MAUI PRISON MAY GET HELP

MEO discovers innovative award-winning program, providing training and jobs for ex-cons and will bring the program to Maui. “It saved my life.”

Cort Gallup

Drugs like crystal methamphetamine, or “ice,” are destroying Maui’s families. It’s a fact that makes the statement “We live in paradise” debatable. Our police, judicial system and government officials agree that drugs are a major cause of violent crimes in Maui and across the nation. They also agree that temporarily locking up the offenders compounds the problem. Eventually they are released into our community with no skills and without rehabilitation, returning to the world of drugs because they know no other. The cycle continues, tragically, from generation to generation. Remarkably, a Maui organization has found an answer. Maui Economic Opportunity (MEO) discovered an award-winning program that has a 90 percent success rate in stopping recidivism, or relapse into criminal behavior. The Delancey Street Foundation is a nationally recognized program for the reintegration of former offenders into society.

“This is a story that sells itself,” says Gladys Baisa, executive director of MEO. “Everybody is so desperate for an answer, for a program that works, that when they hear this story they go ‘Oh my god, here is the answer. Let’s go.’”

Delancey Street was founded by Mimi Sibert in San Francisco, 33 years ago. Sibert, who has doctorates in criminology and psychology from Berkeley, says her program is a lot like Yale University. “They do their very best to find the top 2 percent of the population, we go out of our way to find the bottom 2 percent of the population.”

Delancey Street receives no government funding and is completely self-sufficient. It is

see MAUI PRISON p. 2
Maui Prison...

from p. 1

Maui Weekly • June 3 – 9, 2004

A resident who comes in after serving five years on death row could eventually rise to the top ranks of Delancey Street management. The best example is the Delancey Street Restaurant at the headquarters in San Francisco. It has become a culinary landmark of San Francisco for residents and visitors alike. Other Delancey Street businesses include moving and trucking; picture-framing; roller blade rentals; screening of motion picture dailies; Christmas tree sales; book stores; and a transport business for the elderly and handicapped—all manned and managed by Delancey Street people. All profits go into one pot to buy clothing, food, education and anything that will help make residents successful. Fine business suits often end up hiding a body covered in tattoos. Delancey Street operates on an “each one teach one” model: Each resident that comes in is taught and then teaches one who follows. The first goal is to earn a high-school equivalency certificate, quickly followed by hands-on job training. Some even end up with college degrees made possible by collaboration with Golden Gate University. By the time participants leave, they have received thorough training in three job skills, gained at least the equivalent of a high
MauI Prison...

from p. 2

school diploma and developed supervisory and management skills. Residents must complete their commitment of two years; however, the average stay is four years. Needless to say there are very strict rules. "About a million," says Sibert. Rule No. 1: no drugs. Rule No. 2 is "no violence," and No. 3 is "no threats of violence." The incentive to follow the rules is powerful: If you break them it's back to lockdown. There are now Delancey Streets in Los Angeles, New Mexico, New York, and North Carolina, and the foundation is setting up new programs in Alaska, South Carolina and Maui. Verdine Kong, director of MEO's prisoner integration program, recently visited Delancey Street headquarters in San Francisco. Kong loved the program, especially because it is a system based on the idea of family support.

"That works great on Maui because our whole culture is based on 'ohana," says Kong. A partnership between Delancey Street and MEO is expected to lead to the creation of a program to be called BEST House (Being Empowered and Safe Together), offering shelter, educational opportunities, job training and jobs, and changing the lives of the former inmates of Maui Community Correctional Center (MCCC). The sooner the better for Kong. Nobody knows better than she that the drug problem in Maui County has reached crisis proportions. As a former public defender she was literally standing next to the revolving door of incarceration.

see MAUI PRISON p. 17
Maui Prison...

from p. 8

ceration, witnessing the release of inmates back into the same conditions, fueling the crime in our paradise.

