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Jim Zarroli/NPR

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When Jermaine Robinson got out of Rikers Island jail last March, he had nowhere to live and few real prospects for finding a job. But he did have something that would prove almost as valuable: The address of the storefront Harlem office where Getting Out and Staying Out operates.

"Without them, I wouldn't have gotten where I am right now," 23-year-old Robinson says.

The nonprofit, founded by retired cosmetics executive Mark Goldsmith six years ago, has helped some 1,500 young men incarcerated at Rikers chart new lives.

Only about 20 percent of those who go through the program return to prison, compared with nearly 60 percent for Rikers as a whole.

Persistence Pays

The program contacts young inmates early on and tries to get them to think about the lives they'll lead when they get out. They're encouraged to get an education or learn a trade.

When they get out, **Getting Out and Staying Out** helps them learn job-hunting skills and teaches them how to dress and present themselves on job interviews. They're given an alarm clock and a Metro card, so they can ride New York subways and buses.

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- Mark Goldsmith

They also get help finding a place to live and getting a job. In some cases, they get help paying for college or vocational school.

The program never gives up on the young men it serves, and that's one big reason it succeeds, Goldsmith says.

"We are there for them 24/7," he says. "All of my case workers, everybody has a cell phone. My phone can ring at any time on a week or weekend if they have a problem. This is a brand new experience for them."

He says it's important to show the men you care — rather than telling them you care.

"It takes time to gain their confidence and get them to believe that you really do care," Goldsmith adds. "You do it by being there for them in their time of need."

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After his release from Rikers, where he'd served eight months on an assault charge, Robinson spent months coming to the program's Harlem office, learning skills like how to handle job interviews.

He came to view the program as a kind of gym, where he could mentally prepare for the daunting prospect of looking for work.

Robinson's criminal record made finding a job especially difficult. But he developed a kind of pattern to use with prospective employers: Yes, he'd made some mistakes. He was determined never to get in trouble again. And he'd researched their company on the Internet and really wanted to work there.

It worked. In October, Robinson got a full-time job, putting up ads on phone kiosks all around New York.

'OK, I'll Go To Jail'

Goldsmith stumbled into prison work almost by accident.

Six years ago, he was asked to take part in a nonprofit program that nurtures ties between civic leaders and the schools, by getting leaders to serve as principal for a day.

"I went to the organization, and I said, 'Give me a tough school.' I thought I was heading for East New York or maybe the South Bronx. They said, 'Would you go to jail?' And I said, 'OK, I'll go to jail.' "



Retired cosmetics executive Mark Goldsmith, who runs the nonprofit Getting Out and Staying Out, gives inmates tips about how to handle job interviews. "People usually make up their minds in the first 30 seconds or minute," he says.

Goldsmith spent a day talking with inmates, trying to give them practical advice about how the job market works, how to get the kind of work they want, and what they can hope to earn.

At the end of the day, prison officials noticed that the men were hanging on Goldsmith's every word, and they asked him to return.

To his surprise, Goldsmith found he could relate to the young men at Rikers. Although he ended up doing well in life, he was a slow starter, a poor student who dropped out of college early on. Goldsmith knew what it was like to be young and aimless, without any idea how to succeed.

"You have to understand that these young men have never talked to a successful human being in their life," he says. "Their neighborhood is one block east, south and west of their apartments. They do not know a single person who can help them succeed. Not one."

Tonya Threadgill, assistant principal at East River Academy, a school set up inside Rikers by the city's Department of Education, notes that many of the young men at Rikers grew up without fathers, and never had anyone talk to them as Goldsmith does.

"It doesn't matter to them that he's Caucasian or older," Threadgill says. "He's a man. He's been successful in life. And I think that's an important connection for them. He doesn't come across as overly authoritarian or anything like that. But he's coming there to help them, and that's something they definitely appreciate, I think."

The Program Grows

Today, Getting Out and Staying Out has six full-time employees who work with the young men, but Goldsmith himself still makes regular visits to Rikers to talk to inmates. Those who want to join the program have to write an essay explaining why.

One recent morning, Goldsmith drove to Rikers and headed past several layers of security gates, greeting some of the prison guards by name as he passed them.

He ended up at East River Academy, inside a tiny back office at the school, where he met with one of the program's newcomers, Deshawn McDonald, who's in Rikers on a gang assault charge.

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- Tonya Threadgill, assistant principal at East River Academy

Goldsmith looked through McDonald's file and made a quick phone call to his attorney, leaving a message. He wanted to know about McDonald's next court date, but the call also served another purpose: Many of the inmates have overburdened court-appointed lawyers whose legal representation is less than aggressive, and a phone call from Goldsmith is a reminder that someone is watching them.

Then Goldsmith began asking questions. He learned that McDonald's step-father is a trained nurse with a steady job he likes, so McDonald has a good example to follow when he gets out. He also learned that McDonald worked with children in a summer job, and that he once participated in a charity walk-a-thon. McDonald told him he would one day like to be a counselor. That's another good sign: Goldsmith hears from a lot of young men whose idea of work is to be a record producer or athlete. McDonald's goals are more realistic.

Goldsmith promised to send him information about community college programs in the Bronx, where McDonald lives.

"You're going to have to go to school to do it," he tells him. "You can't just do it because you want to do it, or you're good at it."

Return On Investment

After McDonald left, Goldsmith said his program works in part because he himself came out of the business world, and knows how to apply business-world concepts to the young men's development.

"I like to explain to them what a return on investment is, that if they go to a bank to borrow money, they have to pay back more than they borrowed in interest," he said. "And we tell them about the fact that we're going to invest in them as we would invest in a business.

"So you're a business, an individual — but you're a business. What do I want back? I want you to get educated. I want you to learn a trade. And I want you to be successful. If you're successful, I have gotten my return on my investment."