

# Your Lowcountry

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## STRONG comeback

Program for offenders an alternative to prison

BY ALMAR FLOTILDES  
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At 44, Lewis Thompson's life flashed before his eyes. He was potentially facing 30 years in prison after being indicted for strong-arm robbery of a Mount Pleasant bank in 2008.

It was that possible punishment that finally fazed the Awendaw native despite years of already living in and out of prison for other criminal charges.

A Circuit judge, however, gave Thompson a 15-year suspended sentence with five years of probation on the stipulation that Thompson attend a two-year treatment and training program called SC STRONG.

STRONG stands for Sustaining, Teaching and Rebuilding Our New Generation, which is what the program aims to do, according to its literature.

For people like Thompson who are ordered to complete the program, SC STRONG is an alternative to prison. For others, mainly ex-offenders who also may be substance abusers, the program is a transition place for re-entry into society.

The program gives participants a chance to rebuild their lives by giving them the skills to accomplish that goal.

Thompson said he entered the program about 13 months ago barely literate and with only an elementary education.

At first, Thompson said he thought his sentence was just another dodged bullet and that he would serve his time and return to his old ways of caring only about himself and doing things his way.

Instead, Thompson eventually realized he wanted to change and told himself, "I don't want to go back into society the same way I came in here."

Thompson is on his way from receiving his GED, which he said he's determined to get.

REBUILDING LIVES



John Glemser (left) is facility director of SC STRONG, a treatment and training program for released convicts. He stands with resident Lewis Thompson in front of one of the houses at the old Naval Base that the program's residents renovated and now live in during their two-year minimum stay.

"I'm encouraged even to go further," Thompson said. SC STRONG is modeled after the nationally recognized treatment program Delancey Street Foundation, which was founded in San Francisco in 1971.

The model program operates on the old Naval Base in North Charleston, and halfway through its third year, residents have renovated, on their own, two houses on the property, where the group lives and works.

John Glemser, SC STRONG facility director, said the program plans to renovate a third house, which will house more people. The program has 24 residents now, which is four away from capacity, and aims to more than double that numbers.

With its expansion, Glemser said, he also hopes to see SC STRONG become self-sustaining by 2012 through its residents-run catering and construction businesses. The program now is mostly privately funded.

Glemser, 58, has been with the program since the beginning and lives on the property with the residents. He was a 2006 graduate of the Delancey Street program in New York, which he attended for six years, so he knows first hand where the residents have been.

"It's a perfect opportunity for me to help guys like Lewis," Glemser said. "Like me, these guys got misguided. ... We're teaching them responsibility."

Each day, residents have specific jobs that they are responsible for, working up the ranks from house and yard work to running the catering truck,

which is one of the program's main enterprises. Through the program's training schools, residents are taught culinary skills and construction trades, such as carpentry and plumbing, to give them job options after they graduate from the program.

Also, residents without a high school diploma have a chance to participate in GED courses, as Thompson has been doing four nights a week.

Residents are taught how to better their interpersonal and communication skills as well, to help them become even more viable in the work force. Residents use constructive times each week to discuss current events and even tense issues that may come up.

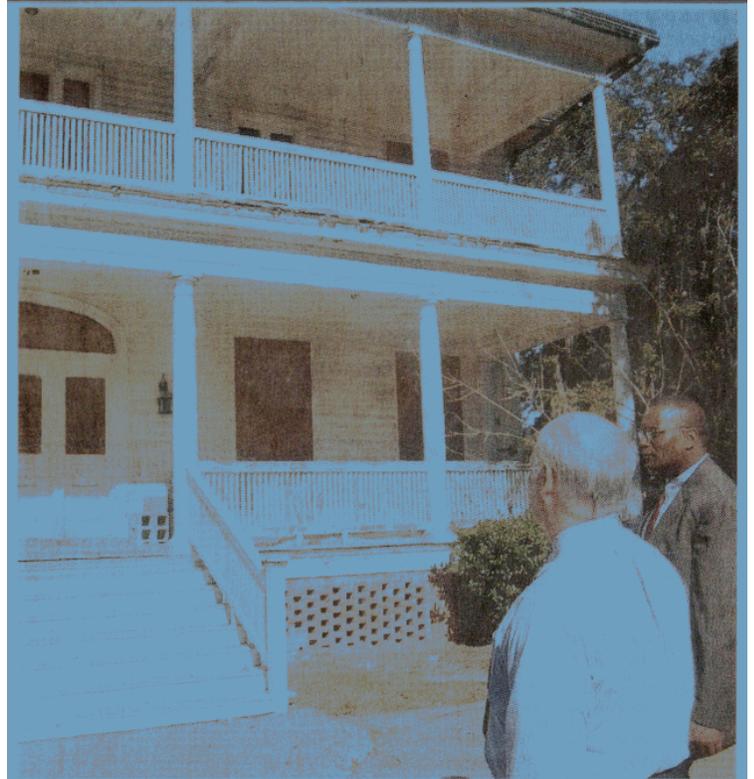
Glemser said the program helps rebuild each resident's self-esteem and teaches them how to market themselves and turn themselves into a commodity.

"We give these guys the tools for life," he said. So far, six men have graduated from the program, and five of them are doing well, Glemser said.

Although residents are required to stay for two years, they can stay longer if they don't think they're ready to leave, Glemser said.

Thompson is only a little more than halfway through the program but already is considering staying as a volunteer.

He said he already knows the first thing he's going to do when he graduates from the program: He's going to thank the judge who gave him another chance.



Glemser and Thompson stand in front of the next house that the SC STRONG program plans to renovate at the old Naval Base. It will help house more residents.