Prison walls don't stop 'Lifers' from reaching out

Sussex inmates able to better their lives by helping others

By ESTEBAN PARRA • The News Journal • May 10, 2010

GEORGETOWN -- Tim Goodwin has the rest of his life to think about the summer of 1987, the year he kidnapped an Elkton, Md., woman as she drove her 16-month-old child to her grandmother's home in Newark.

Goodwin was sentenced to two life terms in prison for kidnapping and rape. But now, the 51-year-old said, he's no longer the person he was more than two decades ago. He credits his conversion to the work he does for the Lifers' Group, an inmate-run program at Sussex Correctional Institution in Georgetown where Goodwin serves by helping organizations, mostly nonprofits, outside the prison.

"It mellows me out. It helps me deal with my incarceration," Goodwin said last month as he stripped plastic and lenses from gold-framed glasses. "It makes me a better person by helping people."

One of the activities of the Lifers' Group is to take used eyeglasses donated to Delaware's Lions Club International and refurbish them so they can be donated to needy people in other countries. Inmates also separate the useful parts and give them to Lions Club members who sell any profitable metal the inmates have stripped from the glasses, such as gold, to help pay for delivery of eyeglasses to the poor in other countries. The inmate program refurbishes close to 4,000 pairs of glasses per month, said Gary Reed, president of the Lifers' Group. By Reed's estimates, inmates have fixed around 500,000 pairs of glasses.

Inmates serving at least 10 years in the Sussex County prison, with no disciplinary violations within the year they apply for the program, can be part of the movement helping community organizations such as the Lions Club's sight team.

"This is the greatest thing in the world," Lions Club District Governor 22-D Jack Brinckmeyer said of the refurbishing program. "What they do saves hours and hours of volunteer time."

Inmates may apply for membership, but it's up to other Lifers to decide if that person will make a good fit.

"We're the best of the worst," said Reed, the Lifers' president and a 44-year-old sex offender. Though some inmates have been deemed "scum" and need to be incarcerated, Reed said, some retain benevolence in them -- and they want to show it.

Though Lifers like Reed, who joined the program in 1996, won't get time off shaved from their sentences, the benefits come from the lessons learned while performing good deeds.

"I know if I wanted to do something good I had to learn patience," he said. "I had to do things the right way, instead of the wrong way."

Besides their work, the Lifers have donated more than $6,700 to area organizations since 2002, Reed said. They raised the cash by hosting chicken dinners and selling products they've made, such as picture frames, candy holders and purses, to other inmates, their families and prison staffers.

Advertisement

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

The Lower Delaware Autism Foundation, Jusst Sooup Ministry and The Way Home, a Georgetown-based group that helps released inmates re-integrate into society, have received donations from the Lifers.

"I have great respect for Lifers' Group," said Barbara Del Mastro, executive director of The Way Home. "These are men who have done terrible things, but now they are turning their life around and trying to give back."

Lifers members provide good role models for other inmates, Del Mastro said. "This is some kind of redemption even within the walls of the prison."

Besides helping the nonprofits, the Lifers also fund prison programs such as Daddy's Bedtime Story, which provides children's books that inmates can read into a recorder so the recordings and a book can be sent to their children.

For 37-year-old Aron Johnson, serving a five-year sentence for robbery, the story program is the link to his 7-year-old son, who lives in Dover with his mother.

"I don't really think that our relationship would have even started on a basic foundation had it not been for this," Johnson said.

One of the Lifers' goals is to heal part of the society that their actions destroyed, said 61-year-old Jackie Lovett, the group's treasurer. Lovett was sentenced t o two life terms without probation or parole for the 1982 drug-related killings of a young couple near Delmar.

"We've burned so many bridges, we've torn up so much stuff and we caused so much mistrust with our families on the streets," Lovett said. "We want to reach out and rebuild them bridges."

What they give is not so much a peace token as much as a gift that inmates never gave when they were on the outside, Lovett said.

"The work being done by the members of the Lifers' Group, especially their eyeglass project in conjunction with the Lions Club, is a great example of offenders finding ways to give back positively to the community," Delaware Department of Correction Commissioner Carl C. Danberg said. "The men aren't involved to earn good time credit or gain special favors, they are involved because they want to be a part of something that yields a positive outcome."

Contact Esteban Parra at 324-2299 or eparra@delawareonline.com.

Purchase this Photo

As a member of the Lifers' Group at Sussex Correctional Institution, inmate Tim Goodwin helps salvage parts from old glasses. (Special to The News Journal/SCOTT NATHAN)

Advertisement

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™