

PRESS RELEASE

Bentonville/Bella Vista Daybreak Rotary Club

FROM:

Bob Bleakman, Bentonville/Bella Vista Rotary Club
479-268-4942 (rbleak@cox.net)



Thomas E. Smith Speaking at the Bentonville/Bella Vista Daybreak Rotary

Attorney Tom E. Smith spoke to the Bentonville/Bella Vista Daybreak Rotary Club on March 1. A native of Gravette and a former Benton County Prosecutor, Smith first served as attorney ad litem (court appointed advocate) for kids in Judge Crabtree's juvenile court. A key part of Smith's law practice focuses on youngsters in the juvenile court system.

"The new 34-bed retention center and juvenile court is a great facility, but it's sad that we have to have it. With the growth and change in our society, kids take the brunt of what we read in the news," Smith said. "As adults' problems get bigger, kids are affected. Juvenal court can change the future for kids." Dependent Neglect cases often result in putting children in foster care. Smith said 176 kids are currently in foster care in Benton County.

Juvenile crime cases come through the court constantly. About 1,000 cases per year are adjudicated in Benton County, and 650 youths are currently on probation. "Rehabilitation is the first goal of the juvenile court and can change a child's future," Smith said.

Families in Need of Services (FINS) is the widest area of law in the legal system. FINS looks for a pattern of change in kids who are on the edge of crime, e.g., swiping prescription drugs from home medicine cabinets to feed a growing habit.

"There's opportunity to volunteer in juvenile court," Smith said. "There's not a DHS case that isn't assigned to CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) through FINS cases. I'd like to bring back a mentor program through the juvenile court, especially to support single parents, whose children account for 95% of juvenile cases."

Smith speaks to service clubs and meets with other community groups to share what's going on in the community, including in the juvenile court system. "The key to change is communication," he said.