.E. on Broad River Road, helps young people who are part of the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice program make items they can sell.

Juvenile offenders blossom through crafting skills

By Deena C. Bouknight

Photography by Robert Clark

“Should I use this fabric? What do you think about this button here?”

Melanie Pompy, manager of the 1,800-square-foot Store of HOPE on Broad River Road, visits students in their classrooms at least once a week. However, she has to pass through a secure facility to get to the classrooms. The students are part of the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice. They learn how to make items — upholstery, bags, jewelry and such — that will sell at the Store of HOPE. “They are very proud of their work and their creativity,” she says.

The recidivism rate for incarcerated troubled teens is nationally high. Often they learn nothing while serving sentences except maybe how they will do the crimes smarter, better and faster when they are released. Give juveniles a skill — something they can be proud of — and hope blossoms. At least that is the intention of the Store of HOPE, a job readiness training and work experience program. Primarily, those served are SCDJJ youth transitioning back into their communities after being incarcerated at the Broad River Road Complex and while in the Birchwood School District. These juveniles could potentially come from and return to all 46 counties in South Carolina.

SCDJJ, at its core, is the agency that provides custodial care and rehabilitation for children who are incarcerated, on probation, on parole or in a placement due to a criminal offense. Youth at the BRRC are there for everything from disrupting school property to assault and battery and worse.

HOPE is an acronym for Helping Others Prepare for Employment. Programs are many and varied: brick masonry, carpentry, picture framing, welding, horticulture, upholstery, sewing — just to name a few. Birchwood School District teachers and instructors provide three days of regular classes to make sure juveniles are receiving instruction in core academic classes, and then specialists in specific areas of technical vocations teach the other two days. It is a privilege earned to enter the program and have the opportunity to learn a trade as juveniles have to meet certain criteria, and they have to show they are trustworthy.

Juveniles do not just make items to avoid idleness while they serve out their time. The fruits of their labor are sold in the Store of HOPE, located on Broad River Road. Primarily, the store is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and on the third Saturday of each month from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Wares are also exhibited at Main Street’s Soda City on the first Saturday of each month. Customers can purchase items such as custom wood-cut and painted Palmetto trees, Adirondack chairs, reupholstered furniture, cloth bags, pillows, blankets, baby room items, cloth napkins and table runners, pottery and wine bottle stoppers. There are also items sporting University of South Carolina and Clemson motifs and colors.


Pre-Christmas months are an especially busy time; customers can purchase upholstered items for a fraction of their original costs, and there is a multitude of gift items from which to choose. Melanie says that once customers learn of the program and the stories behind how and why items were made, they become repeat shoppers and they tell friends and family about Store of HOPE.

“I have a table and chair in my own home that were made here, and people ask me about them all the time,” says Melanie.

“We really get to see the good that the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice is doing for these kids.

People don't always hear or know that. When the kids are doing something hands on and see that they're doing a good job, they start opening up and gaining confidence. We see them have hope in the midst of heartache.”

— Patrick Montgomery



Patrick Montgomery, public affairs director for SCDJJ, has also purchased items at Store of HOPE to decorate his own home. "Word of mouth is a powerful marketing tool, and people definitely want to know more when they learn that the bistro set and bench nook I have was made by juveniles in SCDJJ," he says.

Customers do not have a chance to meet the makers of the saleable products. However, when Melanie visits the facility, juveniles ask her about customers who purchased their items. She provides feedback in person and in a weekly report. Each juvenile involved in making saleable items learns if their item sold and for how much. Plus, some of the items include the juvenile's first name and age so that customers have some idea of the person involved in creating the item purchased.

One of the juveniles, Carbon, told Patrick: "It feels great to find out someone bought one of my pieces. To know something I worked so hard on is in someone's living room is a real sense of accomplishment." Carbon just acquired his GED and is planning to attend South Carolina State University.

Proceeds from the sale of the items flows back into the program and are used not only for more materials, but also to enable at-risk youths to pay monies owed to victims for restitution. For example, if a youth were to drink alcohol and get into a car and inadvertently destroy property, the monies would help to repay the property owner for the damages.

"It's such a great program," says Patrick. He explains that the goal of the program is to equip juveniles with skills to enable them to make money and ultimately secure full-time employment. "We are not sure if all of the credit goes to the Store of HOPE and the training programs, but we believe the recidivism rates are not as high since installing the program in 2012, and test grades and graduation rates have dramatically increased."

Patrick retired from the military after many years as a public affairs officer before taking the position with SCDJJ; Melanie earned her degree in retail fashion merchandising before agreeing to manage the Store of HOPE in 2013. Neither thought they would be involved with juvenile offenders, but agree that the experience is eye-opening and rewarding.

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Melanie agrees. "These kids are coming from tough backgrounds," she says, "and often they are taking items that are broken or old and making them new again; it's just like what's happening with their lives. They're getting trained and educated to have a second look at life ... to have hope for a future. It's about rebuilding and rehabilitating them."

Rebecca Morrison has been an upholstery instructor at SCDJJ for 20 years. "The juveniles need to leave here prepared and able to not fall into old ways," she shares. "We are helping them with a real skill they can use to maybe even lead to a job and career. I wish we could do even more. I have seen many kids come through. Some are good kids, and it breaks my heart if I find out something bad happened to them or that they are back in the criminal system. Some kids take the skills here, and good things happen. Some do not or are not able to make the best choices. But the good stories are amazing!"

The payoff of the program is evident in the comments of juveniles involved. Carbon says that upholstery and working hard has been a great way to relieve everyday stresses. "Mrs. Morrison has been great. She knows a bunch of people in the upholstery business in Columbia. I hope I can get a job in Columbia to help me as I go to college," he says. "I definitely have learned so much working on the furniture. It gives me skills I know I can use in my future."

Tristan, another juvenile, adds, "I never thought this would be something I would do or enjoy before SCDJJ. But I do, and I am good at it. I really like the skills I build every day."

Melanie stresses that Store of HOPE relies on donations of furniture items, costume jewelry, miscellaneous fabric, etc. to provide juveniles with materials to work with and items that will be saleable. "Donations, donations, donations ... we stress that to the public," she says. "We ask people to please not put old chairs or sofas on the side of the road. Bring them to us. We can get these juveniles to give them a new life."

Visit the Store of HOPE at 3208 Broad River Road, or call (803) 896-6286. Store of HOPE also has a Facebook page. The other site that merchandises SCDJJ items is the Bill Rogers Community Connections Center at 4900 Broad River Road. ♣