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KRISTOPHER SKINNER/STAFF

Lauren Bishop, who teaches at the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center, talks about her experiences in the classroom, such as a science class she teaches to youngsters at the facility.

A voice for county's troubled youths

■ Juvenile hall's science instructor is one of two teachers of the year

By Katy Murphy

kmurphy@bayareanewsgroup.com

SAN LEANDRO — To get to Lauren Bishop's classroom, you first need to pass through a series of locked doors and security desks and into a sunlit, two-story hall lined

with doors numbered 1 through 30.

A hint of sky shows through the vaulted ceiling. A few faces peer from cell windows — kids who, for one reason or another, aren't in class. One boy brushes his hair. Another moves his lips, possibly singing to himself. But mostly, they just stand and watch.

Bishop's science classroom is across from those cells, in the maximum security unit at the Alameda

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County Juvenile Justice Center. The room offers no view of the outside world. But for the last seven years, Bishop has prepared her students to find their way in that world, after their trials and sentences are

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behind them.

Sometimes, they do.

Bishop, an Oakland resident and mother of four, is one of two 2009 Alameda County teachers of the year. She is a fierce advocate for her students, most of whom have been charged with, or convicted of, crimes ranging from robbery and carjacking to discharging a firearm and murder. Some of them go home after a few months; others, tried as adults, are taken to San Quentin or Santa Rita Jail in Dublin on their 18th birthdays.

"They'll say, 'Why are you trying so hard? We're in jail,'" Bishop said. "I tell them, 'Education is going to be the way out of the mess you're in.'"

Glory and candy

It's Thursday morning, and Bishop faces three rows of boys in matching blue T-shirts and khaki pants stamped with the unmistakable name of their involuntary placement.

"Listen up," she says. They listen.

She draws two overlapping circles on the board. "Remember when we talked about what this thing is called?"

"Venn diagram," comes the instant answer.

It is their last chance to review the material before the Friday Game Show, a weekly tradition in which teams of two compete for glory and candy using their knowledge of the past week's science lessons. Aside from one boy, who stares blankly at his desk in the back of the room, Bishop seems to have their attention.

They laugh when she reviews a dating metaphor she had used earlier in the week to explain the transfer of electrons from one molecule to another through an ionic bond: "Ooh, baby, take my electron, please!"

Bishop has more constraints than the average chemistry and physical science teacher. No glass, no flames, no sharp objects. After each class ends, she collects the pencils and counts them carefully. When her students made models of atoms, they used beads and

pipe cleaners. Fishing line, she explained, "has enormous choking potential."

Jakari, an 18-year-old from Oakland, said Bishop is well regarded by the youths — in part, because they know she respects them.

"She's a good teacher, a caring teacher, a funny teacher," he said. "Every day after school, I go in there, talk to her. She'll keep me on track. She'll help me."

'Real and honest'

Bishop grew up in the working-class city of Linden, N.J., where, she said, people tend to say what they really think. She said she has found her students to be similarly "funny, stripped down, real."

"They like people who are real and honest with them, and not weak," she said.

Bishop was a research associate in the biochemistry department at UC Berkeley before Alameda County Superintendent Sheila Jordan, the mother of one of her son's friends, persuaded her to become an alternative education teacher at Rock LaFleche Community Day School, in Oakland. After two years, the school — which has since closed — changed operators and brought in new staff. Bishop was transferred to juvenile hall in 2002.

Bishop is one of about 20 teachers at the detention center, which is legally required to provide educational programs to incarcerated minors; the Alameda County Probation Department keeps tabs on the students' attendance.

Bishop said she quickly realized her students would be more willing to learn if she made education a dialogue. She teaches them academic English, they teach her street slang — vocabulary she'll incorporate, from time to time, in her lessons. She shows them the science behind drug use, HIV and asthma, they tell her about gang symbols and tattoos.

"If you don't understand what they're talking about, and you position yourself in your corner of the planet, it's not going to happen," she said.

Sometimes, to her disappointment, former students reappear in her classroom after another brush with the law. She frequently sees the tragedies or alleged crimes

involving her former — or future — students reported in the news media. When she saw Discovery Channel's recent documentary about Oakland gangs, she said, she recognized a number of faces, sometimes by their eyes.

Every year, at least one of Bishop's former students has died violently.

"I think one of the hardest things to take is the sorrow, but there's also an incredible joy as they work their way out of it," she said. "You see the kids that get turned around, and you know you've saved them and their families so much by participating in their rehabilitation. You've saved their potential victims so much."

'Like a bulldog'

Amy Cheney, a librarian who regularly visits classrooms in the hall, said Bishop has a knack for making science interesting and accessible to her students, whose reading levels range from preschool to adult. But, she added, Bishop is more than just an excellent instructor; she's an advocate and a cheerleader.

Until Bishop pushed for a change, youth in maximum security weren't allowed to take a regular physical education class — which meant leaving their unit and going to a gymnasium on another floor, a security concern.

"She's like a bulldog, and if something is not right or not fair, she will make it better," Cheney said.

Wayne, 18, sat a few feet from Bishop during the chemistry review. That's his spot. He learns better when he's in the front row, he said.

Wayne had a back-row view at his "regular school." He said he showed up late and rarely paid attention — when he bothered to come at all. But that's all in the past, he said.

"Ms. Bishop, she's going to help me get my high school diploma," he said. "I'm going to have my high school diploma, and I'm going to be able to go to community college."

Wayne also had a more immediate goal: winning Game Show Friday. It wasn't just the chance to win that made everyone so competitive, he explained, but the prize, itself: "Candy, you know. Snickers."