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Prison program puts faces on criminals, victims

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By MELISSA FLETCHER STOELTJE, Express News

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KYLE — The men file into the meeting room clutching thick white binders, all of them dressed in identical beige khaki scrubs.

If it weren't for the heavy locked door just outside, they could be mistaken for a group of doctors here to discuss the newest medical regimen. But the agenda is far more serious than that. The goal of the night is nothing less than redemption.

They're taking part in a program called Bridges to Life, a prison ministry that seeks to heal victims and reform criminals by bringing them together to tell their stories and listen to one another. Part of a movement called restorative justice, it's designed to prompt offenders to accept responsibility for their crimes as it gives victims an outlet for their pain.

In place in more than 20 prisons across Texas, the program has shown to drastically reduce the rate at which inmates return to prison, especially when it comes to committing violent crime.

First, the 45 men, many with arms emblazoned with dark prison tattoos, stand to sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Amazing Grace." Then they sit, and the speaker for the night, a short, dark-haired woman, walks to the front to tell her story.

It's a harrowing one. Her name is Julie Thomas and she has spent much of her adult life tethered to abusive, alcoholic men. It was 1996 when her ex-husband took her 17-month-old son for his visitation day. He didn't bring him back. When Thomas rushed home from work, she found a message telling her to go to the hospital.

There, a police officer said her son had suffered a massive head injury. Doctors told her there was little hope for survival. After her son died, she gathered him in her arms.

"I just wanted to hold him one more time," she tells the men.

In the throes of a drunken fog when the child was injured, her ex-husband wasn't able to tell Thomas what happened that day.

Later, he was charged with injury to a child with a deadly weapon and sent to prison.

"I don't know about reconciliation," she tells the men, who listen raptly, the only sound in the room the occasional clanging of the metal door. "Maybe somewhere down the road I

can think about forgiveness. It's not healthy for me to hold onto these feelings. I need to let go of it for myself."

When she's through, the men give her a standing ovation. Some hug her.

It seems simple — a victim telling her story to offenders, imparting how crime has wounded her — but what's happening inside this minimum-security prison is nothing short of revolutionary.

This program "makes inmates face reality and get out of denial," says John Sage, a lanky, folksy man who started it in 1998. "The whole system says deny, deny: Don't admit to anything. We're going contrary to that. They have to own up to what they've done, put it out there in the light. In the process, we create empathy where there was little or none."

The inmates sit down in small groups with victim-surrogates — not the actual victims of their crimes — to talk about the "ripple effect" of their actions, not just on their victims but on their own family members and society at large. They hear how victims were hurt. But in the victim-volunteers they find an open, nonjudgmental ear.

"We don't judge them or condemn them," Sage says. "We do challenge them."

But the inmates do more than that. Under strict rules of confidence, they tell the stories of their own broken lives — narratives typically pockmarked with abuse, abandonment and neglect. They do the one thing that is verboten in prison society: They become vulnerable.

Washing off the blood

On a recent rainy night, thunder boomed outside the Kyle Correctional Center, a therapeutic community prison made up of drab, low-slung barracks and fences not topped with barbed wire. All the men here have drug or alcohol abuse in their pasts and go through 12-step programs; their crimes range from DWI to burglary to murder. All the men sent here are within six months of being released to halfway houses. A majority of inmates are African American.

Participation in Bridges to Life is strictly voluntary; most inmates hear of it through word-of-mouth. At some prisons, there are waiting lists of up to 200. Joining the program has no effect on an inmate's sentence. Only sex offenders are barred.

After Thomas finishes her speech, the victim-volunteers — around 20 of them — split up into small groups with five to seven inmates. Each group has a trained facilitator and two victim-volunteers.

It's week nine in the 12-week program and the topic tonight is reconciliation. In facilitator Leslie Perry's group, the men discuss several verses of Scripture related to forgiveness.

Though Bridges to Life is a spiritually-based program, it's ecumenical — open to all, non-believers included — without preaching or proselytizing.

"How can you reconcile if the other person doesn't want to?" Perry asks the group.

The men listen as Thomas talks about her struggle to forgive her ex-spouse in the death of her son.

"Just this last year I stopped wanting him to suffer for the rest of his life," she says. "But as far as having our relationship restored? No, that's a Grand Canyon step for me."

The men murmur their understanding. Those who kill children are targeted in prison, one says.

"I would love to restore my relationship with my wife," says Kurt Maloy, in on a drug charge, "but she's heard it all before. I've cheated, I've lied, I've took from her. She don't believe me. This is my third time in treatment. Words won't do it no more. I'm gonna have to show that I've changed."

Perry, the program manual open on her lap, says you can't "wind back the clock." But you can break fresh ground to build a new life.

The men nod, take it in. They speak about the difficulty in overcoming their crimes.

"If you're not making amends it stops you from going to the next level spiritually," Eric Marks says.

Then, as is done each week, one man tells his story. Tonight the floor belongs to David Morales, a distinguished-looking inmate with silvering temples and a wooden cross around his neck. Sent to prison for armed robbery, he talks of being a "terrible rotten kid" who started stealing early.

Once in prison he joined the infamous Mexican Mafia, shooting dope and ordering hits on other inmates. In 2000 he gave his life to God through a prison ministry program.

"But it was Bridges to Life that made me really realize the people that I've hurt," he says. "I've got lots of blood to wash off my hands."

"But you do realize that even if you're just robbing someone, you're hurting them," Thomas challenges.

"Oh yes," Morales responds.

