

# Press-Republican

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## A chance to change

### Clinton Correctional offers inmates opportunity to alter lifestyle

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---- — "Good afternoon, community."

A voice rings strong from the front of the room. Behind the man speaking are five other men sitting in freshly pressed forest-green shirts and pants. In front of them, sit around 30 other men in the same ironed attire and with the same perfect posture.

Six posters of the community's six groups line the back wall: Keeping Eternity in View, Chosen Few, Transformers, Genesis, The Future, and Visionaries.

Surrounding them are motivational signs.

"Proper preparation prevents poor performance," one reads.

"If you leave prison the same way you came in, then you've failed prison, and you have to repeat the class," another says.

But one makes a louder sound with its words than any other, "Failure is the key to success."

This is the Network program at Clinton Correctional Facility, and these men with neat outfits and eloquent speaking voices are inmates.

#### Inmate-run program

The Network community meeting occurs around 3:30 p.m. every day. This is the time when the 36 men in the program join together to begin the day's programming.

"Network is a melding of different philosophies," said Laura Whalen, the program supervisor and a correction counselor for the state.

This live-in, transitional program is solution-focused — a place where inmates are given the opportunity to take ownership of their crimes. They apply to be in Network and, upon being accepted, make the choice to stay and be an active community member. They make the choice to progress.

Network is inmate-run, and the integrity and progress of the program is based upon the inmates in it. During the community meeting, the men focus on their feelings and attitudes, their behaviors and the way they handle situations. They are able to learn from one another.

Whalen supervises and pops in periodically to assess how the inmates are doing, but it's their responsibility to make sure the community runs smoothly.

## DAILY SEGMENTS

During the meetings, run each day by one of the six community groups, the men go through six segments.

During "Open General Spirits," or "OGS" as the men call it, they stand and share how they feel that day. If it's positive, the community applauds, if not, the room is silent. This is part of the community's operation: responding to one another and working together. Whalen calls the step a "confrontational community," where the men learn to confront their feelings and one another without violence.

The "Philosophy" segment follows; it's a time when the community recites Network principles in a unified voice: "Network is a positive environment for human development in a caring community where individuals can help themselves and others ..."

The philosophy speaks of a positive, growth-filled environment where goals are set and behaviors that lead to successful lives are practiced. And it reminds inmates that it is a lifestyle of discipline.

The philosophy ends with "... a chance to change, to confront mistakes and accept responsibility for your life." The last portion is what Whalen stresses.

"The core of it is responsibility, ownership and integrity," she said.

The two most serious segments follow: "Regression" and "Pull Ups." At this point, inmates have the opportunity to openly take responsibility for having a negative attitude or behavior. After someone stands to express their regressions, other members of the community act as "teachers," offering advice or a piece of wisdom for the person to take with them. The inmate then openly reflects on the teaching and talks about his "future action plan."

Whalen doesn't allow the inmates to use the word "try" at Network; she tells them to say "will."

The "Progress" segment follows and acts as a tension breaker. The men bump fists and talk about the positive things that happened that day.

The segment ends with "Announcements and Closings," where an inmate offers pieces of wisdom the men can take with them for the day.

## 'GEMS OF WISDOM'

Network is simple, yet structured. The day is scheduled in advance, and it is the inmates' responsibility to attend. Whalen teaches classes periodically, but mostly the inmates teach each other.

Marvin Denis, a 68-year-old inmate who has been in prison for 13 years, has been in Network for nine years. At one time, Denis was a member of the program's hierarchy, the group of men chosen by their

progress and attitude to be both peer and teacher. He recently stepped down but still teaches courses on self-improvement, macro-decision making and healing anger.

"You just don't know when you're going to get the gems of wisdom," he said. "People; that's the strength of this program."

## DEVELOPING HABITS

The classes and workshops begin once the community meeting ends, and they last until around 11 p.m. each day. Every meeting is voluntary, but inmates are required to attend at least 15 meetings a week. Many, however, attend significantly more.

The men must learn to juggle work, prayer services, community meetings, classes and visits, just like they would outside prison walls.

"This is a good reflection of how life's going to be," Whalen said. "It gives them structure and discipline ... There's a fine line between therapeutic and how they like to live."

The Network is structured in such a way that basic living rules — dressing presentably, carrying yourself well, being on time and participating — help the men develop habits. Paying attention to little things helps them learn to take responsibility for themselves, she said.

"It also speaks about how you feel about yourself. Their behavior has to connect to their values."

## BETTERING LIVES

Often the men undergo "learning experiences." As a group, the hierarchy delivers a learning experience on paper to an individual. It explains to the person what they need to work on and includes an action plan on how to improve.

"It's information on how to proceed better the next time," Whalen said.

If an inmate has a learning experience over and over for the same thing, Whalen will meet with them and tell them point blank, either take responsibility, or leave the program.

"Some think they can go through the program with no learning experience," she said, but that just shows they aren't learning or growing.

The way they stay in Network is to be open to that progression and make a conscious effort.

## Pinpointing goals

Occasionally, Whalen gives the men an assignment, such as "What are you committed to achieving in the next year?" or "What do you value, and why?"

The assignments help them facilitate their creativity and problem solving.

"I help them hone down their goals ... Helping them to become specific allows them to figure out what's next," she said.

The men write songs, do monologues, perform skits or create mind maps for their future vision, whatever allows them to best express themselves.

"It's thinking outside the box that helps them. The more they think outside the box, the better they will be," Whalen said.

This outside-the-box approach is what turned Whalen on to the program in the first place. She was hired in Moriah Shock Correctional Facility, a military-style boot camp for inmates, in 2005. In 2007, she came to Clinton Correctional for Network, and she has been there ever since.

"I feel lucky that I was given the opportunity to do that," she said.

Innovative program

The program, she said, is "fascinating" and "energizing."

Started in 1979 by visionary Dr. Cheryl Clark, Network was designed as an innovative prison development at a time when prisons were incredibly negative places to be, she said. Shock incarceration was developed as an extension to Network.

When Network began, it was a part of countless prisons in New York state. Now, Network programs are in only six facilities.

Clark, though retired, continues to be a mentor for the Clinton Correctional Network program, and her "SMART" — Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely — philosophy is woven throughout the fabric of the program.

The program will work to the degree that the inmates want it to, Whalen said.

"I like the growth that I see ... it makes me feel confident that change can occur when people are ready for it," she said.

There is no limit to the amount of time inmates can spend in the program, as long as they are working at getting better and becoming active about changing their attitudes and behavior.

"You can't change everybody, but you can provide them with structure and tools," Whalen said.

Denis said he used to have issues with forgiveness and assertiveness.

"It's changed me into a totally different person," he said. "I'm still excited about this program after all these years."

Making choices

In a letter to the Press-Republican, Denis wrote, "The most powerful lesson I've learned is that I can choose my own attitude ... Network is a way of life, not a place to reside."

And that's just it, Whalen said.

The program isn't a place where participants wait for change to happen to them; it's an opportunity for them to live each day and figure out what caused them to be there in the first place. Ownership and responsibility serve as the foundation, and the inmates decide whether they want to use that foundation to progress and change, or to flounder.

Quintrell Joe, a Network inmate for six years and a member of the program's hierarchy, said the lifestyle is structured and often congested, but it's a revolving door.

"This is a voluntary program," he said. "I made the choice to be here."

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