

# Aldine man teaches leadership skills to inmates in Fort Bend

## ■ Toastmaster started mission after becoming victim of crime

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CHRONICLE CORRESPONDENT

During an 18-month period between 1989 and 1991, vandals broke into Jim Arnold's northwest Houston home four times. They took everything they could carry out, ranging from jewelry to stereos.

"The first two times I was like everybody else, you want to hang them high or lock them up and throw the key away," said Arnold, now 64. "The second two times, I got to thinking this is really stupid. This human problem of crime has been going on a long time and society has not changed their approach to how to deal with it."

Instead of using a forceful approach to prevent crime, Arnold got the idea to try to help criminals change their lives and their outlooks. After toying with the idea for 10 years, he started a prison ministry using classes from Toastmasters International, a group that helps people develop public speaking skills.

Arnold has since founded seven clubs at five area prisons, trying to turn around the lives of male and female inmates and youth offenders. Each of the clubs has waiting lists of prisoners wanting to join, and at least three of the former members have since left prison and become preachers, Arnold said.

"My personal opinion, as far as the business community would look at it, is there is more undeveloped wealth in our nation's prisons than in all the land in the United States," Arnold said. "People are not locked up because they're stupid, they're locked up because they did things society says you can't do without going to prisons. We've got some brilliant people in there, some brilliant speakers, and people that really want to change their lives."

Arnold started his first prison Toastmasters club at Sugar Land's central unit in August 2000, and the club's success and popularity led him to start another club at the prison in 2001. Since then, he's started clubs at prisons in Rosharon and Richmond, a women's prison in Dayton, and two clubs for youths and adults at a prison in Lake Jackson.

Virtually a single-man operation, Arnold spends five nights out of any week going to the prisons and teaching them curriculum from the Toastmasters program, although he modifies his lessons to downplay individual competition and focuses on helping the community.

Each club is limited to about 20-22 people, and Arnold encourages weekly participation. Club members can stay in the organization for as long as they want, and Arnold has been a Toastmasters member for 19 years.

Darrell Oakland, who has known Arnold since the 1980s when they met through Toastmasters, volunteers with Arnold and accompanies him to sessions on Sunday nights. Oakland said the classes provided the first leadership training opportunities to many prisoners.

"Many of these people who have had difficult times in their lives, they haven't had the ability to be involved in school organizations," said Oakland, a 54 year old instructor from Alief. "They are some very intelligent people, they've just done some things that have put them there."

As the number of clubs grew, Arnold filed paperwork for Skills for Life Prison Ministry, becoming a charity in 2002. His organization is funded almost entirely by foundations and local churches, but it hasn't been gaining enough financial momentum to grow as fast as he hoped.

Eventually, Arnold said his goal is to get 120 people to teach the Toastmasters curriculum to 17,500 prisoners within a 90-mile radius of Houston, though he concedes he doesn't know



THOMAS NGUYEN: FOR THE CHRONICLE  
**ON A MISSION:** Jim Arnold teaches inmates speaking skills through Toastmasters International.

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how long it will take him to raise the money necessary.

Arnold said he hopes to cut back on the number of prisoners who leave jail only to com-

mit another crime and go back.

"They can come out and become productive members of society, instead of being a drain on society," Arnold said.