

New life for ex-cons

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By the time he was 16, Damien Greene already was an ex-con.

As an adult, the South Bronx native spent three years in prison for two drug-related felonies.

By 28, Greene was through with that life and wanted a change - but he could not go it alone.

"I wasn't focused enough. Every time I got out of jail, I started doing the same things - selling drugs," he said. "I did a lot of part-time work, and in between I was selling drugs."

Greene is one of 110 ex-cons participating in the Doe Fund's Ready, Willing & Able Day program, which gives them an education and stable jobs.

To graduate, participants have to stay clean and are subject to weekly drug tests, a welcome challenge for Greene.

"I made a commitment to better myself, but I don't think I would have been able to do it by myself," said Greene, who entered the program in September and wants to run his own construction business one day.

While about a third of freed prisoners are rearrested within a year, according to the Correction Department, participants of the year-long re-entry program, which was started in 2006, have an impressively low rearrest rate of 4.8%.

"Above all else, we give them the opportunity to work, which is what they want when they come out," said Felipe Vargas, the program's director of criminal justice. Vargas himself was imprisoned for 20 years.

"No one wants to hire someone with a record, and many of them lack both interviewing and job skills. They don't want to go back to prison, but door after door is slammed in their face, and they get frustrated."

The recruiters regularly set out to the Queensboro Correctional Facility prerelease facility to tell prisoners about the program and pick up those interested at the jail's door step on their first day of freedom.

"We want to be the first influence in their life when they come out," Vargas said.

That's where Gary Caldwell, a former U.S. Marine, first heard about the organization.

"Not asking for help throughout different times in my life - that's why my addiction has lasted for so long," said Caldwell, 42, who was addicted to drugs and alcohol for 28 years and was in jail for robbing a cell phone store in Queens to fuel his cocaine addiction.

In the early stages of the program, participants work 40 hours a week, cleaning city streets in blue uniforms, eventually progressing into vocational training, getting their GEDs and attending college courses.

"My family, my kids are proud of me now because I'm in a college course, trying to get my super's licence," said Sean Holder, 37, a father of three who had been in and out of trouble with the law for two decades after he dropped out of Coney Island's Lincoln High School in 10th grade.

After his last release from jail, Holder worked a number of odd jobs for five months, but couldn't seem to hold down a stable job.

"I needed some help, because especially when you have a conviction, all of the people don't give you a chance," he said. He joined the Doe Fund program about a year ago.

The program's success is largely due to the organization's long-term commitment to its graduates, said Vargas.

"We offer lifetime assistance. Once we place a guy, we follow him for five months, and we say to them, 'If you should lose your job, you can always come back here and we'll help you find another job,'" he said.

"We're here for them, and we won't leave them out in the cold."

If you are interested in learning more about the program or joining it, please call Nadia Sadloski at 718-417-2558.

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