

Helping inmates 'S.T.O.P. and Change Direction'

St. Gabriel parishioner brings pilot program to prison

by STEPHEN UZZELL

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CHARLOTTE -- When Joseph Charles Marinello reports to his job site, he must pass through five mechanical release doorways to get to his office, stopping at each passage and wait for security clearance before entering the interior of Albemarle Correctional Institution in Badin, N.C., just west of Albemarle.

But Marinello is pleased to enter into the ACI labyrinth four days a week after driving some 40 miles to Stanly County. The St. Gabriel Church parishioner is a determined educator and counselor in a full-time violent offender's treatment program within the medium security unit that houses over 850 inmates.

Marinello teaches the S.T.O.P. and Change Direction program for the North Carolina Department of Correction Division of Prisons. The words of the pilot program's acronym, "Survey, Think, Options, Prevention," are designed to slow the participating individual to check emotions rather than to act on impulse.

"It's the only program like this in the state," said Russell Ramsey, ACI program director. "We have seen improvements in their (the inmates') behavior. We've seen more positive attitudes. We've seen less infractions. We've seen them continue with aftercare, after completion. We've seen them become peer counselors in the program for the new guys."

The intense 20-week program consists of 28 men agreeing to live together in a dormitory setting. In the beginning, the group encounters a lot of trust issues. Many inmates do not want to talk about why they are incarcerated.

"When the program first starts out, there's a lot of anxiety with the men; they don't know each other," said Marinello. "And of course, I force cultural diversity. I try to put African Americans at the same table with European Americans and Latinos, because I really feel that's an important part of the program's learning about each other."

Marinello encourages the group to use more appropriate behaviors with regard to interpersonal communications and relationships. He teams with two other staff members to teach inmates through an experiential curriculum utilizing personal sharing, role-playing and one-on-one counseling. Three inmates -- former graduates of the program -- participate as peer counselors within the group.

Posters displayed in the ACI library, where the group meets, contrast "power and control" behaviors with "equality" behaviors. Men are learning how to be responsible for their own behaviors and how to recognize and to express a myriad of feelings that may underlie their anger.

Both the inmates and personnel speak of the positive results from the curriculum.

"When I first came into the class, I had a bad temper and I didn't really know how to deal with it," said an inmate who calls himself "Little Wayne." "This class helps. I've picked up strong bonds with this class. It's like a family, and it's going to be pretty hard to walk away from that."

Jennifer Langley, ACI superintendent, praises the program and Marinello.

"We've been very pleased with it. In fact, we have a waiting list," she said. "Joe has the ability to truly give himself. He has the heart for it, he's dedicated to it and he's very valuable to have in the program."

"Joe is the S.T.O.P. program," said inmate "Howard." "The Scripture popped in my mind, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.' If there's anyone that I've ever known to truly be a peacemaker, that's Joe Marinello. ... He can come in here and relate to us because he gives of himself."

Langley said 90 percent of the inmates will eventually be released.

"And if those people do not re-offend because of skills that they have learned in the domestic violence program here, then it will save us a lot of money and a lot of pain," she said.

There are almost 90 men on the waiting list for the next course to be offered in 2004. The present group, entering its 15th week, contains five inmates with life sentences who transferred to ACI from other maximum-security units within the N.C. Division.

The strategy of Marinello's program is to educate and create "agents for change." The men will return to their populations after graduation in December and may demonstrate they can walk away from adversity and still feel good about themselves.

"It's not just a program. I consider it to be an option for life," said an inmate "Baby Boy Norm." "It gives you a chance to live. For you to care for somebody, you have to care for yourself, also."

Although Marinello is not allowed to accept gifts as a state employee, inmates have given him artwork, ceramic sculptures and other crafts they've made. One inmate, a Baptist, made a rosary for Marinello; the inmate learned from a Catholic pen pal how long the rosary should be when finished.

"He took plastic stirring sticks, cut them into little pieces, melted them and rolled them into beads. He used staples to hook the beads together," said Marinello. "And then he used a paper clip and dental floss to weave and bind plastic pieces together into a cross. It's very special to me."

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Want More Information?

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