

Helping inmates free themselves

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‘What does General Motors have in common with a drug cartel?’

When Mark Goldsmith posed this question to a group of inmates at Rikers Island, he meant no disrespect to the car company. He was trying to figure out a way to get the attention of his audience and show them “how they could possibly get a job in the real economy.”

There are people in both legitimate companies and criminal enterprises who do the books, people who are in sales and so on. But, as Goldsmith, a former cosmetics-industry executive, explains, “no one had ever mentioned this idea to [the inmates]. The self-worth is not there. They don’t recognize how smart they are.”

Goldsmith recounted this story to an audience last week as he accepted the Manhattan Institute’s Social Entrepreneurship award for nonprofit leaders “who have founded innovative, private organizations to help address some of America’s most pressing problems.”

Goldsmith’s first visit to Rikers was in 2003, when he went to the Horizon Academy — the jail’s high school. He volunteered for New York City’s “Principal for a Day” program and told the organizers to send him somewhere with “tough” kids. Boy, did he get his wish.

By all accounts, Goldsmith’s lecture was a success, and he was asked to return the following year. By then he had started to learn more about one of the most intractable problems of America’s inner cities — the recidivism rate.

Some 700,000 prison inmates are released into society each year and more than 40 percent end up behind bars again within three years. The rate is as high as 67 percent for men 18 to 24.

The biggest reason, according to Ingrid Johnson, who’s worked with returning inmates and is on loan at the Manhattan Institute, is “barriers people returning home from prison face in achieving employment.”

In 2004, Goldsmith launched GOSO (Get Out and Stay Out). He started to meet regularly with inmates to prepare them for jobs on the outside and continued that relationship once they were released. He had no money for the program, so he met with them in Starbucks — offering help with getting into community colleges, paying for vocational training, advising them about careers, giving them MetroCards to get to and from school and work, even purchasing shirts and ties for job interviews. And he convinced many of his former business colleagues to volunteer their time as well.

The program has a very lean paid staff, and while it maintains a close connection with both the Department of Education and the Department of Corrections, it is a decidedly private organization. “I’m not tied down by any onerous paperwork,” says Goldsmith.

In 2004, he received a grant to open a small office. GOSO adds 250 to 300 new clients every year. Last year, his clients had a recidivism rate of only 9 percent.

John Gonzalez, who had been in Rikers on a drug-related charge, is one of GOSO's first success stories. In 2005, he was 20 years old, a high-school dropout and the child of a single mother in The Bronx. He had no job skills and was, in his words, "doing stupid things." When he met Goldsmith, he thought, "Nah, this white guy ain't doing nothing for me."

But Goldsmith surprised him. He met with Gonzalez's lawyers, helped him get his GED and guided him into a program to get a commercial driver's license. Mostly, though, says Gonzalez, Goldsmith "was a role model. I wanted to be like him. If I ever needed someone to sit down and talk with he was there."

Today Gonzalez is living in a small town in Pennsylvania with his wife and their 5-year-old son. His job as a commercial driver allowed him to save enough money to purchase his own home at the age of 23. Gonzalez is thrilled that his son will get a chance to grow up in a neighborhood "with very little crime and great schools."

Goldsmith, meanwhile, has been approached about replicating the program elsewhere. For the sake of all the John Gonzalezes out there, here's hoping.

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