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Former D.A. Educating 'Ignorant' Teens About Law

Written by [Chandra R. Thomas](#) on Jul 26, 2010

J. Tom Morgan has a lot of Facebook friends – more than 4,000 actually. Just about all of them are teenagers peppering him with questions about Georgia law. They want to know their rights and how to avoid getting into serious trouble. And the former longtime DeKalb County District Attorney is more than happy to let them know.

Morgan has sold more than 27,000 copies of *Ignorance Is No Defense, A Teenager's Guide to Georgia Law*, a self-published book that he speaks about at schools, community centers and just about everywhere else anyone will listen, in hopes of educating young people and their parents about Georgia law. Since 2007 Morgan has carefully crafted his message, which also includes separate presentations and question and answer periods for students in the daytime and their parents later the same evening. At his urging, most of the kids and some parents, reach out to him on Facebook to ask specific questions. He usually fields about 10-20 per day.



“Most of the questions usually center around, sex, drugs and alcohol,” says Morgan, glancing up from his computer screen at his downtown Decatur law office. “Social media has provided great access. I don’t think they would have ever emailed me and they certainly would not have called me up to ask these questions. Facebook is a great equalizer; every kid has access to a computer these days.”

Since the book’s release three years ago, Morgan has visited nearly 200 schools throughout the state – from Savannah to Bremen – and addressed more than 100,000 students in the process. He was the keynote speaker at the 2009 Georgia Parent Teacher Association convention and last spring was contracted to speak at all 21 DeKalb County Middle Schools.

“One time I spoke to seven schools in one day; I got tired of hearing my own self speak,” quips Morgan, a trial lawyer. “When I got started with this book I had no idea it would take off like it has.”

Perhaps the initiative is a bit of prosecutorial penance for Morgan’s many years in court cracking down on young people who broke the law. He says during his more than 20 years with the DeKalb County District Attorney’s office, including 12 years as district attorney, he’s watched a lot of young people get into serious trouble for actions that they had no idea carried serious penalties. One great example, he says is the growing trend of “sexting,” when minors send one another sexually explicit messages or nude photos and videos via cell phone.

“Most of them don’t know that if the person in the photograph is under the age of 18 it is considered child pornography,” explains Morgan. “Even if the person is taking a picture of himself or herself, they could be looking at a 20 year felony charge just for possessing that photo.”

Morgan’s research found that 80 percent of Georgia students don’t know that they are considered adults in Georgia at the age of 17 or that they’re automatically considered adults in the state if charged with one of the “seven deadly sins,” which includes: murder, voluntary manslaughter, rape, aggravated sodomy, aggravated child molestation, aggravated sexual battery and armed robbery with a firearm.

“What I don’t do is moralize my answers,” says Morgan, who has referred some young people to attorneys. “I don’t inject my personal beliefs. I tell them what the law is. I don’t give them advice, I just state a fact of law.”

Due to high demand for supplemental materials, Morgan has hired a teacher to draft a companion curriculum that will allow educators to instruct their students on the information in the book. He expects it to be available on the Web and CD by the fall.

This month he also expands his publishing reach to North Carolina with the release of his first college-age focused version of the book co-authored with Wake Forest University law professor Wilson Parker, *Ignorance Is NO Defense, A College Student’s Guide To North Carolina Law*. He expects a book for Georgia college students to be next.

Morgan says he considers his work done if he prevents one young person from making a serious mistake that could affect the rest of their lives.

“The reality is that most kids lack the knowledge that we assume they have and that has got to change.”

Ignorance Is No Defense, A Teenager’s Guide to Georgia Law retails for \$15 and may be purchased through Morgan’s website, www.IgnoranceIsNoDefense.com, Amazon.com or at Eagle Eye Books and Blue Elephant Books in Decatur.

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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