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By CAROL HYMOWITZ

Mark Goldsmith didn't expect to go to jail when he volunteered to be "principal for a day" at a New York City school. But after requesting a "tough school," he was assigned to Horizon Academy, a high school for inmates ages 18 to 24 at Rikers Island prison.

Mr. Goldsmith, a former executive at Revlon and Shiseido, was ushered through locked gates to the prison's classrooms. Standing in front of his new class, he looked at the young students and saw in them signs of his own difficult youth. He had never committed a crime; but he told the students he thought he was dumb, and graduated near the bottom of his high-school class. He enrolled in college at night because his wife insisted, but he didn't think he could achieve anything. Then, he landed his first business job at 29 at Coty, a fragrance company then owned by Pfizer, and proved his hard work could earn him advances.

"I started at the bottom, got in earlier than anyone and left later, and then I got promoted -- and you can do this, too," he explained to the class.

Mr. Goldsmith felt the teaching experience was rewarding for both sides and volunteered again for the program. After, he decided he needed more than just one day a year with these inmates if he were to help them turn their lives around. In 2005, he launched his own nonprofit, Getting Out and Staying Out. GOSO, as it is called, now is working with 275 inmates serving sentences in upstate New York prisons and 150 at Rikers.

Mr. Goldsmith and 14 other current or retired executives who volunteer at GOSO, based in Harlem, plus a paid staff of six, are working to counter the familiar story of prisoners getting released without skills, jobs, money or a place to live, and then resorting to crime only to get locked up again. Fewer than 10% of the 400 released inmates GOSO has worked with have been arrested again since the group was formed three years ago. That figure compares with two-thirds of prisoners released annually nationwide who have been rearrested, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.



David M. Russell

Mark Goldsmith, founder of Getting Out and Staying Out, outside the organization's office in New York City.

In addition, three-quarters of the former prisoners counseled by GOSO, which receives private and public funding, are employed or attending school.

As former business executives, Mr. Goldsmith and other GOSO volunteers offer something else that's different: They understand who gets hired and promoted in a variety of industries and can teach inmates how to turn the entry-level jobs they typically get after prison into a career.

executive director of adult education in the mayor's office, New York.

"A lot of programs for prisoners are run by former prisoners or social workers, but Mark brings a business perspective, he's a role model of success and he tells kids who have never thought they can be successful that they're entitled to that," says Anthony Tassi,

GOSO also urges participants to keep returning for counseling so they can keep advancing.

"GOSO is successful because unlike other groups it works with young prisoners to plan for re-entry from the day they're incarcerated, and then sticks with them over the long term," says Hazel Beckles, head of the planned re-entry for incarcerated adolescents program at Community Service Society of New York, a nonprofit organization.

Mr. Goldsmith and Richard Block, the retired CEO of a 2,000-employee entertainment-packaging company, spend several days a week at Rikers, counseling inmates studying for their high-school equivalency diplomas. The pair believe that the same motivation principles -- including perseverance and adventuresome ambition -- that they used to help their employees build a career can help young prisoners.

On a recent morning, the two men gathered with 10 inmates in a classroom watched closely by prison guards.

"What's going to be hardest for you when you get out of here?" asked Mr. Goldsmith.

"Staying away from the friends I got into trouble with -- and getting a job," one inmate quickly answered.

The group fell silent, though, when asked what jobs they wanted after prison. "What are you good at, what do you like to do?" insisted Mr. Block.



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Mr. Goldsmith speaks with a client, 21-year-old Quawlmel.

One inmate blurted that he had taught his cousin how to play basketball and might like to be a school basketball coach. Another said he loved to cook. "We have three GOSO members who are now in culinary school," said Mr. Block, who promised to bring him restaurant menus on his next visit to Rikers. He wants inmates to know there are hundreds of different jobs and they don't have to choose between crime and menial labor.

Because GOSO works only with young prisoners who are attending school, and haven't been in prison long, it has a better chance of success, acknowledges Mr. Goldsmith. Even this select group, however, faces steep hurdles after release -- from steering clear of gangs and violence in their neighborhoods, to avoiding drugs, to following strict parole rules and to mending relationships with relatives.



GOSO members are urged to come to the group's office within a week of their release. They are each given an alarm clock, mass-transit cards for commuting, a subway map and a calendar to keep track of appointments.

Roberto Moran, GOSO's career-development manager, provides individual job education coaching. The group maintains a job bank of openings with employers willing to hire former prisoners, helps them to write resumes, gives out college and other education scholarships, and holds seminars. A retired construction-industry executive, for instance, teaches what is required to become a skilled tradesperson.

Mr. Goldsmith tells everyone who gets a job interview that "the three most important things to say are, 'I'm never late, I work very hard. I never get sick.'" He warns them to dress in conservative clothes, avoid faddish hairstyles and to remember to turn off their cellphones for the interview.

He encouraged Larry, who spent eight months at Rikers before the robbery charge against him was dropped, to talk directly to the hiring manager when he applied for a job at Target. When Larry wasn't selected from a crowd of other applicants, he stuck around until the manager noticed him and invited him to his office. Within an hour, he had a job.

"I got lucky," he told Mr. Goldsmith.

"You made your luck," Mr. Goldsmith replied.

Not everyone sticks with the program. "There are disappointments," says Mr. Block. He says he felt most let down when a Rikers inmate he'd spent hours mentoring and loaned money to never came to GOSO's office after his release.

But those who do show up say GOSO is a "home" they can keep returning to for help. Some former inmates drop by just to chat or to share good news about a job, or talk about a problem they are having with their mother, girlfriend or boss. Many call the office daily, or bring by their relatives. Others return for counseling whenever they lose or don't land a job, want a different one, or decide to go back to school.

"I know it's up to me to change, but GOSO always receives me like family and helped me change my life," says Mark, who was in and out of prison three times between the ages of 16 and 23 on drug dealing and robbery convictions. He met Mr. Block at Riker's when the former executive held a workshop on how to write a business plan for a small company. After Mark got out of prison last year, Mr. Block urged him to recall his worst experiences to remind himself why he never wanted to return. "The food was nasty, I missed my family so much and you're dependent on the guards for everything," Mark said. "No one thinks about kindness in prison."

Now 25 and off parole, he worked at the delicatessen counter of a supermarket when released 11 months ago, but he was fired when he threw out some turkey he hadn't sliced properly. He talked to Mr. Block, who told him, "don't bury your mistakes, it's all right to make some."

Now he has a job driving patients to and from hospital appointments. Last week, when he passed the test required to drive a van with 40 passengers, he immediately called Mr. Block.

When Mr. Block first volunteered at GOSO nearly three years ago, Mr. Goldsmith told him that if he felt ambivalent about helping people convicted of crimes, he shouldn't get involved. He has turned away other executives who were afraid to use their real names with inmates. Some of his friends tell him he's crazy to spend so much time with convicts.

"If they'd get to know some of these kids better, they'd know they're not hopeless, he says. "A lot of them are as smart and talented as anyone you meet in business, they just haven't had anyone to help them."



Courtesy Richard Block
Mark Goldsmith, right, with Richard Block

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