

Magic, Monsters and More: Dungeons & Dragons in Detention

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Once a week, an ordinary classroom in the Donald E. Long (DEL) Juvenile Detention Home transforms into a fantastical landscape. Time and technology catapult 500 years forward, the ground desiccates, and biodiversity increases tenfold—as does otherworldly danger. These changes set the stage for a group of youth to play Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), a game of collaborative storytelling. With the help of volunteer Rob Farris, D&D is a unique opportunity for these boys to explore their identities, practice prosocial behavior, and be heroes.

Rob, who works for Wizards of the Coast, a subsidiary of Hasbro Toy Company that publishes D&D, describes the game as an “interactive, choose your own adventure.” He serves as the Dungeon Master for the DEL campaign, essentially playing “the world.” The boys play characters who inhabit it.

“As a Dungeon Master, it’s my job to paint the picture of where they are in the made-up world,” he explains. “I create the story, the tension, and the drama effectively. The boys then collaboratively decide how to respond to it. There’s no winning or losing in D&D, just fun.”

As you can imagine, being a Dungeon Master is a true test of creativity and memory. It’s Rob’s responsibility to control the flow of the campaign by introducing new foes, branching paths, and guidelines for the players. Occasionally, he’ll forget a small detail about the campaign and the boys will point out that he’s broken the world immersion. Their nitpicking isn’t criticism; it’s respect—for Rob, his craft, and the game itself. D&D is serious business for this group, and it requires all hands on deck to be successful.

Each youth plays a unique character with clearly defined physical attributes, skills, and personality traits. They’re all part of the same in-universe organization, though: the Outriders, which is dedicated to protecting communities from magic and monsters in Rob’s post-apocalyptic world. D&D thrives on collaboration. When one player isn’t sure what course of action to take, they consult the others. Together, this team has battled a basketball-playing dragon god, cannibalistic, anthropomorphic bunnies, and a stampede of motorized horses.

Ultimately, D&D is a way for these youths to use a distant story to process their own trauma and transformations. It requires them to be silly. It requires them to tap into their imaginations and think outside of the box. Above all else, it requires them to be kids.



Rob Farris

The benefits of D&D

Every youth I interviewed expressed that D&D had changed them for the better. Among these changes are improved confidence, collaborative skills, creativity, and self-image.

The sense of community at the D&D table is overwhelming. Rob and the boys are a tight-knit crew, and it was nearly impossible for me not to feel like I was disrupting the delicate latticework of their campaign when I first started observing. When you step into the classroom, after all, you're stepping into their world—with its unfamiliar jargon, elaborate cast of characters, and entire historical canon.

During one of the first weeks I observed a D&D session, Rob apologized for “being down.” All of the boys immediately came to assuage him.

“It’s okay, man,” one of them said. “People have their emotions.”

As I learned about the youths, they learned about me too. They picked up on my snack preferences and brought out foods I might enjoy, asked about my favorite pieces of media, and even offered to work me into their campaign as a side character. Before long, I started to feel like part of the crew.

D&D is rooted in this slow and steady building of friendships. One youth told me that not all of the boys in their campaign get along, but once they sit down at the D&D table, all bad blood disappears. It begs the question: What is respite?

“I used to have almost no privileges,” one youth, whose character is a bugbear barbarian, told me. “My behavior must’ve put me at like a negative level two, and now I’m at one of the highest levels you can be here. D&D helps me stay out of trouble, and it’s helped me get along with people too.”

Going hand in hand with collaboration is confidence. In order to tell the story of their campaign and tell it well, the boys need to commit to their characters. This means memorizing parts of the canon, having explanations for their actions readied, and, at times, using silly voices to create an immersive experience.

One youth said that these parts of D&D have helped him be more confident in social settings, especially when trying something new. Another youth recounted that before D&D, he wouldn’t have even done this interview with me. “D&D’s given me the chance to change,” he said, pensive.

This is one of D&D’s most appealing factors: It gives the youths a chance to achieve their goals through play.

The notion of heroism in D&D and its real world effects cannot be glossed over either. Rob told me he intentionally built the Outriders, the organization that the boys’ characters unite under, to be an “Avengers-esque” group.

