

Skills For life, Inc.

A 501c3 Prison Ministry

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THE SUCCESS OF GAVEL CLUBS IN PRISONS

In August of 2000, Toastmaster Darrell Oakland (one of ten Toastmasters to participate, myself included) gave a demonstration meeting for the inmates at the Central prison unit in Sugar Land. The club filled up immediately with 20 inmates. The following week they arrived with a list of 35 inmates wanting to participate. By the end of that year (according to the chaplain) every inmate wanted to be in the program. A second club was started in 2001. The clubs at Plane State jail, Terrell unit, Clemens unit (a maximum security unit with 2 clubs - - one for adults and one for youth) were discontinued for medical and financial reasons in June 2007 (Plane State and Clemens were eventually restarted). The club at the Carol Vance unit (the first Christian prison in the history of the United States) was started in July 2005. Based on the changes the staff saw in inmates' behavior, in May 2006, the program became part of the curriculum and made mandatory for every inmate going through that unit. The program is also mandatory at Jester III, as part of the faith-based dorm; the Cleveland unit in Cleveland and the Stiles unit in Beaumont. Currently, the program is active in fourteen prisons. That is one measure of success.

Another measure of success is the changes seen in inmates' lives. Jason gave his tenth speech (the objective of that speech is to inspire the audience) on a Sunday night. Jason was in the Air Force in the 1990's. The club members knew his background. Jason said when he got out of the service, the only thing he missed was the camaraderie, that it was the most incredible thing he had ever witnessed, that he was scared to death that he would never have that experience again. Jason said he found that experience in his Toastmasters Club. Michael, a member of one of the clubs at Central, arrived in prison unable to read or write, but learned to do so. When Michael finally joined the club he had been on the waiting list for one year. He said he prayed for that year to get into Toastmasters. Why? At the age of 47 he was unable to carry on a conversation with his own mother. January 2011 he gave his 32nd speech. At Plane State jail the women were blossoming and growing in self-confidence in as little as 2 to 3 months. Monica had been in the program for 7 months and had become president. On the outside, her boyfriend was the gang leader of the largest Latino gang in the state of Texas. As you can imagine, her language was pretty rough. One day she stood in front of the women and said, "You will never hear me curse again." Working with over 3,000 inmates over the last 15 years, I have only heard 6 curse words; four of them apologized. They are serious about wanting a better life.

A very effective format and environment has been developed, enabling the inmates to build community in prison. It would be advantageous to all concerned to have a network of individuals conducting Toastmasters in prisons so we can share our knowledge and experience to further improve the quality of the program and have better outcomes.

In terms of leadership, the focus is strictly on servant leadership. Participants have to memorize the definition of servant leadership and the logic behind it. In addition, one of the 10 speeches in the basic manual must be on servant leadership.

In December 2012 the names of 359 inmates were submitted to Huntsville to determine their recidivism rate (the only criteria that is ever used was they had completed the basic 10 speeches in the Toastmasters manual). December 2013, we were invited to Huntsville to speak to 34 prison chaplains. We have been told that at some point this program will be in every prison in the state of Texas.

December 2014, the names of 672 inmates were submitted to Huntsville to determine their recidivism rate, which was just over 16%. December 2016, the names of 1350 inmates were submitted to Huntsville. Their recidivism rate was 5.6%. The website was updated in August 2016. The website address is: www.skillsforlifepm.com