

United Methodist Communications

Bridges to Life gives prisoners new perspectives

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By JOHN GORDON, Bryan, TX (UMNS)

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Prison inmates seldom talk about their crimes and why they committed them.

But getting prisoners to tell their stories — and bringing them face-to-face with crime victims — are part of the philosophy of Bridges to Life, a program taught by volunteers at 22 Texas prisons.

Regional coordinator Margarita Blazier takes attendance.

"We look at confession, accountability, responsibility," says Margie Blazier, regional coordinator for Bridges to Life. "And we discuss those topics with the offenders."

Doug Wilson of Spring, near Houston, tells inmates with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice in Hamilton how crime has affected his family. Wilson's son is serving a life sentence for his role in a robbery and double murder.

"My son made a choice that changed his life and ours forever," Wilson says. "Two young people died, and four young people were arrested three days later."

Wilson wants inmates to understand how crime steals hope and opportunity, and how it affects other family members.

"A lot of them believe that they are not affecting anybody at all but themselves. They're looking at it from their perspective," he says. "I think once they hear it from somebody else's perspective, they realize what type of impact they've had."

Reaching out

Bridges to Life started in 1998 and was founded by John Sage, whose younger sister, Marilyn, was murdered in 1993. More than 300 volunteers are involved in teaching the 14-week course at Texas prisons, and the program also is launching at prisons in Louisiana and Colorado.

The Rev. Guy Pry, a retired United Methodist pastor, has volunteered for the prison program for more than three years.

Most of the volunteers in the Bryan program come from area United Methodist churches.

"This is not a Bible study; it's not a worship or preaching group," says the Rev. Guy Pry, a retired United Methodist pastor. "But this interaction in following the steps of accountability, accepting responsibility, confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, restitution — those steps are part of it."

Attendance at Bridges to Life meetings is voluntary. But inmates who sign up are much less likely to return to prison.

Blazier said the recidivism rate for those completing the program is 13.9 percent, compared with a national average of 67 percent re-arrested for serious crimes within three years of their release from state prisons.

'I'm not all bad'

"I've started thinking about the crime that I committed and why I committed it," inmate Robert Smith tells a group of other inmates and Bridges to Life volunteers at the Hamilton unit. "It can stop with me. I have that hope for my son (that he) doesn't have to see the inside of this place."

Lonnie Jones was 16 when he killed a homeowner who surprised him during a burglary. He expects to be released soon after serving nearly 30 years for murder. He has taken the Bridges to Life course three times and hopes to counsel inmates after he gets out.

"Bridges to Life just really solidified that feeling that I am worth something," says Lonnie Jones.

"(Bridges to Life) was the program that I was looking for all the time, all these years," says Jones. "Bridges to Life just really solidified that feeling that I am worth something. I do have some good in me, you know. I'm not all bad."

James Benson, who has served 21 months of a six-year sentence for selling drugs, is determined not to return to prison after his release. "The choices I made were bad choices," he says. "But now that I get to see how it affects other people, it makes me change my outlook on everything."

Blazier says the program's impact on other inmates is equally dramatic.

"We have had men listen to the stories at the impact panel at the very beginning. And before they even get into small groups, they're crying," she says.

More volunteers are needed, however, as the program expands to other prisons.

"Basically, (we need) just a person who wants to help, who knows that they can make a difference," Blazier says. "And if we can change one person's way of thinking as far as crime, I think we've done a lot."

*Gordon is a freelance producer and writer based in Marshall, Texas.

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To see a video on their site about Bridges to Life called Prisoners Meet Victims, click [here](#).