Westfield mom and a few critters making a difference for teens

By Megan Banta
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NOBLESVILLE — After the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, Amanda Smith felt compelled to do something to make a difference.

Smith, a mom of two from Westfield who is the superintendent of natural resources and education for Hamilton County’s Parks and Recreation Department, had been going once a year since about 2008 to talk to youth at the Hamilton County Juvenile Services Center. She said the shooting caused her to expand that program.

Beginning January of last year, she started going monthly to make more of an effort to reach out to the youth at the center. Her most recent program took place Friday.

For an hour to an hour and a half once a month, Smith takes live animals, usually one or two turtles and a salamander or a snake, to the detention center. She talks to the teens there about her job as a naturalist, about parks in general and about the importance of nature. Then she brings out the animals.

Smith said that while she shares information about nature and her passion for it to try to relate to the teens, she gets to the “critters” as quickly as possible. She said she does that because “they all seem to really love the animals” and enjoy the time hearing about and interacting with them.

Angela Houston, one of the primary teachers at the juvenile center, said the teens love the program.

“This is one of their favorites,” she said. “They look forward to it.”

Smith said she is always surprised and encouraged by the teens’ appreciation for the program and by how engaged they are.

But she said she hopes the teens get more out of the experience than enjoyment.

“My romantic notion is that, that empathy, that connection with another life is happening for them,” Smith said. “And I see that happen quite a bit.”

Once, Smith said, one teen sat back with his arms crossed and glared at her for most of the time she was talking. But she said when one of the animals, a box turtle named Long Legs, walked slowly over to the teen and stopped by his foot, she saw a total transformation. The teen bent down and asked Long Legs, “Hey, what’s up, turtle?”

“He turned into a softie.”

Smith said she also hopes that by talking to the teens, she can help them find something to serve as stress relief once they leave the center.

“I encourage them, when they’re out of there, to get outside and get to a park and use the resources that they have in their community to overcome whatever they have going on with them,” she said.

Houston said that was part of the original intention for the program. She said it’s all about encouraging curiosity and exposing the teens to something they might not have given a chance to in the past because it wasn’t “cool.”

“It’s a tool they can add to their toolbox to use to be successful on the outside.”

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Amanda Smith introduces Long Legs, an endangered box turtle, to youths at the county’s juvenile center. Smith is with a nature center. MICHELLE PEMBERTON/THE STAR