“Many people want, or need, to be the hero of their own story,” he described to me. “And there’s something really important about being celebrated for doing something good. It’s an imaginary fantasy moment, but the players earn their celebration. Those moments are powerful. And the idea of being a protector spreads from one character to another, ripples through the group.”

D&D gives players a chance to be heroes. This identity exploration alters the way youths have learned to view themselves.

One youth, whose character is a goblin monk, confessed that he’s a quiet kid, which surprised me, since he’s boisterous when he plays. He used to have trouble feeling like he fit in anywhere, but now has a renewed sense of confidence from the game: “Seeing myself then versus now, and imagining what I’ll be like when I’m out of here—it’s made me realize I’m a different person. I can be a different person.”



Words of wisdom

I asked the boys what advice they’d give to other youth going through difficult circumstances, or what they’d shout into a microphone if the public were guaranteed to

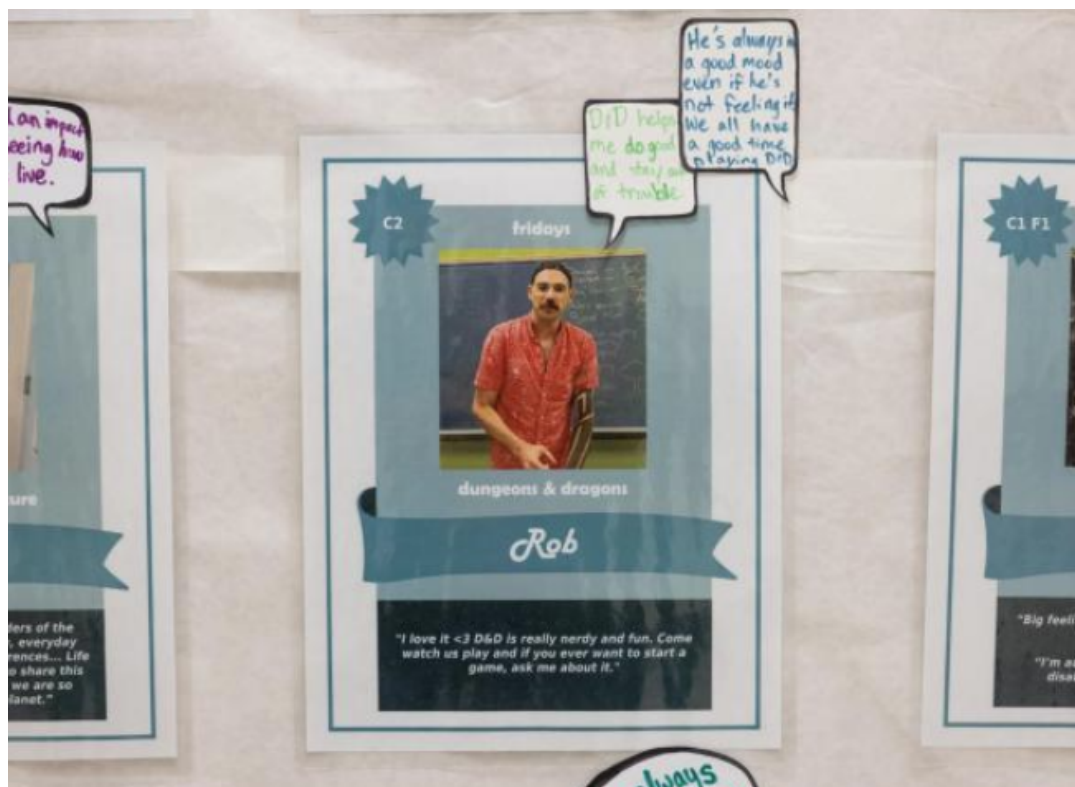
listen. All of them echoed the same sentiment: Make the best of your circumstances, and don't be afraid to give something a go.

"My advice would be to try something new," the goblin monk youth said. "Growing up in a hard background and being around dangerous stuff, I hope that maybe kids who focus on the worst things could someday experience something like this, because it changes you. It really does."

