



Alex Santana, co-owner and barber instructor at Reading Barber Institute, speaks during the Life Skills Crime Prevention Tennis Clinic aimed at getting troubled youths to make better choices in life.

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Justices side with Met-Ed in conduit case

BY MICHAEL YODER
READING EAGLE

After years of court battles, the state Supreme Court ruled Tuesday that the City of Reading is liable for tens of thousands of dollars in damages caused to a Met-Ed conduit bank in 2009.

Tuesday's decision reverses a 2015 Commonwealth Court judgment that the city was immune from a lawsuit from Met-Ed because Pennsylvania's Tort Claims Act frees governmental bodies from liability in damage to property.

In a 6-1 decision, the Supreme Court ruled that city workers' negligence led to \$53,000 in damage to a conduit, making the utility exception clause of the tort act applicable, as Met-Ed had argued.

Met-Ed spokesman R. Scott Surgeoner said the company was "very pleased" with Tuesday's decision by the court.

"We believe that decision clarifies and reinforces the application of the utility service facilities exception to governmental immunity under Pennsylvania's Tort Claims Act," Surgeoner said. "It's been several years, and it's good to get a final resolution."

According to the majority opinion written by Justice Christine L. Donohue:

■ The court case dates back to an incident in July 2009 when workers from the city's sewer department excavated a site in the 200 block of North Fifth Street to gain access to the sewer main. As the excavation proceeded, a portion of Met-Ed's conduit bank was exposed and damaged.

■ Met-Ed officials were notified of the damage by the city and hired Homan Excavating of Leesport to stabilize and repair the conduit bank. Homan employees told city workers that the excavation of the sewer main was not being properly reinforced and could lead to further damage of the conduit.

■ A heavy rainstorm in July caused earth to erode around and under the conduit, leading to a collapse of the city's hole, into which Met-Ed's conduit bank fell.

A 2014 decision in the Berks County Court held the city responsible for the \$53,000 bill to repair the conduit.

The following year, Commonwealth Court cited a precedent involving a backhoe and overturned the ruling, finding that the city would have been liable only if its facilities, rather than its employees, were responsible for the damage.

The Supreme Court found for Met-Ed, ruling that, in passing the Tort Claims Act, the General Assembly clearly intended to include negligent acts — such as the City of Reading employees' failure to heed a warning about the precariousness of its hole — under the utilities exception.

Reading Mayor Wally Scott said he was unfamiliar with the 2009 incident or the outcome of the case on Tuesday. Scott said he would honor the court's decision and reach out to Met-Ed officials to come to an agreement.

"I don't have any reason to believe that the state Supreme Court didn't rule right," Scott said. "I'm just a person who believes, 'Let's do the right thing,' but it's always better to do the right thing when it happens rather than go to the expense to have someone tell us that we're wrong."

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Trading ankle monitors for a life with possibilities

Reading boys in program meet successful barbers who are former inmates

BY ELLEN BARDASH
READING EAGLE

A tennis instructor and five teenage boys wearing ankle monitors walk into the Reading Barber Institute. No, it's not the setup for a bad joke. It's three men's effort to change the boys' lives before they make a decision that could land them behind bars.

The boys were brought to the institute, at Eighth and Oley streets, as part of the Life Skills Crime Prevention Clinic, run through Set Point Tennis. Participants are in the Evening Reporting Center program at the Children's Home of Reading, which serves as an alternative to juvenile detention centers.

The clinic usually meets weekly at the courts by Wilson High School to practice tennis and hear from a speaker, but Michael Murphy, the owner of Set Point Tennis and the clinic's organizer, decided to go in a different direction this week. The group heard from the Reading Barber Institute's co-owners, Serg Vilaire and Alex Santana, two men who used cutting hair as a way to turn their lives around.

"That's what the purpose of Set



Serg Vilaire, left, co-owner of Reading Barber Institute, and Michael Murphy, president and owner of Set Point Tennis, speak to the boys in the program.



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Point Tennis Life Skills is — to connect these young men that have electronic monitors on their feet with positive role models like these young men that are creating positive change in the community," Murphy said.

Like the boys attending the clinic, Vilaire and Santana have experience getting into trouble before they decided to become barbers. Today, the two own both the institute and ATS Barber Shop. But their success isn't just for them: They want to give others in Reading the same opportunity.

At their shop, Santana and Vilaire employ 12 barbers. After running a successful barbershop for a few years, they decided to take things a step further by opening the Reading Barber Institute,

where they have been teaching courses to prospective barbers since January.

The institute, which can educate up to 25 students per instructor at a time, uses local and state grants of between \$5,000 and \$10,000 to help ex-felons and low-income people get their barber's licenses. This money goes toward the cost of the classes, textbooks and equipment.

In addition to learning how to be a barber, students receive instruction on managing money, a skill Santana said is vital when working in a vocational field.

The reasoning behind giving grants to students is that if ex-felons have jobs, they are less likely to re-enter the prison system, and the career opportunity gives more people a chance to support their

families, pay taxes and generally contribute to society, Murphy said.

"You have the electronic monitors on now," Murphy told the boys. "But once you get them off, you can do a lot of bigger and better things with your life."

Once students complete 1,250 hours of training at the institute, which Santana said takes between nine months and a year, they automatically receive a temporary barber's license. From there, they can apply to get a license from the state board.

According to Santana, the idea for the institute came from the need for guidance for young people in the community.

"It's very tough for a young man today to grow up in the City of Reading, and you can see it with these young men," Murphy said. "They're very good boys, but for one reason or another, they strayed off a little bit."

One ideal that Vilaire, Santana and Murphy emphasized to the boys was that of accepting personal responsibility.

"You are in charge of yourself and the decisions that you make," Vilaire said. "Everybody can tell you all the things that you're doing wrong, and this and that, but life has a way of letting you know you're screwing up. Sooner or later, life itself is going to let you know that what you're doing is wrong."

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