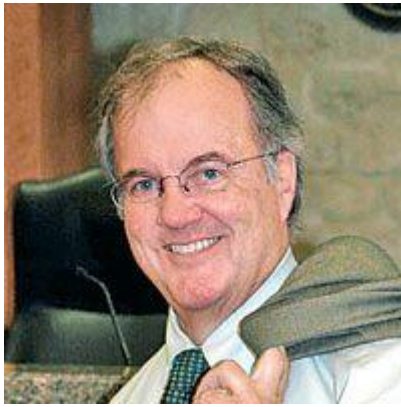


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Judge courts safer world by helping rehabilitate inmates

By: MIKE WILLIAMS, Greater Houston Weekly



'We do very little rehabilitation and socialization of our inmates. It's shocking how little we spend on it.' -- Bill Burke

Judging is Bill Burke's business. But after hours, he's not so quick to judge. He's quick to help.

The lawyer-turned-jurist who holds forth at Houston's 189th District Court spends his days hearing cases and settling matters at the new Harris County Civil Courthouse downtown.

But when the day is done, you'll likely find William R. Burke Jr. heading to jail, where he takes part in and has become a strong advocate for Bridges to Life, a remarkable program through which volunteers help Texas prisoners prepare for life on the outside by working through the problems that landed them inside. "These are folks who are getting out," said Burke of the prisoners he works with, usually in small groups of 10, who participate in Bridges by choice, typically for 12 week programs. "They're coming back to live in your neighborhood and mine. And so that being the case, we'd like for them to be living as law-abiding citizens and have some tools for living life right."

Burke is critical of the state of Texas' commitment to helping prisoners adjust to life after their sentences are served. "We do very little rehabilitation and socialization of our inmates," he said. "It's shocking how little we spend on it. And then we let them out, send them back to your neighborhood and wonder why they don't behave."

The faith-based Bridges to Life was founded in 1998 with the primary mission of reducing crime by reducing the recidivism rate of released inmates. One strategy is to bring inmates together with victims of violent crime.

"Many of them are victims of very violent crimes - murdered children, murdered spouses, murdered parents," said Burke. "They're not meeting with the people who committed the crime they're affected by, just other offenders.

"They share their stories with the offenders. It's a healing process for both. The crime victims are trying to use the terrible thing that's happened to them to heal and benefit somebody else, these inmates, and, indirectly, other people who won't be affected if the inmates change their lives."

The point, he said, is to get inmates talking about themselves. "Many of them have been victimized by their families, by relatives, particularly in the women's prison, but in the men's prisons as well. And many of the choices they make as adults have been influenced and shaped by the fact they didn't have parents who cared, they were molested as children, thrown out of the house, left on their own at an early age, a stepfather who beat them - I mean, you name it, they've gone through it.

"And so the goal of these programs is to have them recognize some of the things in their lives that are influencing their behavior, and to get across to them the message that if they let those things run their lives for the rest of their lives, and their choices are all governed by those bad experiences, they may never get out of that cycle."

Burke, who is open about his own battles with the bottle, said prisoners have invariably fallen afoul of the law because of drugs or alcohol. "Probably 80 percent of the inmates in the system, their crimes are either directly related to getting money for drugs and alcohol, or indirectly somehow."

Burke, a Lamar High, Rice University and University of Texas Law School graduate and a former partner at Baker Botts, got involved with Bridges to Life in 2001 through his church, Chapelwood United Methodist. His wife, Beverly, is also involved in prison ministry, and both are part of programs at the Star of Hope, a shelter and service agency for the homeless.

"Sometimes it will absolutely amaze you, the changes you can see in people," he said. "What I've learned over five, six years of doing this work is, my job is to carry the message. How it's received, and how quickly it's absorbed and how it's put to work, that's the responsibility of the person we're working with and how God works with them, and whether He puts it in their head that makes them change it. "I can't control that part of the process; all I can do is be responsible and show up and deliver the message."

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