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Male Focused Empowerment Program is Flipping the Script

By John O'Donnell

These seemingly hopeless circumstances face many of the thousands of Michigan prisoners released each year. For those willing to earn a second chance at a better life, a Goodwill Industries of Greater Detroit program can help them "Flip the Script."

The mission is to prevent young men from a return to jail and put them on a path to employment and a career. Less than one in ten of the ex-offenders who had completed the 16 weeks of training in life skills and job preparation have had any serious contact with the criminal justice system since the launch of Flip the Script in 2003. The program works with minority males aged 18-30 prior to and after release through a partnership with Wayne County Jails and Courts. Director Keith Bennett says the messages in the program orientation, particularly for ex-offenders, are brutally straight-forward.

"Can you make a commitment to not kill? That's a start. It may not stop you from stealing from a store, but it can reduce your chance of going to jail. Then, if we can give you the skill set to get you a job...maybe we can keep you out of jail. In many cases, the challenge is to convince them that regardless of your background, you can change your circumstances. We empower them with a spiritual belief in themselves."

The approach is curriculum-based, but, as described by Bennett, adds a human element that may catch many of the young men by surprise.

"We do that by sharing the fact...that we love them. We have some people that walk their experience. They've been poor and disenfranchised. Most of our guys didn't have a dad in the home. I didn't meet my dad till I was 35, so I'm a living, breathing experience that that is not an excuse."

The intensive curriculum centers on training participants in the critical areas of math, reading, positive relationship development, parenting and workplace ethics. The impact is powerful, and timing is one of the reasons.

"We reach them at a crossroads in their life when they may finally be ready to listen. We're hitting them when they've had enough failure. Now, let's see if the education process will open some doors. We start with math. If we teach young men how to do math, they can help their children with their homework. When you can do that, you're a dad. It's not the gym shoes that you bought them," said Bennett.

The stunning success of the Goodwill Industries initiative led to a major ex-

pansion in the program in November 2008. It included a move from Goodwill Detroit headquarters to its own facility in Detroit's Northend Neighborhood with capabilities that nearly doubled the number of men in



Young men have been given another chance to put to work their hands and minds, thanks to the Flip the Script program.

the program to 180 per year. Many who are admitted have no criminal record, but meet admission requirements. The focus of Flip the Script has always included those who are economically and academically disadvantaged, and the positive results quickly caught the eye of school administrators. With two-thirds of the students in Detroit Public Schools living in poverty, and less than one-third graduating from high school, they were seeking solutions.

"We were having many principals for public and parochial schools call us, saying 'We heard about Flip's success and what you can do. Can you come in our schools and work?'," said Bennett. The demand led to In School Flip, presented for boys and girls ages 12 to 17 during after-school and evening hours. The pro-

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gram, with funding support from the Skillman Foundation, includes academic skills development, substance abuse education, and anger management and domestic violence training.

The Flip the Script formula of training in life and workplace skills has curbed criminal activity, but does it get results on the job?

"A lot of our young people have never seen parents get to work on time, so how can we expect that from them without teaching the alternatives? We give them a skill set of starting to think like a boss or business owner," said Bennett.

The stories of the young men differ. Some are re-entering society after release from jail. Others need to find their way after a series of setbacks. Joseph Humphries, 22, of Detroit, feels that he was clearly on a path to nowhere before entering the program.

"I had messed up a lot of good opportunities. I got real lazy and everything started falling through. I wasn't too excited about the program when I first was told about it. I actually had to keep being reminded to go. After the first day, I fell in love with it." He credits a motivational speaker at the program introduction, Raphael B. Johnson, with helping him to stop making excuses and be the "master of your universe." After completing his course in March, Humphries found a part-time job in the meat department at a Meijer store.

"The program didn't actually get me the job, but they definitely gave me the skills to pass the interview process. You get out of it what you put into it. I put my heart and soul into it and I got all kinds of job offers."

Aaron Jennings, 20, of Detroit, was encouraged by his mother to enroll for Flip the Script training. He believes the emphasis on developing math skills paid off, and Jennings is now employed at a CVS Pharmacy.