As part of the program, each inmate has to write two letters: one to his victim and one to his family members or society. It's optional whether the letters are sent. Deborah Hartman, a regional coordinator, provides one, exactly as it was written:

To My Society:

I realize I've hurt you. I've hurt you by being an addict. All the crimes I've committed to fuel my addiction. I've not only been a deterrent to my family and community but thru all the drugs I've manufactured and sold. The police and special task forces that you've financed thru your tax dollars to stop me, the jail space I've occupied and correctional staff you've once again had to finance. The children of the addict parents I've preyed on in my selfish and dishonorable trade I've preyed on with no regard for others I'm sorry. To the police who've spent untold amounts of time and energy working to stop my lawlessness, I'm sorry. ... I ask you for your forgiveness for the strain I've put on our community and all of my criminal behavior and felonious activity. I'm sorry, please forgive me.

Get out, stay out

It started with a murder.

In 1993, the 43-year-old sister of John Sage, a Houston businessman, was slain. Two 19-year-old strangers out to steal her car — which they got, along with \$13 — put a plastic bag over her head and stuck a butcher knife in her throat. She begged for her life. The two later told police her last words were: "Please don't kill me. I've got two kids."

Sage was very close to his sister Marilyn; she even introduced him to his wife. Her death plunged him into a deep, intractable depression. The former defensive captain of the 1970 Louisiana State University football team lost 30 pounds. He couldn't function.

Then he took part in a prison ministry called the Sycamore Tree, sponsored by Prison Fellowship Ministry. It gave him the idea to start Bridges to Life. That first year, 30 inmates at a Beaumont prison took part.

Today, almost 4,500 inmates have graduated. In addition to the Texas prisons — both male and female — the program curriculum has spread to one prison in Louisiana and two in Colorado.

Prison officials are interested in Bridges to Life because an ongoing, three-year study suggests the program has a dramatic impact on recidivism rates.

Of those in the study, only 14 percent have returned to prison — compared with about 67 percent nationally — and, most startling, only 1 percent have returned for violent crime. One-third of those who go through Bridges to Life are serving time for violent crime.

Many graduates who return to prison have committed technical parole violations, Sage says.

One could argue that recidivism rates for graduates would be lower because the program is voluntary, and thus draws a better grade of inmate. But Sage says his program includes some of the hardest cases.

Experts who study the program believe a true cognitive change takes place in offenders.

"You can't continue to hurt people once you care about those people," says Dr. Marilyn Armour, assistant professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin. "Those two worlds don't fit together anymore. You can't fit caring and hurting in the same space."

Armour did research that analyzed 1,000 inmate responses to Bridges to Life and found a remarkable consistency across prisons. Inmates reported that hearing victim stories affected them dramatically.

"Now we know Bridges to Life is effective," she says. "The question now becomes: What are the mechanisms that make it work, and how can we help other groups that are trying to develop prison programs?"

Hartman, the regional coordinator, thinks she knows why the program is successful.

"Inmates see that the people who have the most reason to hate them and blame them instead are forgiving and accepting and caring," she says, noting that only 2 to 5 percent drop out of the program.

But restorative justice isn't simply about lowering reoffense rates. In fact, the primary focus is on elevating the status of the victim in the criminal justice system. And it's the victim-volunteers, drawn from churches and other community groups, who say Bridges to Life has changed their lives as well.

"I don't believe there's any such thing as closure, but (Bridges to Life) helps you let go of the negative power of the anger and bitterness that harms you," says Linda White, who was one of the first volunteers. Her daughter was raped and murdered by two 15-year-old boys in Brazoria County in 1986. They shot her in the head and left her body under some brush.

White says the program enabled her to see offenders as "fully-fleshed-out, three-dimensional human beings, who are just as wounded as we are. It cures some of that resentment and softens some of those hard places."

Terrie Reagan was shot three times during a carjacking 12 years ago. The incident left her with post-traumatic stress syndrome, broke up her marriage and sent one of her sons into a spiral of alcohol and drugs.

"For me, this program puts a face on my offender," she says. "I hear them, I listen to them. I don't condone what they've done, but over the 12-week program you actually

grow to love them. You start to understand how they got to where they are and that understanding helps me."

"This is a more hopeful vision of the future, as opposed to just locking people up," says Ellen Halberd, who was raped and beaten by a man dressed like a ninja who hammered a knife into her skull. "You actually get to tell your story again to people who want to hear it." And in the telling, there is healing, she says.

Tears and more tears

It's another rainy night when the graduates of Bridges to Life receive their completion certificates and get to say a few words into the microphone.

One by one, the men describe how Bridges to Life has changed their lives, some of them tearing up and choking on raw emotion. What they have to say overturns stereotypes of the unreachable, hardened criminal.

"This program has made me realize my actions have consequences," says Richard Baker, 39, serving time for his third DWI conviction. "Even though I didn't hit anyone, I still hurt someone. I hurt my family. Bridges to Life really opens your eyes. It opens you up."

William Meyer, 53, serving time for robbery, says the program helped him for the first time confront and deal with abuse he suffered as a child.

"We got real close in my group, there were a lot of tears," he says. "It helped me to open up and trust other people, to have confidence in other people. I'm just about positive I'm not going to reoffend. This program gave me the tools to help me face myself and see the harm I was doing."

Whether the graduates will go on to live law-abiding lives once on the outside is anyone's guess, but tonight the light inside the meeting room is hopeful and warm, as inmates hug the victim-volunteers and say goodbye.

Kurt Maloy, the repeat drug offender who is convinced he's going to win back his wife, has one more observation.

"A group leader told me something that stuck with me," he says. "She said tears are what happens when the ice around the heart melts. That's what Bridges to Life does: It melts the ice. This program should be in every prison in Texas."