Another youth, whose character is an aarakocra fighter, recounted his hesitancy to commit to D&D at first, and his gratitude that he followed through. "You don't know what it's like to express yourself in that new way unless you try," he told me. "If it doesn't work the first time, try again. Try with different people. Take a second chance." He flashed me a shy smile. "You might just like it."

This youth recently celebrated academic achievements. He's learned how to work hard and play hard, attending classes and D&D sessions in the same room, balancing the serious and the playful. We talked about how this has altered his sense of self and taught him how to hope again.

"It made me realize, like, 'I can actually go forward with my life.'"



The importance of volunteerism

Volunteers allow the Department of Community Justice to diversify our skillsets and give new experiences to our youths. They are vital to our mission of community safety through positive change.

I asked Rob what drew him to volunteering as a Dungeon Master and volunteering at Donald E. Long in particular. He's always been service-minded, but the idea of being a Dungeon Master in juvenile detention came to him after two specific experiences:

- Reading a [New York Times article](#) about death row participants playing D&D
- Hearing the positive anecdotal feedback from a coworker of his who ran a D&D for educators program, where they'd give free kits to lower-income schools so students could play after school.

"The marriage of those two things for me was D&D for incarcerated youth," he explained, which brought him to Donald E. Long.

What struck me most about Rob's response to my questions about volunteerism was his emphasis on having something to give. In his eyes, everyone has something they can provide, even if it might seem unconventional, like his own prowess as a Dungeon Master. "We live in a society that is difficult for a lot of people," he admitted. "We can't solely rely on institutions to take care of us, and so we need individuals and communities."

This is why people like Rob, and all of DCJ's volunteers, are vital.

The boys certainly agree. "I hope Rob keeps coming as long as he can, because if he keeps coming, he's gonna keep helping people," said one youth. "Group work and volunteers like him still feel relatively new to the facility, and it seems to lower the number of people who come back, the chaos of the entire unit, and the number of calls for back-up. We need more stuff like this." In other words, community support makes a difference. It changes lives.



Passing the torch

One youth, whose character is an orc cleric, has taken initiative and started running his own campaigns as a Dungeon Master, completely free of Rob's help. I asked him how this change came to be.

"There was a week when Rob wasn't here, so I decided to make my own campaign, and it wasn't too difficult," he said. "Of course there were times it was a little trying, because people get distracted and you have to have patience, but it's been good."

This youth has designed approximately forty different D&D characters. He's well-versed in the lore of the D&D universe, having read most of the books Rob brings in, and spends his free time dreaming up new campaigns.

This originality and ambition is exactly what Rob's hoping to see more of. The youths have more time than he does, so a long-term goal of his is training the new trainer. Another goal is expanding D&D to other facilities, namely MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility. A large part of making this happen will likely be proving efficacy, which will require funding and publicity.

“We want to scale it up,” Rob affirmed. “Crawl, walk, run. Right now, we’re still in the crawl. We need to show demonstrable positive impact and ideally make this a peer-reviewed study.”

The goblin monk youth said that he’d like for D&D to expand specifically so that more BIPOC kids have the opportunity to play. “It’s not really common for a kid of color—or any kid who’s different in another way—to play,” he explained, “so I want them to have more chances to. D&D is fun. It’s an eye-opening type of feel to do things you wouldn’t usually do.”

Out into the Enclaves

Rob informed me that he doesn’t have any specific plans for the boys’ campaign from here on out. “It could end at any moment,” he confessed, “and that would be okay. We’ll just start a new one!” Juvenile detention is a revolving door, so there’s always the challenge of losing players and having to reshape the story. Flexibility is key in a situation like this.

The only hint Rob gave me about what might come next in the DEL youths’ campaign is that there’s much more to discover. He’s crafted a specific geographic region of the world known as the “the enclaves” meant for unconstrained exploration. It’s littered with priceless artifacts, old ruins, and ancient secrets, and if the boys collaboratively choose the right path, they’ll uncover some of them.

This opportunity summarizes what I perceive as the overarching theme of D&D for these young heroes: We don’t know what the future holds, but the world is waiting for them, and it’s filled with treasures.