



An Ethical Foundation – Retraining from a Correctional Perspective

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There is nothing divine about morality; it is a purely human affair. If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed. What the individual can do is to give a fine example, and to have the courage to uphold ethical values in a society of cynics.

Albert Einstein

“Do we want them going back as better criminals? Or do we want to release them with the tools that’ll help them succeed? Those are the questions you have to ask,” said Sheriff Gabe Morgan, Newport News Sheriff’s Office, Newport News, VA. “Unless a person receives the death penalty, is sentenced to life without parole, or dies while incarcerated, they’re coming back.”

That means approximately 95% of those persons convicted of a crime are going to go home. Some day, they are going to return to their community.

The Newport News Sheriff’s Office holds the ethical philosophy that it is obligated to do what it can to make that person...that inmate...a better human being when they leave jail than when they came in. That is why there is an emphasis on inmate programs.

And society -- how does it benefit? Ultimately, neighborhood streets will be safer by virtue of an ex-offender being less likely to recommit crime.

There are numerous inmate programs being offered at the Newport News City Jail. One of the more innovative is the brick masonry class. In July, Sheriff Gabe

Morgan began giving inmates a trowel as a tool for reintegration.

“I believe hard skills, particularly a trade, represent the best chance of success. Also, there is less bias in the construction industry when hiring people with a criminal record,” said Sheriff Morgan. A trade also adds earning power that low skill jobs lack.

The ability to earn a livable wage and find an employer willing to offer a second chance is what turned Charles Williams’ life around. He spent eleven years in prison on a bank robbery conviction. In prison, Williams learned the trade of brick masonry. Now he is giving back as a volunteer at the Newport News City Jail.

“Brick masonry was the foundation for me to start my life on the right track,” said Williams. “It was instrumental in stabilizing my life when I was making the transition from incarceration to society.”

Williams volunteers four hours a week and makes good use of every minute. The advantage to teaching a trade in a penitentiary as opposed to teaching in a municipal jail is time. Williams understands that. In the cycle of his



Teacher Charles Williams instructs inmates in the fundamentals of brick masonry.



Before setting their trowel into mortar, inmates first get a feel for the finesse of handling the tool.

course at the jail, his students may be released, bonded, or transferred to another facility. He needs to get the meat and potatoes of his craft quickly. The emphasis is on teaching the basics.

Inmates gain enough knowledge to appeal to an employer looking for an apprentice. The inmates are very eager to learn Williams said, and they catch on quickly. “The men want to grab onto something to enrich their lives. They really want to break that cycle.”

David Barrett was the very first inmate to sign-up for the brick masonry class. He said before the city jail’s class, his future looked dim. The twenty-four year old has two young children. “I believe it’ll help me stay away from the streets,” he said of learning a trade. “I never knew another way of getting money than drug dealing. I believe it (brick masonry) will help me take care of my kids the way I’m supposed to.”

Academics are another priority at the Newport News City Jail. The GED program was revamped in such a way that quadruple the number of inmates earned a GED in 2007 compared to 2005. “And the year isn’t over,” smiled Vernesa Graves, Inmate Program Director.

Graves tacked on an added incentive to the GED program. Inmates who earn their GED get a graduation ceremony that includes a commencement speaker, a certificate, cake, punch, and most importantly...a contact visit with loved ones. For some, it’s the first time they’ve held their baby, a baby born while they were



Inmates spread mortar and level walls.

incarcerated. For others, it's mother's hug. For other's, it's a G-Rated kiss from a spouse.

The latest graduation ceremony outgrew the limited space of the jail. There were eleven men who passed the test. Each invited four loved ones. In addition, the public school system always sends representatives. There are guest speakers. And don't forget the extra deputies called-in for heightened security. There is not a room big enough for that kind of crowd at the jail.

No space was not going to mean no ceremony. On the contrary. Sheriff Morgan arranged to hold it at City Hall Council Chambers. The event was videotaped and aired on the government channel. There are cameras permanently installed in the council chambers. They are generally used to publicly broadcast city council meetings. "But in this case, we were able to broaden our audience and let them know about the good things going on inside the jail," explained Sheriff Morgan.

"What I remember most is the story about the oyster," said Marcus Taylor, one of the graduating inmates, as he ate cake with his young sons seated on either side of him. Taylor was alluding to remarks made by guest speaker Reverend Jerome A. Barber.

The reverend talked about the oyster's ability to take something poison and create something beautiful. Instead of a grain of sand smothering the life out of an oyster, it has the natural ability to transform it into a pearl. "That's what jail can do for you," encouraged Reverend Barber. "You can take an otherwise painful experience and turn it into something beautiful."

Vinnie Lulofs is the GED instructor. She said it matters not to her whether her students enroll in class because they want to learn or whether they learn because they want to get that contact visit. "The end result is the same. They earn that GED. And that is the first step in



Inmates are awarded a contact visit with family for earning their GED.

getting a job. I don't want them to stop there. Set goals, I tell them. Go to college. Enroll in an apprenticeship program. This is only the beginning." Miss "L", as she's called, is notorious for tearing. Someone handed her a tissue once she started to gloat about "her guys." She got a little choked-up.

Lulofs has been the GED instructor at the Newport News City Jail for seven years. She has never asked any of her students what they're charged with. "I don't want to know. It doesn't matter." The moral and ethical thing to do is treat each inmate the same. The only thing she judges them on is their grades.

Work release is another avenue being pursued. To



Inmates earning their GED participate in graduation ceremony at City Hall while deputies stand guard.



Inmates pose with certificates. From L-R, Sheriff Gabe Morgan; Marcus Taylor; Howard Gwynn, Commonwealth's Attorney; Rev. Jerome Barber.

better understand why this old concept is new to the Newport News Sheriff's Office, you must first understand that the city jail is not the only facility in Newport News that houses inmates.

The City of Newport News runs the City Farm, a correctional facility commonly referred to as a prison farm. It is for male inmates convicted of non-violent crimes. They perform manual labor throughout the city. In addition, the Farm has a work release program whereby a limited number of male inmates hold down jobs during the day and return to their cells at night.

But what of female inmates? By virtue of their gender, they don't qualify for the Farm.

Work release had never before been offered to female inmates housed at the Newport News City Jail. Sheriff Morgan saw the inequity of that and changed it. A pilot program was started this year. A female inmate was the first candidate to be selected, but Sheriff Morgan plans to expand it to include men.

"We have to do something to break the cycle of churn," Morgan said of the recidivism rate. "A person on work release develops the discipline and ethics needed to hold down a job. They learn to be prompt. They learn to be a valued employee. They learn to take direction. Plus, the money they earn pays down their court costs and other fees they incur when they're in here." When they get

released from jail, they'll have a head start on getting their lives back on track.

Back to the brick masonry class in the recreation yard, Barrett reflected on his time behind bars. He discovered jail was a blessing in disguise for him. "It sobered up my mind. I could see more clearly. I could think straight. Jail helped me focus on what was real and what was important: being a role model for my kids," he explained.

With a keen eye, Williams watched his inmate-students construct a wall. "Stand over here and take a look at this line," he instructed. He pointed to a slight variation in the line of bricks. "See how they're off? Not by much. But a 40-foot wall is going to lean." The guys laughed at their mistake and fixed it.

Following the repairs, Williams inspected the wall again. This time he said, "The wall is exactly plumb. It can go up 40 feet and still be plumb."

There is something very symbolic about that wall. If you keep climbing vertically, pay attention to detail, and remain steadfast with cemented ethical values, your life will stay on the straight and narrow. ★

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