

From Beyond the Walls

by Barry DeLeon
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SMART Recovery[®] News & Views Newsletter
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Seeking New Horizons

by Barry M. DeLeon

"I've learned more from my failures than I have from my successes." If that adage contains even a scintilla of truth, I must be the brightest bulb on the string.

There are countless sayings and lifestyle theories about how we can learn as much from failure as we can from success. Bill Parcells once said, "Success is never final but failure can be." I have seen that ideology become reality these past five years, and I have viewed first hand young lives wasted by drug addiction and crime. This has been the most profound, life-changing experience I have ever known. I hope that I have conveyed my thoughts and opinions these past few years in a way that honored REBT and SMART Recovery[®]. I have stated in the past, and I state again unequivocally, that these concepts are the most invaluable tools that a man or woman leaving prison can take with them as they rebuild their lives. Writing "From Inside The Walls" has also helped me as I reflect upon how SMART Recovery[®] has enabled me to look at even the most abnormal and irrational situations with a rational perspective. As I write "Beyond The Walls," I hope to convey to readers the advantages of SMART Recovery[®] and give evidence to support my contention that REBT and SMART Recovery[®] can contribute to lower recidivism rates and the transformation of lives from prison population to societal conformity.

If you want to see what's happening in the stream of our prison system, go to the edges and look at what's happening there. Then you begin to have an understanding—if you know how a stream works—of what's going on in the middle. Meet the men on the edge, and those over the edge, and you'll begin to see what inadequacies and weaknesses there are that creates escalating recidivism rates. I've met many of the men who are 'over the edge,' and I don't have much to submit on that group of the prison population. In my opinion, they are beyond help because they completely lack the desire to change. However, men such as they should not be used as the example because they are the minority, not the majority of the prison population. The men 'on the edge' are the ones who can benefit most—those men that are about to rejoin society either in the short term or the long term who possess the motivation to change and the open minds to accept such change. By understanding that these men will once again be your neighbors, one should realize that there is an essential need, one shared by both the convict and the community, to rehabilitate men and women convicted of crimes. In the stream of prison reform, what's happening on the edges of the prison population is a reflection of what's happening inside the prisons. There is little, if any, focus on rehabilitation.

The trend away from rehabilitation is changing in New Jersey thanks to Commissioner Jack Terhune and his staff. As I wrote in my final "From Inside the Walls" column, the New Jersey Department of Corrections (N.J.D.O.C.) is moving towards the pragmatic trend of preparing their prisoners for acclimation back into society. Community Corrections Corporation has joined with the N.J.D.O.C. to assess and treat prisoners who are preparing for release by creating programs to address the issues of recidivism. I have been at their main program, Talbot Hall, for three months and will be moving into the halfway house system shortly. Talbot Hall provides an alternative to incarceration. Their Mission Statement is as follows:

To provide a healthy, drug-free, safe and secure environment within which staff provides treatment services for residents that focus on changing addictive and criminal behaviors. We provide the knowledge and skills necessary for a productive life-style prior to reintegration to society.

By providing the basics for developing a new mindset, the resident inmate can learn to put aside addictive behaviors and criminal thinking and look to release not as a chance to make up for lost time but as a first step to a new life. In Talbot Hall, I absolutely believe that the knowledge and skills they provide each resident in the tools of REBT, Cognitive Thinking Therapy, SMART Recovery[®], and other self-help wisdom can and will equip ex-felons for a productive, crime-free life.

There are incredible transition and adjustment issues that ex-convicts fail to look at upon release. Many men and women who land behind bars are addicted to drugs and alcohol, criminal thinking or are just plain dysfunctional. When many of them were placed in prison, they adjusted to an abnormal environment. Some made the adjustment so well that abnormality became normal to them. Thus, they cannot adjust back to the normal societal environment without preparation, change in thinking, and true rehabilitative education. Talbot Hall absolutely provides this.

Much of the four-point focus of SMART Recovery[®] is sewn into the fabric of Talbot Hall's program. Building motivation to change, coping with urges, problem solving, and lifestyle changes are four of the most important factors to contribute to a successful transition. As the staff of Talbot Hall delivers this message, coupled with a well-balanced, all-around assessment, and society will be the ultimate winner. When the community receives a well-adjusted man back into the stream of society, and the ex-felon truly develops a new lifestyle, there is an underlying benefit to both. The ex-felon has so much to offer a society from which he once took so much away. He has the experience and knowledge to give to young adults and children that might be on the destructive path to criminality and addiction.

The media delivers so many contradictory messages about escalating teen drug use and falling crime rates, but one message that never fluctuates is the accelerating prison population. It's true that criminals need to be put behind bars, but many of those criminals might not have landed in prison in the first place had they been directed towards the right path with a realistic message of hope. Talbot Hall even provides that benefit with their Alumni program.

Charles de Gaulle once said, "The graveyards are full of indispensable men." I say so are this country's prisons. Motivational speaker Les Brown talks about the graveyards as being the most valuable real estate in the world because most people die taking their ideas, inventions and goals with them. I see prison as the next most valuable place in the world. Wasted lives, squandered goals, unutilized talents, unfulfilled dreams—and left behind are countless children and families that lose as much as if not more than the convict himself. By gaining independence from addictive behaviors and criminal thinking, prisoners can reform their lives. Shakespeare wrote, "Presume not that I am the thing that I was." I believe he meant that a man can change and should not be judged solely on the choices of his past. Society must take this view as well. It is a rational approach and a logical one to assist the prison population of this country by giving them the tools to change.

Now, change is not easy. As ex-felons, we must go from 'marking time' to 'making our mark.' We must see our future with confidence. As Coach Joe Paterno once said, "You need to play with confidence, or else you'll lose again, and the losing becomes a habit." Criminal thinking and drug abuse has become habitual for many men and women behind bars. SMART Recovery[®] teaches us that these bad habits are a result of irrational thinking. Talbot Hall teaches resident inmates the same thing. With this knowledge, felons can and will become ex-felons and retain that status as a productive and contributing members of society.

Criminal behavior and negative thinking in general must be treated like any addiction with commitment to life, patience, discipline, a will to get better, forgiveness, self-love, and the knowledge that recovery is not just possible, but following certain guidelines, INEVITABLE! Talbot Hall has taught me this, as has SMART Recovery[®]. They have taught me that success is not a destination but a way to travel—that the road to success is always under construction. I myself have learned more from failure than I ever have from success. I trust that those men who come behind me and are exposed to the programs of Talbot Hall will be equally enlightened.

Finally, REBT, cognitive therapy, and other self-help wisdom are the foundation to the new lifestyle sought by the released offender, but we must move further to provide the knowledge and skills for him to obtain gainful employment. It's what I call the "Now What Theory." Without fundamental education, vocational skills or the life skills to obtain and maintain a job where a man can support his family and further his education, all the change in thinking and attitude will only get us so far. There must be real efforts made to educate and properly train the motivated ex-offender. Talbot Hall is even addressing this issue with education, computer training and direction to funding for vocational training and continuing education once a resident moves into the halfway house system. This overall, integrated approach is what will truly change the way we reduce our prison population and keep these men from re-offending. This approach is both SMART and logical, and I am very happy to be a part of it. I challenge all News & Views readers to make efforts to get involved in the inclusion of these programs into the prison systems. We all have a shared hope to reduce the burden of the prison population.