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Don Horsley
SAN MATEO COUNTY SHERIFF

Inmates who volunteer for County jail's tough Choices program are willing to do...

Whatever it takes



AN INMATE RAISES his hand (above) to speak during a Choices program morning discussion. An inmate's personal art (below) is displayed as he works on a T-shirt for donation to a service group.

County's criminals learn their lessons

By Christine Louie
STAFF WRITER

LOOKING back at all the hurt and destruction he caused during decades of crime, Booker Robinson credits one program for helping him turn into a decent human being.

It's a program he says helped banish his criminal exterior. It helped him come to terms with his drug and alcohol addiction. And most importantly, it made him realize how he never wanted to return to his old life.

The Choices program, run out of the County jail, saved his life, Robinson said.

"It is run by love," he said. "Most of the (staff) people are people who have already come back from where you are headed."

The program, founded nearly 10 years ago, is run by a staff of seven men and women,



who at one point in their lives, made the same mistakes as the male and female inmates in Choices.

Facing hopelessness and having nowhere to turn, many of the counselors successfully sought help and are teaching

Choices members what they've learned.

Using what Choices counselors call "behavior modification" techniques, inmates are compelled, through group or individual sessions, to address their past and acknowledge the impact their actions have had on their loved ones and society. Inmates can also participate in classes on domestic violence, parenting or substance abuse, or they can work toward earning a GED.

Both male and female inmates adhere to a strict schedule every day, comprising a dawn wake-up call, numerous "issue group" meetings and a daily service component, in which inmates design greeting cards, T-shirts, dolls or quilts to send to shelters, schools or service people overseas.

Inmates also are held to

Graduates of Choices are three times less likely to be rearrested

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strict standards. There is no cussing, and they must sit properly and be punctual for group meetings.

Appearance is also stressed, as male inmates must shave everyday and have their hair cut every week.

Some participants are hand selected by counselors to become mentors to the other inmates.

Those who fall short of the expectations are reprimanded by counselors or other inmates. Punishment, such as cleaning, is quickly handed down. Those who can't conform are asked to leave the program.

"We are real with them. We don't just talk (about a way of life). We live it," said Teri Lynch-Delane, who helped found Choices. "You gotta learn every day how to be, learn how to stop taking and how to give."

Choices is modeled after the Delancey St. Foundation, a residential rehabilitation program created in 1971 that has five facilities across the country.

Delancey St., which has one location in San Francisco, helps ex-drug addicts and ex-cons so they can re-enter society drug and crime free.

And in many ways, Choices does the same thing, according to Lynch-Delane. The lessons taught through the program leave lasting impressions with the inmates, many of whom haven't returned.

Reducing re-arrest rate

A study conducted in 2000 by the San Mateo County Health Services Agency found that those who successfully completed the program were almost three times less likely to be arrested, convicted, incarcerated or

picked up on a probation violation after being released from jail.

Such statistics are music to Sheriff Don Horsley's ears.

"The real magic of the program is the personality of the people who run it," he said. "They're charismatic and they instill a belief (in the inmates) that they can change."

With little staff turnover in the past decade, the program has been a hit with the inmates who see that counselors are committed to their mission, Horsley said. The Choices program serves 74 out of 850 male inmates, and 21 out of 120 female inmates. There is a three page waiting list for the male Choices program.

Horsley added that all Choices members have some substance-abuse problem, which contributed in some way toward the crimes they committed – including robbery, extortion, burglary, theft, carjacking and even attempted murder.

The fact that many of the counselors themselves conquered substance abuse helps inmates relate more with the staff.

Often those who get caught up in a cycle of committing crimes and doing jail or prison time see themselves as victims, Horsley said.

"Some of these prisoners have low self-esteem, and they don't think they can fit into a law-abiding society," he said. "Choices helps them to see they're not victims. It shows them they have the inner strength and abilities to help them see the value of themselves as human beings who don't need drugs."

Defense attorney Eric Liberman agrees.

As one who has represented many clients who have transformed themselves through Choices, Liberman said he supports the program's attempts to tackle

inmates' substance-abuse problems, and in turn, steer them away from committing more crimes upon their jail release.

"I've had many clients facing three-strikes prosecution and life in prison but because of their participation in Choices and their willingness to change, they have been spared prison sentences," he said.

Changing the cycle

Though inmates may readily accept the lessons taught through the program, it is impossible to ignore the crimes many of these men and women have committed. But those who have demonstrated a genuine desire to change are sometimes given another chance at life.

Robinson, the former Choices member, was facing 50 years-to-life in prison for drug possession. As a three-striker who had spent most of his adult life in prison, he said he still remembers the day when the judge suspended his sentence and instead allowed Robinson to go to a residential treatment facility.

"He was just going on his guts," said Robinson, now a full-time employee at a Menlo Park church. "I knew I was a political liability but I also knew that I wasn't the same Booker. (The judge) took a gamble and it paid off."

Still, many who have committed egregious crimes are not spared from prison time. But Choices staff and judges say they hope the values imparted on the inmates while the program are used as they serve the balance of their sentence.

Craig Parsons, a Superior Court judge who is an advocate for the program, said there are many factors judges and probation officers consider when determining what kind of sentence an inmate gets, especially if they are in Choices.

A prison sentence may still be imposed even if someone is successful in Choices. But Parsons said judges must weigh variables like how the person has conducted himself while in custody, his prior criminal record, the nature of the current offense and their danger risk if released back in the community.

"In some ways, they can use Choices (values) to help them in prison," Parsons said. "The benefit I see is inmates can help themselves to become better and wiser when they get out."

"Any self-help you can get in the local county jail to help you better deal with your issues, the better off you'll be," he added.

Parsons said many of the former inmates who were given a second chance by the court through Choices still keep in contact with him, letting him know they're drug-free and haven't gotten into anymore trouble.

"I always get personal satisfaction from seeing people I know get treatment and to become productive, to become better people, sons, daughters, parents," he said.



AN INMATE (left) traces his work on a window at the jail, as part of artwork Choices members give to the community.

**PHOTOS BY
JOHN GREEN**

“I realized that I love my son and my family more than I do getting high. I’ve made enough mistakes to know I have to listen to other people.”

Jenelle
CHOICES MEMBER



FEMALE inmates (left) in Choices often share their feelings during “issue groups.”

MALE inmates (below) in the Choices program gather for their early morning meeting, where they may act, sing, or discuss current events.

