



Prison Entrepreneurship Program promotes positive change

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In TDCJ, volunteer-taught courses have become an effective way to reach many offenders who genuinely want to turn their lives around. One particular group of volunteers has especially high expectations for dramatic change and personal transformation in the offenders with whom they work: the Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP) volunteers see themselves as servant leaders whose mission is to transform offenders through values based upon scripture and deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian principles.

PEP offers offenders a second chance for success through education, mentoring and one-on-one training provided by PEP executive volunteers. PEP is not an easy program and is not intended for everyone; participants must be willing to learn new skills, think positively, work diligently and possess a desire to change. The program prepares participants for successful reintegration by offering real-world, values-based business skills for use when the participant returns to the community. Participants learn how success comes from accepting accountability and making work a fun and rewarding part of life.

Positive character development is the foundation of the program's core curriculum, and critical for participants' long-term

success. Volunteers work with participants to identify and remove character traits and behaviors that stand in the way of positive life transformation, and behavioral and character issues are addressed through ten driving values participants must live by: integrity, accountability, wise stewardship, love, fun, fresh start outlook, servant-leader mentality, innovations, execution and excellence. The core curriculum uses a college textbook *Entrepreneurship: A Small Business Approach* by Charles Bamford and Garry Bruton, supplemented with Harvard Business School case studies.

The cornerstone of the PEP program is the Business Plan Competition (BPC), modeled after BPCs held at several major universities across the nation. Each student is required to envision a business that he or she would start upon release. The participant must research the logistics of competing within their chosen industry, write a business plan for launching the business, and then "pitch" their plan dozens of times before groups of executive volunteers in a "shark tank" format. During the in-prison program, participants complete a financial literacy course, an employment workshop, a business etiquette course and a Toastmasters class.

PEP has recently started recruiting women at the Lockhart Correctional Center. This program consists of nearly 50 women who study an entrepreneurship curriculum similar to the men's. The first phase is called the Ma-

triarch Academy, which focuses on character formation, work ethic and business basics. The second phase is the Business Plan Competition, which emphasizes creation and oral presentation of a business plan, followed by the graduation ceremony. Reentry services, including case management, transition housing, assistance in finding employment and social service networking services are provided to program alumni. In April, the inaugural class of female offenders completed the course work and graduated from the program. The 34 women are now preparing to transition into the workforce.

PEP is more than building business skills and acumen; the program is founded on the belief that people can change, and it is designed to bring about a positive, transformative change in the students, their families and communities. PEP is committed to working with people and organizations who share their values and mission, and exists only because of the executive volunteers who desire to serve program participants, executives, partners and donors, as well as TDCJ staff and everyone who calls Texas their home. ▲