"In the legal field you can only help them very little. It's just the tip of the iceberg. There are all these underlying problems, so I wanted to feel more satisfied about what I was doing. I wanted to do more," says Kong, explaining why she changed hats, joining MEO to lead the BEST House program.

"It is a more comprehensive approach to the individual. We mentor them and receive them culturally with renewal of their Hawaiian ancestry," she says, referring to the cultural component of the program. Through the BEST House program, dozens of inmates at MCCC, where there is a very large native population, are enrolled in an extensive Hawaiian culture class.

Na Puaio Maui, or The True Prisoners, is a hula group made up of 10 female and 10 male MCCC inmates. The group performs at functions, resorts and malls, including a recent reception for Delaney Street delegates and residents visiting the MEO office in Wailuku.

Debbie Kamali is training coordinator and cultural specialist for the BEST House program. She says teaching the inmates about their local culture and having them perform is key in making the inmates believe in themselves once again. "It gives them back their self-confidence, their ethnicity, and makes a reconnection to their culture. They love it. It makes them feel like they are giving back to their community."

MEO executives are thrilled that the state has promised them a million dollars for the building of BEST House. The county has already contributed $300,000 for planning and design. However, they are concerned that the federal funds limit them to working with only hard-core criminals. As it stands, only violent offenders between the age of 18 and 35, convicted of a class A or B felony, who have served one year or more in prison are eligible.

"There is a greater need than that on Maui," says Sandy Baz, deputy director of MEO. "For example many drug charges are class C. Those people would be left out." He added that there is hope for complete coverage with other funds coming in.

Those wanting to get into BEST House must show some incentive, a desire to start anew. Like Delaney Street, simply writing a letter, which is then presented to residents for pre-approval, does this. A judge then reads the letter, usually during a plea bargain, and the individual is sentenced to the program rather than being locked up. Although going through the courts is the most common method of entering the program, some homeless people and drug addicts are also welcomed.

It was seeing a man writing his letter to Delaney Street in the compound of San Quentin Prison that saved Abe Elizare's life. Elizare was a heroin addict at 13, a member of the Mexican Mafia, and in his 30s was about to be sentenced for his third violent crime.

"I had never held a job. I never had any skills, and I roamed around the prison system all my life. I really didn't have much of a life. I was thief, a drug addict and a convict," says Elizare. That is when he approached the fellow inmate at San Quentin who told him about Delaney Street. Elizare wanted out of his violent life of drugs and crime. When he heard of Delaney Street he took down the address, borrowed an envelope and a stamp and is now a Delaney Street VP.

"I became a person when I came to Delaney Street. I not only learned my only skills and education there, but I learned how to become a decent human being. I learned social skills so I could function in the real world as a real person. I was in a very violent situation, and if it wasn't for Delaney Street I would be dead. There is not a doubt in my mind that it saved my life. It was the only place that I came across that would take a chance on me," says Elizare.

Edward Jensen of Kihei has been incarcerated at MCCC for eight years. He is a client of the BEST program and he likes what he sees ahead. "It is a great source of support. They are going to help me get back on my feet and lead me in the direction of opportunities," he says.

MEO and Kong believe that BEST House is the type of innovative program that everybody is looking for to successfully reintegrate former inmates into the community. The nationwide recidivism rate—the rate at which ex-cons return to crime and go back into custody—is about 67 percent.

"We want to cut that in half, or even get it down to 25 percent or lower," says Kong. Delaney Street claims that the recidivism rate of their 14,000-plus graduates is less than 10 percent.

"I think the reason why Delaney Street works is because they graduate the program with work skills and an education. BEST House will do the same and everybody on Maui will benefit from it," says Kong.

Ironically, a tool proven effective in fighting the drug crisis that is destroying Maui's families is a program that is based on the idea of the family.

Kong is determined to have BEST House up and running in as little as two years.

"This kind of program enhances public safety, and makes the community stronger and healthier. I really like being a part of that. Who wouldn't want to be a part of that?" she asks.