

Final Escape Program offers mentorship to ex-offenders upon reentry from incarceration

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A mentoring program to help ex-offenders transition into life after incarceration held its grand opening Saturday.

So far, 20 men and eight women have completed the first stage of the program, spending two hours per week for eight weeks developing conflict resolution, team building and anger management skills, working on self-confidence, learning about resume development and interviewing skills and more.

“As the men and women embrace who they are by design, so does their confidence in who they can become increases. They begin to see themselves as people of value,” said Yvonne Williams, program director. “They begin to see themselves as people of worth. And seeing themselves the way they should see themselves (starts) when they understand their true identity. This causes a change in the mindset. This causes a change from within.”

Life Together’s program “Final Escape” will extend beyond incarceration. When the 28 men and women are released, they’ll have the opportunity to continue with the program for another year, participating in reentry services. The program will offer emergency food, clothing and hygiene supplies. Counselors will work to help integrate participants back into their families. Participants will be provided bus passes so they can look for jobs, and Final Escape staff will assist with contacting businesses and training groups.

“If they want to come in and apply themselves, this is a place where they can do it,” said Bishop David Hall, executive director of Life Together.

The first class participated via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but future classes will participate in person.

“After the first couple visits there was such a thirst to get into it because of the way we orchestrated it, very human, lack of judgment, motivation,” Hall said. “We’re driving them to understand you can change: You’re going to get out and never get back into this institution.”

Office space, a training room, a clothing closet and a food pantry for the “Final Escape” program opened Saturday at 588 Vance, on the second floor of the NAACP’s facility.

At the grand opening, Shelby County Sheriff Floyd Bonner described the program as a chance for people to move forward from incarceration.

“I want to dance because I believe those 28 people will not be back in our facility,” Bonner said. “We want to see people succeed.”

Williams said that in the first class that she taught at Jail East, she witnessed women who were introverted become outgoing, starting to feel good about themselves.

“I’ve learned that men and women alike when they’ve been beaten down by society, by their own bad choices, they need someone to come in and say look, accept what you did, but you don’t have to stay there, you can have another chance to get back up again,” Williams said. “We’re there to help them get back up again and show them that they do count, that they really do matter. Though they made a mistake, there is life after prison.”

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