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## Features



### Life After Prison

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#### Brooklyn Organization Helps Transition from Rikers to Real World

*By Caitlin McNamara*  
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BROOKLYN HEIGHTS — Tomorrow, 18 men will graduate from the Osborne Association's "Fresh Start" job and life skills training program set within the EMTC correctional facility on Rikers Island.

Completion of the 10-week course means that their chances of recidivism and potential re-incarceration will be more than cut in half.

In addition to a foundation of culinary arts and computer literacy training, the participants attend workshops and individual counseling on issues such as anger management, budgeting, problem-solving, goal setting and the importance of investing time in family relationships.

All inmates at the EMTC facility are required to have a work detail, and for those enrolled in Fresh Start it becomes their "job" to attend classes, Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"It all starts inside," says Dwayne Harris, director of jail-based services for the Osborne Association. "We don't wait for people to get home. We get to them at the beginning of their sentences."

Several hundred inmates sign up to participate in Fresh Start, but Osborne selects about 20 men for each cycle who demonstrate high commitment to change. The individual approach is key to success.

Harris says the culinary training is essential to the men's progress because they work together as a team. For many, this is the first time they have done so because they don't have family and are accustomed to hustling on

their own.

To further reduce re-arrest, Osborne provides transitional planning and aftercare services as part of the Rikers Island Discharge Enhancement (RIDE), an initiative of the city's Department of Correction.

On their release dates, in the coming days and weeks, each program graduate will be taken by bus from Rikers Island to the Osborne Association's Remsen Street office. There, he will receive a free meal while a staff member reviews his discharge plan. If he doesn't have a place to go, Osborne will help him to find transitional or emergency housing.

Osborne tracks each program member for a year after he leaves jail, and offers employment services and job training. Most program participants are from Brooklyn or the Bronx.

Men who participate in Fresh Start are much less likely to return to jail. Eighty-one percent of graduates are still experiencing positive outcomes a year after release, says Harris. The recidivism rate of Fresh Start participants is 25 percent, compared to Rikers' recidivism rate of 60 percent.

"We do exactly what our name is," says Harris. "We provide people with a fresh start. This is a model that people know works. There's a saying, 'Men lie, women lie, but numbers don't.'"

Osborne was the first organization in the country to offer a comprehensive parenting program, FamilyWorks, in a men's state prison. In addition to Fresh Start, prisoners are enrolled in FamilyWorks even if they don't have children; it helps them develop communication skills and to strengthen or develop family relationships.

### **Prison Programs Successful**

Osborne Association Board Chairman Jeff Smith was once himself "a consumer of correctional services," he writes in the organization's 2008 viewbook. A college psychology course offered to him on the inside launched Smith's interest in academics, and he became the first person in New York State to receive an associate degree while in prison. After release, he attended Vassar, Princeton and Yale, resulting in a successful law career.

"Incarceration devastates families and communities," he writes, "and since 1931, the Osborne Association has furthered the work of Thomas Mott Osborne, helping to restore lives, striving to keep families together, assisting successful transitions for men and women returning from prison and jail, strengthening the communities to which they return and reforming the criminal justice system."

Fresh Start was highlighted as a model re-entry program in the U.S. Department of Justice's "Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council." Graduates from Fresh Start have gone on to become prep cooks, catering assistants and counselors at substance abuse programs. Several students in the program have published articles in New York City magazines and newspapers.

Fresh Start has served 450 inmates since Osborne took over its operations

in 1997. Osborne also has offices in Beacon, N.Y. and the Bronx.

“Graduation is beautiful,” says Harris. “Family visitor day and graduation are tailored so that the families see what these men have accomplished: Ten weeks of working on themselves, putting time into their selves.

“We’ve had people come all across the world to support their loved ones on graduation day. We look forward to it because the men really get to feel a sense of accomplishment.”

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