

## **The Beaumont Enterprise**

### **Bridges From Bars**

09/04/2004

By ANDREA WRIGHT / The Beaumont Enterprise

NEDERLAND - They come from many walks of life and they're many different ages, but the graduates from Bridges to Life are all about to receive more than just a diploma. They're re-entering the free world.

At the Texas Department of Criminal Justice LeBlanc Unit, the August graduates gathered for a relaxed evening program that ended their six months of classes designed to help them with that re-entry, some after a relatively brief time incarcerated and others after as long as 30 years.

Most who began attending the Christian-based sessions were influenced by hearing from the program's volunteers who were themselves victims of crimes.

"This has been the most rewarding time since I've been locked up," said Robert Lemming, before he sat down with his guitar to sing a song he had written himself. "I wasn't a Christian before I came to prison."

Founded about five years ago by John Sage of Houston, Bridges to Life was inspired by Sage's volunteering for a similar program following the murder of his sister.

"My sister was murdered in June of '93 when she was 43 years old," Sage said in an interview following the LeBlanc graduation program.

"Two strangers broke into her apartment, beat her, wrapped a plastic bag around her head, and stabbed her to death to steal her car and \$13. With her pleading for her life. They told in court how she said, 'Please don't kill me - I have two kids.' The lawyer asked them, so what did you do? And they said, 'we killed her.' They wanted to drive to Bay City."

His story, and those of other victim-volunteers, are told to inmates serving time for a variety of crimes, with the intent to stir empathy where none existed. At LeBlanc, all inmates have had drug or alcohol problems and most crimes were related to those addictions. At their graduation, they have an opportunity to step up to the podium and discuss their experience there, the program and their hopes for different futures.

Harvey Morris, a "recreational addict" before entering prison, told how he was influenced when he heard a woman volunteer speak on how she was victimized.

"I was really impressed ... I crossed the bridge to understanding how somebody else feels, and gained a respect for others," Morris said. "That old Devil comes along and says, 'Go

ahead, man, you can do it, you can get away with it.' Now, the first thing that comes to me is 'How is that other person going to feel?'"

Tim Honeycutt, 45, went through the Bridges to Life program in 2003, not at LeBlanc, but at the Kyle Pre-Release Unit, located near San Marcos. The BTL program operates in 10 prisons across Texas for both men and women.

Today, Honeycutt attends Community Church in Orange on Sundays, attends classes at Lamar University four days a week, and is a self-employed carpenter remodeling homes. Recently married, he and his wife live in Deweyville.

Looking back, he reflects on how the BTL experience turned his life around. Incarcerated for triple DWI violations, Honeycutt said the program succeeded in making him take responsibility for what he had done in his life, and what he had not done.

"I used to think I could just drive around, drink, and never thought about the danger to other people on the road," he said in a telephone interview. "That (program) brought a lot of feelings and beliefs from childhood back for me.

"I built a better relationship with my family, and my 27 year-old daughter. I almost abandoned her when she was 18, just left her life. Part of the program was to write a letter to a member of our family ... it's a healing process."

He said in his opinion the prison system needs a lot more programs like Bridges to Life, whereby inmates are allowed to sit and talk with people "from the outside" before they cross that final bridge back to the free world.

"You're fixing to get out, and you think, I'm ready to go, but this type of program opens your eyes to other things like family, morals, and getting close to God ... I pray a lot. I thank Him every day of my life."

## ***Bridges to Life***

A non-profit program currently conducted at 10 prisons across Texas, mainly metropolitan cities, working with the Victims Services Division and the Chaplaincy Department, both under the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

Inmates who sign up for the six-month program will meet once weekly with BTL volunteers and the prison chaplain.

Volunteers, themselves victims of a crime, go through an orientation, followed by a combination of victims speaking before whole groups of inmates, then breaking up into small groups of five-six inmates with one facilitator and two victim volunteers.

The mission is to meet with inmates who are preparing for release within 12 months, to assist them in their transition from prison life to re-enter the free world.

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Thoughts on graduation day:

Danny: "I was an athlete and a druggie. In '99 I gave my life to Christ and it's been beautiful ever since ... with Bridges to Life, seemed like years and years of stuff that had been bottled up inside - it all came out."

David: "I've been locked up 20 years ... this program has helped me reach into parts of myself I never thought I could touch again."

Henry: "At first I didn't like the program because it made me think about all the bad things I did to my kids."

Jesse: "I felt I was a victim of society, but really, I was a victim of myself."

Ramiro Garcia: "I was always thinking of me, not the victims. Now I know everything I do can hurt others ... I'm going to try to help others when I get out of here."

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