

Graffiti punished by reading - 'It worked!' says prosecutor

Read the text and fill in the gaps with an appropriate sentence

- a) *Alejandra Rueda drew up a list of 35 books and ordered the offenders to choose one title a month for a year and to write an assignment on each of the 12 books they chose.*
- B) *Normally it would just be probation which would mean checking in with a probation officer once a month and maybe a few hours of community service and writing a letter to say sorry.*
- c) *Her intuition proved correct.*
- d) *It was the Ashburn Coloured School, an historic building that had been used by black children during segregation in Northern Virginia.*
- e) *So I saw a learning opportunity.*
- f) *Her mother was determined her daughters should know about the Holocaust, racial hatred and the implications of holding prejudice based on race, religion or ethnicity.*

In September 2016, an old school house in Virginia, used for teaching black students during the era of segregation, was sprayed with offensive graffiti. The culprits were given an unusual sentence - reading. Two-and-a-half years later, the BBC's Emma Jane Kirby asks whether the punishment worked.

From the moment Prosecutor and Deputy Commonwealth Attorney Alejandra Rueda heard about the racist and anti-Semitic graffiti scrawled across the school house in Ashburn, Loudoun County, Virginia, she suspected the culprits were children.

"The graffiti was racially charged - they had spray-painted swastikas and phrases like 'White Power' and 'Brown Power'," she recalls. "But there were also images of dinosaurs and bodily organs. And I thought, 'This doesn't look like the work of sophisticated KKK people out to intimidate - it looks more like the work of dumb teenagers.'"

_____ 1 _____ Five children aged 16 and 17 were arrested for the crime and pleaded guilty to one count of destruction of private property and one count of unlawful entry.

The teenagers were unaware of the significance of the building they had defaced.

_____ 2 _____ The prosecutor believes the children were just kicking out against authority after one of them had been expelled from his school, but she understands why the town was so shocked by the crime.

"The community blew up. Understandably. But you know, some of the kids didn't even know what a swastika meant. _____ 3 _____ With children you can either punish or you can rehabilitate and these were kids with no prior record and I thought back to what taught me when I was their age, what opened my eyes to other cultures and religions... and it was reading."

The judge in the case endorsed the prosecutor's order - that the teenagers should be handed down a reading sentence (or "disposition" as a sentence is known in juvenile cases). _____ 4 _____

The titles included Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *My name Is Asher Lev* by Chaim Potok, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, *Cry The Beloved Country* by Alan Paton and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*.

Having grown up in Mexico in a bilingual literary family - her mother was a school librarian - Alejandra Rueda says she owes her own cultural and racial awareness to certain books her mother prescribed.

_____ 5 _____

"I had no idea about apartheid in South Africa until I read Alan Paton and that just blew my mind - I had had no education at all about apartheid," she says. "Likewise, I knew nothing about Israel until I read *Exodus* by Leon Uris. So those books had to go on my reading list and I also added classics everyone should know, like *To Kill A Mockingbird*."

The judge was widely praised for trying to educate the adolescents out of their offending behaviour, but some members of the black community wrote letters of complaint to local and national newspapers arguing

that teenagers of colour would never have been treated so leniently. In fact, while none of the offenders was black, Alejandra Rueda says three were from ethnic minorities.

Twelve of the 35 books

Things Fall Apart - Chinua Achebe
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings - Maya Angelou
The Tortilla Curtain - T C Boyle
The Kite Runner - Khaled Hosseini
To Kill a Mockingbird - Harper Lee
12 Years a Slave - Solomon Northup
The Crucible - Arthur Miller
Cry the Beloved Country - Alan Paton
My Name is Asher Lev - Chaim Potok
Exodus - Leon Uris
The Color Purple - Alice Walker
Night - Elie Wiesel

"And the sentence was in no way lenient," she argues.

"These kids had no prior record so there was no way they were going to get a custodial sentence at a penitentiary.

"The sentence I gave was harsher than what they would normally have received. _____6_____ Here they had to write 12 assignments and a 3,500-word essay on racial hatred and symbols in the context of what they'd done... It was a lot of work."

All five of the teenagers successfully completed their reading and written assignments along with mandatory visits to the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and the Museum of American History's exhibit on Japanese-American internment camps in the US.

Two years later, none has reoffended, and all are still in education. The teenagers' lawyers say their families were "embarrassed" by their "stupid prank" and that the sentence had had its "intended effect".

Source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-47936071>