

# Faith Based Programming on Texas Death Row Officially Began Today: A Splendid Sense of Awe

--by Rob Will, 1/5/2022

For the past hour I have been doing yoga and listening to some real nice jazz while letting a splendid sense of awe flow through my mind and body... Just resting with the feelings regarding the events that took place earlier today on the Faith Based Sections. Today was our official orientation and introduction, which started off with a presentation by the founder and CEO of the *Bridges to Life* organization, John Sage.

We are all still housed in a single cell super-seg solitary confinement. There are 28 of us in two adjacent 14 cell sections. Each section has a dayroom cage between our cells and the officer control picket. There is a U-shaped space between the cells and picket about 10 feet wide. A partial concrete wall separates the sections. I've heard that people can actually see the structure and inside of this building online. They had a mic system set up in the picket space with speakers in each dayroom. John Sage spoke along with several of his colleagues. Then, they walked around and spoke to us and the Field Ministers passed out the materials: a book entitled *Restoring Peace: Using Lessons From Prison to Mend Broken Relationships* by Kirk Blackard, and an accompanying Self Study Guide.

*Bridges to Life* is one of the two programs that we are required to take starting off the Faith Based Programming. The other is the *Overcomers Recovery Support Program*. These programs will last at least 90 days and we will be required to take eight classes/programs in all. These two programs have been utilized within the Texas prison system for at least 20 years and they are highly effective. After they passed out the Overcomers book, *A Daily Choice: Overcoming Life-Controlling Problems* by Charles and Sharon Burton, everyone left and I started reviewing the materials.

As I was doing this a team of C.Os (an "escort team") came to take my neighbor somewhere. One of the officers saw me with the books and asked, "That's the two classes they're starting off with? Overcomers and Bridges to Life?" When I told him yes, he started talking to the other C.O— who was "stripping out" my neighbor— about how effective these programs are strictly from a behavior modification perspective. He said "It's about time. We wouldn't have had half the problems we've had back here if they would've started these programs years ago". He talked about how he's seen guys out in general population completely change after taking these programs. This guy is a veteran C.O who has worked on this unit for at least 10 years both on Death Row and out in general population. He used to be on the SWAT team here (which is a very telling thing) and his political views are well-known: *extremely* Right Wing Republican conservative.

Hearing him voice support for the programming *simply from the perspective of reducing problems for staff and making their job easier* made me think of how ridiculous it is that the "higher ups" in TDCJ have never allowed this programming on Death Row until now. It's here now though and that's what matters. There is surely plenty of information online about these two initial programs, but here is a little info that I've gained from reading through the materials today:

## Overcomers Recovery Support Program:

The *Daily Choice* workbook is divided into daily lessons that we have to study and complete. Each day we will do a short writing assignment. This is a very serious 90-day program. Some lines from the Intro:

*“The Overcomers Recovery Support Program based on a 90-day recovery workbook. A Daily Choice is established with Christ as its solid foundation. It is a program that works! People of all ages are being released from addictions to drugs, alcohol, smoking, gambling, codependency issues, eating disorders, sex addictions, violence and criminal behaviors. They're learning to overcome bitterness, jealousy, the need to manipulate, and feelings of inferiority. Through daily lessons, memory verses, and weekly support meetings, participants are regaining self respect and taking control of the future!”*

### Bridges to Life:

The *Restoring Peace* book is 190 pages divided into 13 chapters. The accompanying *Self Study Guide* is 76 pages divided into 14 chapters of week-long lessons that require study and written assignments. This is also a very serious program that will last about 90-100 days. It is indeed Faith-Based and Christian orientated but they note that the program isn't intended to “proselytize and convert participants to a particular view or religion”. Here are the listed Goals and Objectives of the Bridges to Life program:

### Goals:

This program has four principal goals:

1. To improve offender's daily lives while they are incarcerated.
2. To help offenders mend relationships with loved ones and others outside prison.
3. To provide a healing journey for offenders.
4. To create an environment that increases the likelihood that offenders will not commit additional offenses and return to prison when they are ultimately released.

### Objectives:

The successful achievement of the program's mission and goals depends on offenders accomplishing the following objectives:

- Understanding the impact of your criminal actions upon your victims and society and accepting responsibility for these actions.
- Acknowledging the consequences of your actions and being accountable to God, yourself, and others for what you have done.
- Appreciating the role of faith in the healing process.
- Learning a process of confession, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and restitution.
- Taking initial steps in the peace and reconciliation process by starting to deal with your current problems, thereby seeking internal peace, personal recognition, and reconciliation with family, loved ones, and friends in the free world.
- Learning to live peacefully with fellow offenders.
- Making plans and commitments for future healing actions and for a life that doesn't include another visit to prison.

Each week there will be a one hour show for *Overcomers* and an hour show for *Bridges to Life* broadcast on the prison radio station, each hosted by a different prisoner Field Minister. Everything is new. None of this has ever been done before and it is going to be interesting to see how things progress and evolve. Most of the guys here have never before dealt with anything like this and they've been locked in a solitary confinement cage for years and years.