



Other Side of the Law

Former DA J. Tom Morgan, known for sending thousands to jail, is now on a mission to keep Georgia teens out of legal trouble.

SOME PEOPLE COLLECT baseball cards. Some stockpile business cards. J. Tom Morgan amasses three-by-five index cards.

Scribbled on one side of each of these white cards—he has more than 2,000—is a legal question that a Georgia teenager has submitted anonymously during one of the seminars hosted by Morgan, the former longtime DeKalb County district attorney. He's taken his legal show on the road to schools, churches, and community centers, offering question and answer sessions in conjunction with discussing his self-published book, *Ignorance Is No Defense: A Teenager's Guide to Georgia Law*.

"With the title, I'm trying to get across that lack of knowledge about the law in no way absolves you from the con-

sequences of breaking it," says Morgan matter-of-factly.

Helping teens understand the law—and how they might become tangled up in it, even inadvertently—might seem at first a bizarre objective for Morgan, who, over the course of twelve years as DeKalb County DA, earned a reputation as a tenacious prosecutor. (The murder of DeKalb Sheriff-elect Derwin Brown was probably his highest-profile case while in office.) Morgan insists this latest crusade is a labor of love that he hopes ultimately will keep young people from making the same life-altering mistakes he watched so many others make. "As a prosecutor you don't get to talk to these kids; you just present this evidence and move forward with a

case," says Morgan, who now helms a general law practice in Decatur. "When you sit down and talk to these kids, you realize that a lot of them got in trouble due to lack of knowledge."

A casual flip through Morgan's stack of cards reveals both alarming ignorance and juvenile curiosity. Some of the questions are clearly comedic, while others are pointedly profound.

"If a 15-year-old was caught having sex with another 15-year-old, who would get in trouble?" writes one teen in barely legible print.

"Is it true that anyone caught 'high' in public can be arrested?" inquires another.

Morgan's favorite is the one that starts off with "I'd love to be your son" and ends with "If I was drunck [sic] but my parents gave it to me, would it be illegal?"

"I always show that one to my children and say, 'See, someone would love for me to be their dad,'" says Morgan, adding that the card has fueled a running joke with his twenty-two-year-old daughter and nineteen-year-old son. But humor aside, he says of the sessions, "[Teens] always come up with some of the most insightful questions."

On the heels of highly publicized Georgia legal skirmishes—like the Genarlow Wilson and Marcus Dixon teen sex cases, in which a legal technicality sent teens who had consensual sex with peer partners to jail, or that of Rachel Boim, a Roswell High School student who was expelled for writing in her diary a fictional story about a student who shoots her math teacher—Morgan's book would seem a valuable addition to the home library of any Georgia household with kids. Consider that Georgia is also one of only five U.S. states where seventeen-year-olds are prosecuted as adults, and the book merits essential-reading status.

Morgan says he got the idea for the book after he resigned from the DA's office in 2004 and was working at the Balch & Bingham law firm. It took him a full year from conception to completion. An early draft got such a thumbs-down from his

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children and their friends (they claimed it was too heavy on legal jargon) that Morgan had to call on his wife and hire a high school English teacher to help pare down the legalese and make it more teen-friendly. The result is a text that, through real-life examples, explains Georgia laws to teenagers and parents in easy-to-understand language. The primary focus is on criminal laws, but the book also outlines teenagers' rights under the law.

Morgan ultimately decided to self-publish the book, which has sold more than 5,000 copies, because he wanted to control the marketing and sell it at different prices to individuals and groups. The seminar component became a marketing tool after someone who bought the book asked him to speak about it at a school assembly.

The seminars, which typically include separate sessions for students and parents, address an array of laws involving drugs, alcohol, sex crimes, and property damage. He loves the reaction he gets when he tells the story of teens charged with a felony for possessing a fake ID with a government logo. The law, which was in effect due to post-9/11 terrorism laws, did not get changed back to a misdemeanor until this past July. A hush tends to fall over the audience when he shares true stories about the teenage boy charged with child pornography for e-mailing a nude photo of his girlfriend to a friend, or the teenage girl charged with distributing narcotics for passing her prescription-strength Tylenol pill to a classmate suffering from menstrual cramps. Morgan says 80 percent of the teens who take the Georgia law test he gives at the start of his seminar fail to get even half the questions right.

"I do think a lot of teens are ignorant of the law, but for some it's more arrogance that they won't get caught than ignorance," says Jacob Walker, sixteen, who attended Morgan's seminar at The Walker School in East Cobb. "His seminar has made a difference for a lot of people at my school. The level of arrogance goes down tremendously when they see what has actually happened in some cases."

"I like to think of myself as a very involved

parent, but I was actually surprised at how much I did not know that could affect my boys," says Jacob's mother, Mary Jo Walker, of him and his older brother, Ben. She attended the evening seminar for parents at her sons' school. "This was a chance to get some good and accurate information about Georgia laws."

Jacob, who appreciated that Morgan did not "talk down" to him and his classmates, says the seminar has had an impact on his actions. "Now every time I'm in a situation that could go bad, I think about what could go wrong and what the consequences could be," he says. "Now I think to myself, 'How can I defuse this situation?'"

Mike Mears, former director of the Georgia Public Defender Standards Council, applauds his longtime counterpart's efforts. "What may have been accepted in one generation as youthful indiscretion is now a felony," says Mears, who now works as an instructor at Atlanta's John Marshall Law School. "The stakes are higher and lawmakers have upped the ante, so to speak, when it comes to crime."

Continues Mears: "The time surely has passed when you could say, 'I'm a teenager, please cut me some slack.' That's why J. Tom's book is so needed. Once the law gets involved and you're a victim of a crime, or if you're arrested or charged, it's too late to do a lot of what could have been done to prevent the situation from happening."

Morgan is now working with the state's Parent Teacher Association in hopes of getting material from the book taught in every Georgia school. He laughs off assertions that his campaign is in any way penance for his actions while in the DA's office. Maybe, just maybe, could this be the emergence of a kindler, gentler J. Tom Morgan?

"I think teens make better choices when they're more informed," he says. "That's all I'm trying to do." ■

→ **ONLINE** ARE YOU SMARTER THAN A TENTH GRADER? Put your knowledge of state law to the test. Visit atlantamagazine.com to take a portion of Morgan's Georgia law quiz.

The advertisement for All Star Enterprises features a vertical arrangement of items: a red and white striped banner at the top, a red Georgia Tech football helmet with signatures, a yellow '5X YOUR CHAMPION' t-shirt with a USPS logo, a red acoustic guitar with a signature, and a small photo of a person playing guitar. The items are separated by horizontal lines of white stars. Below the items, the text reads: '★ 1,500 ★ authentic items ★', 'Raise money for your next charity event with...', and the All Star Enterprises logo. At the bottom, it lists 'SPORTS • CELEBRITY • MUSIC' and contact information: '678.546.3253 • www.allstarenterprises.biz'.