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Criminals, crime victims share experiences in the hope that once inmates get out of prison, they stay out

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BEAUMONT - The young woman sobbed as she addressed the roomful of prison inmates at the Richard LeBlanc Unit.

"Before this, I didn't have any hope for society," 20-year-old Holly Horton told them. "Prisons are filling up. I thought you were all a bunch of bad guys. I found out you were good guys who made bad choices."

Horton was speaking in her first session with a group that has been spending every Monday night for the past 12 weeks visiting the LeBlanc Unit and working with about 35 inmates.

Bridges to Life, a program operating in 21 Texas prisons, is aimed at reducing inmate recidivism by bringing victims of crimes and offenders together.

Horton joined the group because of her mother, who has taken part in nine sessions. The inmate who spoke after Horton underlined the significance of her decision to join. He told his fellow prisoners to think of her if they ever were tempted to commit another crime.

Volunteers go in hoping to help the offenders get in touch with their consciences and understand how their crimes affect other people, but they find the work helps them as much as they hope it helps the prisoners.

Yvonne Stevens lost her husband, Ray, 23 years ago when he was shot to death in a robbery at a restaurant the couple owned.

Police never found his killer.

Stevens said Bridges to Life is part of her way of keeping her husband's memory alive. She hopes telling her story will help inmates to understand the ripple effects of their crimes.

It has also helped her to find forgiveness and healing.

"It has helped me see prisoners in a better light," Stevens said. "Now when I'm looking at inmates, I see them as people."

The inmates must listen when victims of crimes - often very brutal crimes - tell about what happened to them and how it affected their lives.

This is what affects them the most, inmates in the program said.

Inmate Terry Keys said when victims opened up and shared their stories so honestly, it made him want to open up.

It turned out to be just what he needed.

Keys, a 43-year-old Beaumont resident, has served 16 years for robbery by assault and is to be released next month.

Keys thought he had done his time and was ready to go home.

But over the course of 12 weeks, Keys found himself feeling things and saying things he never thought possible.

Bridges to Life saved his life, he said.

"God brought me here," he said after the graduation ceremony. "I know I'm not going to do wrong."

The curriculum emphasizes concepts such as repentance, reconciliation, restitution, forgiveness and empathy, volunteer Jesse Doiron said.

To graduate, the inmates must write two letters: one to their victim or victims and another to their family.

In the letters they must admit their crime, ask the victims for forgiveness, list several things they are going to do to make amends and show empathy for the victims.

That done, last Monday night was graduation.

Before the program began, inmates milled about, greeting each other and the volunteers with many a hug, smile and cheerful word.

If it weren't for the white pajama-like uniforms of the inmates, it would be hard to tell the difference between this gathering and a church social.

After a prayer, two inmates with strong church-choir singing voices started off the ceremony singing hymns a capella.

Inmates and volunteers both had the opportunity to stand up at the lectern and speak to the "class."

One inmate after another took the microphone to talk about God, repentance and personal responsibility.

One read a poem; another sang a religious song. Some broke into tears.

Volunteers also say their pieces, telling the inmates how proud they are of them for owning up to their crimes and taking steps to live a better life.

John Sage, who began the faith-based program in 1998, said one reason it works when other forms of rehabilitation fail is because it is victim-centered.

Volunteers add that the program works because of the genuine love that grows between them and the inmates.

David Wesley said when he left prison this time, he finally would be the father he had never been to his children.

The 52-year-old Houston man will be going home in about four months after serving two years for a narcotics offense.

"Bridges to Life came along and showed me what love is really about: responsibility," he said in his turn at the mic. "The only thing I have to do is be responsible for my life and my children's lives."

Victim volunteer Doiron, who has been involved with Bridges to Life for about four years, entered the program reluctantly after a friend suggested it, sensing Doiron had not really moved on after a brutal attack years before.

Doiron said his first experience talking about his vicious beating at the hands of two men was unpleasant, and he had no desire to repeat it.

"It took about 20 minutes and I cried - I fell apart in front of 40 guys who were murderers, burglars, drug dealers ... "

But when his friend asked him to come back again, for some reason Doiron agreed.

"I realized for the first time I was being fairly honest and not hiding," he said, adding he was surprised when the inmates asked him if he had forgiven his attackers.

He said he'd never really thought about it.

He was struck by the question, one that prisoners have asked him and other victim volunteers many times since.

"They realized that if I can forgive my attackers, then maybe their victims can forgive them," he said.

It became clear to Doiron the offenders often were as traumatized by what they had done as the victims were.

"In Bridges to Life we are on opposite sides of the bridge, but it's the same bridge we are crossing," Doiron said. "It's as bad for them as for us. We see how much they have injured themselves."

To a cynic, this could seem like so much touchy-feely pie in the sky.

But the statistics are impressive.

According to a Bridges to Life recidivism study, of 3,039 program graduates who have been released, 429 have returned on parole violations or new convictions. This is a 13.9 percent recidivism rate, compared to an estimated 50 percent among inmates who don't complete the program.

Inmate Larry Dale said when he began attending, he didn't think Bridges to Life was for him.

"I didn't want to be here and do this program," he said. "I came here looking for something but I didn't know what I was looking for."

What he found was understanding about himself and his previous poorly considered motives.

"For the first time in my life I feel positive about the direction I'm going," Dale said. "I want to thank the State of Texas and all of y'all for doing this."

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