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Seeking redemption one prisoner at a time

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OSSINING — "Remorse" — it is a word Julio Medina has scrawled across the chalkboard in a lower-level classroom at Sing Sing Correctional Facility.

Medina, director of aftercare for the New York Theological Seminary, has asked the nine inmates currently studying there for master's degrees in professional studies to reflect on its meaning, to put, as he said, a "human face on our crimes."

"We don't get the opportunity to talk authentically about that remorse. We tend to justify," Medina says to the men, most of whom are serving an average of 20 years to life for serious crimes. "We all feel it. We know it's there. But we somehow find a way to bury it."

Orlando Hernandez, who has served 18 years of his 25-to-life murder sentence says it was that deep sense of remorse that began his metamorphosis .

"It is the driving force embedded in my transformation," Hernandez, 55, says to the class, adding he hopes to go into ministry work. "There hasn't been a day that has gone by that I have not regretted what I've done. I know I can't make it up to the family, but maybe I can make it up to others."

For most of the prisoners in the curriculum, it is that desire to own up and change that has brought them to the program. The NYTS course has been at Sing Sing for 27 years and during that time some 375 inmates have graduated. The famed maximum security jail has a current inmate population of roughly 1,750.

For Robert Wooley, who has been behind bars 22 years for kidnapping, receiving his master's degree, he said, was a "godsend."

"What attracted me to this program, was that I saw men that were doing something positive and that were trying to encourage others to be better people," said Wooley, 59, who does administrative work for NYTS while serving his time at Sing Sing. "It was encouraging to hear that there are second chances."

Medina has built his life around second chances, devoting his own to keeping former inmates out of prison and making sure the ones still inside are prepared to stay out upon release.

Turning point

Medina graduated from the master's program at Sing Sing in 1994 while serving a 12-year sentence for drug dealing. He returned in 2001 to teach because, he said, it was in the class where he reached his "turning point."

"I came in with the idea that it would look good for the parole board, but 30 days into the program, the lights came on," said Medina, 48. "The program gave me a blueprint that I was more than a drug dealer and that I was a community organizer."

Medina teaches about twice a month, but in his classroom there are no textbooks, rather reflective thinking and establishing long-term goals on life after prison. His work at Sing Sing, in addition to establishing the East Harlem-based Exodus Transitional Community, one of the nation's leading re-entry programs for ex-convicts, has been an inspiration to those both in and out of jail.

"I consider him like a Malcolm X," said Rashan Smalls, 35, a Sing Sing inmate completing his master's degree. Smalls has been incarcerated for 17 years on a second-degree murder conviction. "He's a model of excellence for us. I admire him tremendously. He is the example that we hope to be."

Medina founded the nonprofit, Exodus Transitional Community in 1999, three years after he was released from Sing Sing. He considered the work a "calling" after getting letters from those still locked up asking him "How is it out there?" and struggling

himself for months with finding a job. He received more than 30 rejection letters, he said, before landing one as a substance abuse counselor.

"We need organizations that are concerned about the practical things, like 'Did you eat today?' Seventeen percent that get out go to homeless shelters," Medina said. "What can we do to make this real, to give people a fair opportunity of getting work and reuniting with family?"

Exodus was built on that premise, one that Medina refers to as "balancing the scales of justice." Yet, he understands the task is monumental.

Struggle after release

There are currently some 58,658 men and women incarcerated in New York, representing the fourth-largest prison population in the country, according to the state Department of Correctional Services. In 2003, 26,315 inmates were released from jail and after a three-year follow-up, close to 40 percent of that population returned.

Nationwide, the statistics are even more staggering. The U.S. reportedly has the largest prison population in the world, with more than 2.4 million people behind bars, 2008 federal figures show. A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice in 1994 tracked 272,111 people coming out of 15 state prisons, and showed that after three years, 67.5 percent were rearrested.

