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## **Real Gun, Fake Gun, Doesn't Matter!**

Written by [Chandra R. Thomas](#) on Aug 3, 2010

So you're 16 years old and broke. And you're sitting around brainstorming ways to get money. On a whim you decide to stick up the convenience store around the corner. You don't want to hurt anyone; you just want the dough. To be sure you'll even use a fake gun. You know it's a risk and you know there is a chance you'll get in trouble. What you probably don't know is that if you're convicted in Georgia, you will land you behind bars for a minimum of 10 years.



[Clayton County District Attorney Tracy Graham](#)

[Lawson](#) knows the serious consequences all too well and the former juvenile court judge is trying some innovative ways to get the word out to young people *before* they end up in prison.

"I keep watching young men age 17 to 22, mostly of color, commit these crimes every day," says Lawson, adding that a total of 164 armed robberies have taken place there between January and April of this year. "I'm so tired of seeing this. They don't realize that they're going to end up in prison for at least 10 years and there's nothing me or anyone else can do about it – it's the law."

Lawson and her director of programs, Gary DuBose, with the support of several county agencies have created an educational video called "Real Gun, Fake Gun, Doesn't Matter." It features Clayton County teens, judges and law enforcement officers acting out the likely outcome for those who commit armed robbery. It's a crime considered one of the "seven deadly sins" in Georgia, a distinction also shared with murder, voluntary manslaughter, rape, aggravated sodomy, aggravated child molestation and aggravated sexual battery. And using a fake gun has no bearing on the final punishment.



Lawson and DuBose recently took their crusade to a summer program at Crossroads Comprehensive Youth Development Center in Clayton, where students age 14 to 18 and their young counselors watched the video. "If you get arrested at 18 you'll be 28 when you get out; you won't be able to go to college, get married and if you have kids you won't be there to watch them grow up," she told the group. "And when you get out [of prison] as a convicted felon, it will be just as hard trying to get a job or finding a place to stay."



They cheered and jeered at the film's comedic and dramatic moments. And many of the young audience members know this issue well. Thirteen out of more than 30 students raised their hands when Lawson inquired if they knew "someone who has been arrested for armed robbery."

Lawson told them, "You can also get up to life in prison. Do you know how much time you would spend in prison on a life sentence?"

"Thirty years," a tall boy in the back immediately blurted out.

An impressed Lawson retorted, "Wow, you should go to law school!"

Shot on location at a Clayton County restaurant, a police officer's home and the courthouse, the video is reminiscent of the 1990s bank heist flick *Set It Off*, starring Queen Latifah, Vivica Fox and Jada Pinkett Smith. It follows a group of teenage girls – from their decision to rob a local restaurant to their respective days in court and inevitable fate behind bars. The overall goal, Lawson says, is to show the video at schools, churches and community centers in an effort to educate young people, and more importantly to encourage them to share what they've learned with their peers.

"She started seeing an alarming amount of juveniles doing this and she wanted to do something to engage them," explains DuBose.

The effort actually began as a poster contest where Lawson promised \$100 from her own pocket to the young person whose design best conveyed the message. Two students ended up splitting the prize. The key elements of their winning drawings were merged into one poster featuring the tagline "Real Gun, Fake Gun, Doesn't Matter!" Lawson later decided the YouTube-obsessed generation would likely be more responsive to a video message.

"I think it's wonderful because having the visuals are better for them than listening to someone talk,"

says Crossroads Executive Director Rev. Willie M. Simpson. “It’s even better when they see someone their age acting it out. “

Lawson’s office hosted a film premiere at the county’s performing arts center this past spring and the leading starlets contend that they had great fun during their daylong shoot in January.

“It was really fun when we all had to hide around the buildings and try to remember our lines and where to stand,” recalls actress Jasmine Patterson, a Mount Zion High School student who played a starring role. “It was really funny when the police arrested us.”

The production, however, had its share of challenges, including rehearsal schedule conflicts and production delays. In fact, the script had to be rewritten to feature girls in lead roles because the young black male volunteers – the very demographic that Lawson says is most affected by this issue in Clayton and nationwide –dropped out during rehearsals.

“They were not consistent, so we had to change the script to an all female lead cast,” adds DuBose. “In fact, one of the young men who was supposed to be in it was detained [by the police] for minor infractions shortly before shooting.”

Lawson and DuBose say they will continue showing the video to young people all over Clayton. They have copyrighted the video and plan to post it on YouTube.

Schools and teen programs that would like to show “Real Gun, Fake Gun, Doesn’t Matter!” should contact Gary DuBose directly at [Gary.DuBose@co.clayton.ga.us](mailto:Gary.DuBose@co.clayton.ga.us).

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*Chandra R. Thomas is an award-winning multimedia journalist who has worked for Atlanta Magazine and Fox 5 Atlanta. She has also served as a Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Journalism Fellow at Atlanta’s Carter Center and as a Kiplinger Public Affairs Journalism Fellow at The Ohio State University.*



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Renea

August 3, 2010 | 10:22 am

I saw the video and I thought it was GREAT! Keep up the good work.