Not surprisingly, Michigan's sustained economic problems have taken a toll. "The first few years, we placed guys at 80 percent. Last year was 67 percent. We're struggling to keep it at 50 percent now. I share with them that this economy will not stay this way forever," said Bennett. He notes with

pride that 70 participants of the program are now in unionized skilled construction trades. "They get a big kick out of it when I tell them that they're making more money than I am."

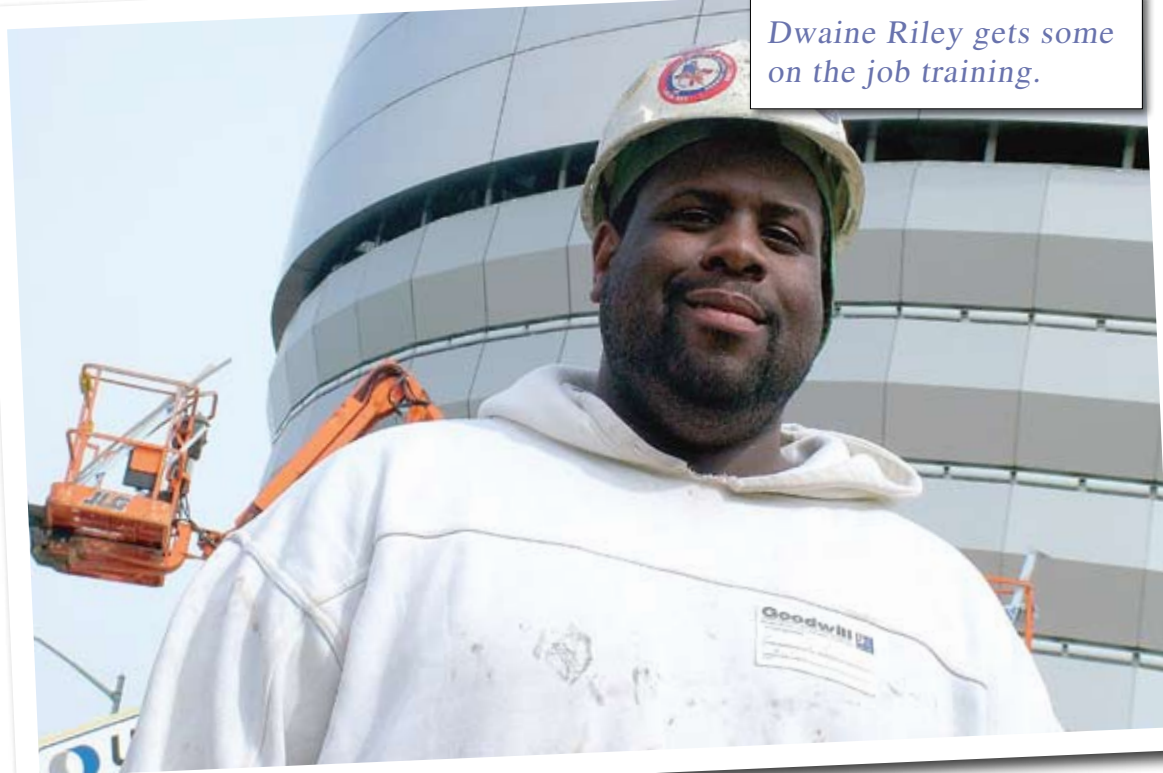
The handful who returned to prison has sent him apologetic letters, and he reminds them that it's not too late to "Flip the Script." The training that the curriculum provides is considered just the start. It's not an end to the challenges many of these young men will face, and the Flip staff vows to assist in any way it can.

Ex-offenders have always found it difficult to land employment opportunities in Michigan, according to Bennett. But he believes that reluctance by hiring managers can and should change, and that the odds are with the employer that hires a young man

from the program. They'll be investing in an applicant who brings a strong work ethic and academic and relationship-building skills that are freshly-ingrained and on-going to the job.

180 young men a year have chosen to change their lives by enrolling in the Goodwill Industries program. Regardless of what their adverse circumstances may be, they're eager to Flip the Script. Are we ready to give them a chance?

More information about Goodwill Industries of Greater Detroit's Flip the Script program is available by visiting goodwilldetroit.org, calling 313. 557.4848, or by sending Keith Bennett an e-mail: kbennett@goodwilldetroit.org.



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