Some of the reasons why recidivism rates are so high are because ex-convicts struggle with finding employment and housing, securing proper identification, re-establishing ties with family and returning to communities where their crimes were committed.

Exodus is working to stem that tide by supporting its clients socially, economically, spiritually and educationally. In a decade, the faith-based program has helped some 5,000 people transition back into society, Medina said. Exodus operates on a \$1.2 million budget annually with monies coming from the state, the city and individuals, including prisoners, Medina said.

In 2004, Medina was an invited guest at President George Bush's State of the Union address, where he became the recipient of a grant initiative Bush proposed. In January 2009, Medina was invited to Bush's farewell speech in which he was mentioned as an example of "America's character."

According to a study, Exodus reduced the recidivism rate by half the national average. Exodus works, Medina said, because its staff is made up almost entirely of ex-convicts, including Diana Ortiz, Exodus' community liaison. She spent 22 years at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for robbery, grand larceny and second-degree murder. Former program director John Valverde spent 10 of his 16-year murder sentence at Sing Sing. Valverde went to work at a similar agency.

Not to mention Medina's fervent belief that all people are "redemptive."

"We committed a crime, but there is more to us than that crime," Medina stressed to the class at Sing Sing.

Successful model

Philip Heath, superintendent at Sing Sing, praised Medina's work and said more programs like Exodus are needed.

"You have a gentleman who was where they were at, telling the inmates that they can make it on the streets. And not only is he telling them that, he's showing them where to go in order to make it," Heath said. "We have thousands of inmates released to society every year looking for jobs and here you have a program that's meeting those needs."

On a recent visit to Exodus, about a dozen men and women showed up for orientation at the building on East 104th Street that also houses the Church of the Living Hope. They are greeted by staff and a room outfitted with computers and posters revealing some grim statistics: "More than 1.7 million children have a parent in state or federal prison," and "More than 8.3 million children have parents under correctional supervision."

The weeklong orientation includes several workshops a day, including ones on filling out employment applications, mock job interviews and Internet searches.

Clients are asked to sign an "Exodus contract," that focuses on setting — and achieving — goals in six specific areas: education, family-relationships, employment, spirituality, health-physical fitness and community involvement.

Clients become participants for a year or more following orientation. Exodus also offers anger management and substance abuse counseling, life coaching and mentoring programs for children with incarcerated parents. Between 800 and 900 people receive services at Exodus per year, officials said.

On day one, senior case manager Steven Llanos opened the meeting, relating his own personal experiences of crime and hard times to a captive audience. His well-ironed khakis, Oxford shirt and tie contradict a past of gangs and drugs. Llanos was a member of the Bloods for 10 years and served eight years in prison for possessing an eight ball of crack, he said.

He was released from prison in June 2008 and couldn't even, as he put it, get a job at McDonalds. He arrived at Exodus because he walked up the wrong block, he said, and after participating in the program, began volunteering there before working his way up.

"I never had a real job until I got to Exodus," Llanos, 30, told the group. "I advise you to work that contract. You are here with people that really care about you. You all already took the first step."

Llanos said out of 73 people on his caseload, at least 50 percent are employed and only three have returned to prison. He believes the program works because of the staff being able to relate to the clients, he said.

"We're living examples of how to stay out of prison," he said.

Later, Rudy Holden, Exodus's retention specialist, covers the basics to seeking employment. He discusses how to get a state ID card, professionalism, hygiene and punctuality. Holden, who served 11 years for assault, ends with a quote of his own that resonates with the group: "I'd rather have a 9 o'clock curfew than sit on a 10 o'clock count."

As the first day of orientation drew to a close, some of the clients appeared hopeful, invigorated by the staff and their experiences.

Felicia Earl, who served time for felony attempted robbery and is now in a drug treatment facility, said she learned about Exodus through a friend and wanted to come because she was having a hard time landing a job with her prison record.

"It's looking good so far. I think they can help me," said Earl, 34. "At least I know I'm not alone. There's nobody better than nobody else."
