

## **Dallas Morning News**

### **Victims hope to turn inmates around Hutchins State Jail welcomes program for those close to release**

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By ED TIMMS / The Dallas Morning News

Three men broke into Connie Hilton's Tyler-area home and murdered her husband. She was beaten and raped. They killed her dog. More than a decade later, she works with Texas inmates who are about to be released. She wants them to understand how crime affects victims, their families and friends. She wants the inmates to accept responsibility. And she doesn't want them to commit more offenses.

"If we can reach at least one person in every group, we have saved a lot of people from being victims," said Ms. Hilton, regional coordinator for Bridges to Life, a faith-based organization that brings crime victims and inmates together in face-to-face encounters. The goal is to both reduce the number of inmates who end up back in prison, and to empower the victim-volunteers who participate.

This weekend, Hutchins State Jail in south Dallas County became the most recent Texas facility to participate in a Bridges to Life program. Roughly 20 to 25 volunteers, including victims and "facilitators" who help guide the discussions, as well as a similar number of Hutchins inmates, will meet weekly over the next three months.

Ms. Hilton said the inmates will learn from the victim-volunteers how crime affects others, and in the process may become better people. The victim-volunteers do not meet with the inmates who committed the specific crimes they suffered. After the program is completed, they have no further contact with the inmates.

The inmates typically are within 12 months of being released and receive no special privileges or consideration on their sentences. Participation is strictly voluntary.

"They are going to be released back into our society within several months," Ms. Hilton said. "... By hopefully changing their attitude, when they come out, they will be productive citizens. They won't be making more victims."

A total of 438 Texas inmates already have completed the process at several other Texas prison facilities since the nonprofit group was founded in late 1998. Of those, 335 have been released, and 25 – 7 to 8 percent – have returned to prison. Both male and female inmates have gone through the program.

It's too early to gauge the long-term recidivism rate – that will take more time and data – but Texas prison officials are optimistic that the numbers will stay low.

Raven Kazen, director of victims services for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, noted that the normal recidivism rate in Texas prisons is "close to 50 percent or more." Even if the rate among Bridges to Life inmates goes up within the next five years, she predicted that it will be substantially lower than the regular recidivism rate.

"We've had people who've been in prison on five separate occasions who say that this program has made more of a difference in their lives than any other rehabilitation program they've ever been in," said Ms. Kazen, whose office works closely with Bridges to Life.

Ms. Kazen said that by talking with victims, inmates realize that crime really has an impact on "another flesh-and-blood human being."

Many times, she said, inmates rationalize their criminal behavior. For example, a drug dealer might claim his was a "victimless" crime, failing to understand or admit that someone who purchased the drugs might commit other crimes to support a habit.

"Not owning up and taking responsibility for what you've done keeps you in the same pattern of doing it again," she said.

### ***Rebuilding a life***

Thomas Allen, 28, first ran into trouble as a juvenile; as an adult, he racked up a criminal record that included aggravated assault on a peace officer, aggravated robbery with a deadly weapon and burglary of a motor vehicle.

He went through the Bridges to Life program while in an East Texas prison. Now out of prison, he is trying to rebuild his life, trying to care for a 3-year-old daughter and a wife who has been diagnosed with aplastic anemia, a rare bone marrow disorder.

He works as a commercial floor installer. Recently, he wasn't able to work for several days after he was injured in a car accident; his wife underwent a bone marrow transplant.

In such times, when things aren't going right, Mr. Allen said that he has had to fight off thoughts of easy ways to make money. But, he said, he has tried to focus on lessons that he learned in the Bridges to Life program: the consequences of crime and the hurt it causes.

"I can't say that I wouldn't have relapsed" if it had not been for that insight, he said.

Bridges to Life was founded by John Sage, a Houston businessman whose sister, Marilyn Sage Meagher, was murdered in 1993.

Mr. Sage said he went through a period of "rage and anger and anxiety and depression and revenge" for about four years. He later participated in a pilot project that brought victims and offenders together, and ultimately decided to launch Bridges to Life.

## ***Courage required***

The organization has grown substantially but is limited to a degree by the number of victims willing to get involved. Bridges to Life is actively seeking victims who might be interested.

"They have to be past the initial raw anger of the tragedy," Mr. Sage said. "They have to have a desire to help someone else. I think they have to have a spiritual dimension in their life, not necessarily any certain religion or any particular faith. ... And they have to have the courage to take the first step."

Over a 12-week period, victim-volunteers and inmates cover a variety of topics. They often meet in small groups with a facilitator who helps guide the discussion and a chaplain.

Panels may talk about a specific subject, but there are no lectures or preaching.

Ms. Kazen described Bridges to Life as a Bible-based program that draws upon the values without proselytizing.

"The things we're using out of the Bible technically are the same things that the Quran and the Torah and other religious books have in common," she said. "If not the same words, the sentiments: how you treat your fellow man, the act of repentance ... accountability ... forgiveness ..."

The inmates who have participated, she said, represent a variety of faiths; some are atheists.

Mr. Sage said that when he started the organization, he hoped it would reduce the number of future victims, sparing others some of the pain he endured after his sister's death. But while the focus was on reducing recidivism, he said he was surprised by the effect on the victims who participated.

"It never makes the tragedy a positive event, but it gives them something positive they can do with the tragedy. ... They can use that experience to help another person change, so he doesn't cause another family to go through what they went through."

Ina D'Orzio is a Houston area accountant and victim-volunteer whose son, E.R. Capps, was murdered in Houston in 1993. She soon will be going to a Texas prison for her third series of meetings with inmates.

For victims, she said, the program is "not just the cheapest, but most therapeutic counseling we can get."

"Most people don't listen to our side, so we never get to talk about it," Ms. D'Orzio said. "I spent eight years not talking about it."