

Life is about choices. Whether it is the choices we make, the ones we don't make, or the choices others make for us, choices often alter lives and communities.

As part of Leadership Centre County class of 2016 Government Day, we first heard from alumni and fellow class members who work with local and state government and to glimpse the balancing act our government officials must follow. What is the right decision for our community, the choice that most people desire or the choice that has the best long term impact? How does an ordinary citizen get engaged? How do we make sure that our voice is heard and that governance choices are not made without our input?

We toured SCI-Rockview, an intimidating prison filled with evil, redemption, sadness and awareness. The inmates might be serving life sentences or they might be serving a relatively short stay for non-violent crimes. While there are programs within the prison walls that give prisoners life skills, education and coping skills aimed at trying to reverse criminal thinking, the harsh reality is that the prison is meant – first and foremost - to put a wall around these people to protect the rest of us from their poor choices. Nearly 5,000 members of our greater community are housed in the two local state prisons at the expense of \$32,000 a year per inmate. A prodigious amount of money from the state budget must be allocated towards crime and punishment. One percent of our society is in prison. Nearly everyone would agree this must change, but at what cost? And what choices do we need grapple with to make such change possible?

Our visit to Rockview brought us face-to-face with the sad consequences of choices involving a life of crime and drugs. We explored the drug use epidemic that plagues our nation. An interactive discussion with a local drug task force officer on the myriad types of drugs, how they are used and their availability shocked most of us. Heroin, cocaine, bath salts, synthetic marijuana are widely available, infecting our county as well as the rest of the nation. Sometimes a cheap alternative to prescription medications, sometimes simply a way to intensify a high, the drugs that are available are extremely dangerous and, at times, lethal.

Centre County has felt the ripple effects of the heroin explosion with a score of young people passing away this past year. This epidemic crosses all socioeconomic boundaries; this is not merely a problem for the poor. Tied into the rampant drug problem is the crime associated with drug use. Whether selling drugs, stealing and burglary to pay for drugs, or violent conduct while under the influence, the officer estimates nearly 60% of all crimes are linked to drug use! As a community we need to find a new way to combat this plague. Clearly, we have been losing the "war on drugs" for decades. Education, awareness and treatment must be the new commitment to save our children, but at what cost?

Education and treatment as a preventative costs money up front. The myopic view is to appease people and the budget now. Build a bigger, better police force. Be tough on crime. Send people to prison. Build more prisons. Fill more prisons. Such tactics look good on paper and might sound like viable political decisions, but those choices are not working.

On the flip side, a local non-profit, Centre Peace and its executive director Tom Brewster (LCC '11) have chosen to follow a different path, a path of caring. Most inmates are not evil people, but they have

made poor life choices. Mr. Brewster has the wisdom to try and help inmates by educating them. He provides work opportunities at Centre Peace, he gives talks within the county jail, and he helps to organize other educational opportunities within the jail. His mission is to care about people. He has chosen to spend the better part of his adulthood building something special in Centre County, one that many don't appreciate. Helping those who were never offered help before, Tom is making a difference.

Much of our day was but a glimpse into the darker side of our community. Terrible decisions and poor choices have consequences. As a society, are we prepared to undertake a shift in our thinking? Will we have the foresight to recognize that building more prisons solves the current problem without addressing the fundamental truth, but that we need to make better choices as a community to help prevent people from getting involved with drugs? Drug use and crime rate are intertwined, and to alleviate the crime rate we must focus on the drug epidemic. Education, prevention and treatment must be a fundamental and ongoing goal for our society or else we will be a society of prison walls and shattered lives. Can we empower our government leaders to look towards the future? Can we do this ourselves? These are the choices we must make.

*Submitted by Casey McClain a member of Leadership Centre County Class of 2016. For more information about Leadership Centre County go to [www.leadershipcentrecounty.org](http://www.leadershipcentrecounty.org)*