

Toastmasters Release Captives

By Jim Arnold and UMMen Staff

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." Luke 4:18 NRSV.

Many of us are familiar with this verse, but how many of us could imagine the Toastmasters setting captives free in prison? In reality, Skills for Life, Inc., a Houston based non-profit corporation is setting inmates free from the "captivity" of poor social, communication and leadership skills.

The first Toastmasters club (called Gavel Clubs in prison) was started at the Central Prison unit in Sugar Land, Texas, in August 2000. A second club was started there in November 2001. Other clubs were also established for women at the Plane State jail in Dayton, Texas, and for youth offenders at the Clemens unit in Lake Jackson, Texas in October 2002. Plans are underway to start a club for InnerChange Initiative, (the prison operated under the auspices of Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship organization) located at the Carroll Vance unit in Sugar Land. The chaplain at the Hightower unit in Dayton has submitted an inquiry as well. Each club is limited to 20 members to make sure everyone gets to participate every week. There is also a requirement that each member give a minimum of one prepared speech each month.

Skills for Life, leaders offer vital ministry to the incarcerated by running weekly supervised meetings, which teach public speaking, personal responsibility and leadership skills. These two-hour long meetings provide an impetus for inmates to help each other to learn. Participants learn how to present talks effectively on the topics of their choosing and learn through various exercises. Men and women learn multiple skills, i.e.: how to evaluate each other in a caring and constructive manner, how to think on their feet, develop leadership skills and improve their listening skills. The speeches are normally 5 to 7 minutes in length. Each speech is designed to achieve certain technical goals such as maintaining eye contact, overcoming nervousness, effective use of gestures, vocal variety, eliminating vocal pauses and using props effectively. Participants measure their progress through goal achievement programs under the rules of Toastmasters International. The inmates at Central have taken it upon themselves to establish their own mentoring program. They have established two 5-week workshops that an inmate must go through before they let him into their club.

Through this program the lives of men at Central have been transformed. Last summer men at Central Prison approached the chaplain with an idea for a program. The chaplain agreed and didn't change one of their ideas. What did the men want? A revival! Over a 3-day weekend they conducted a spiritual revival from morning to night with 200 in attendance.

The implementation of this program has produced other significant results. The participants learn to research subjects and organize their material in a logical, coherent manner. They are also developing community. Most impressive is the dignity, courtesy, and respect for one another that is on display at every meeting. Participants consider themselves family and their increased self-esteem is obvious.

Skills for Life was organized for the purpose of reducing the recidivism rate in our nation's prisons by instilling Christian behavior through the development of social, communication and leadership skills of the incarcerated. This organization is currently working with the chaplains' office at Central Prison to develop a tracking program so as to determine the re-incarceration rate. Wardens and judges in Louisiana comment about how successful this program has been in reducing recidivism. One district state judge said that since putting the program in one prison only one of the 80 offenders who went through the program in five years returned to prison.

Another objective of Skills For Life is to gain participation from others to assist in bringing about these positive behavioral changes by providing education, motivation and support for those who would willingly work toward this end. This is currently being done by speaking at churches, civic groups, service clubs and networking organizations in the Houston area. If you would like to start a Gavel Club in your area, we have available an hour and twenty minute videotape of our offenders conducting a complete Toastmasters meeting. For more information or to make donations please contact:

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