

Item News

By Joe Robinson

Who would've thought—even five years ago—that so-called hardened criminals would eagerly enroll in classes (taught by their peers, no less) that teach how to become legitimate businessmen? The founders of Inmates Teaching Entrepreneurship & Mentoring (ITEM), a New York prison-based program they started in November 2005, that's who.

Now in its third year, ITEM is well on its way to becoming a mainstay in New York State's Department of Corrections. The five current facilitators have developed an "ITEM Facilitator's Manual" that will enable the program's replication throughout the state, as transferred facilitators start ITEM at their new facilities.

While ITEM's mission has remained the same—to teach incarcerated men the basics of starting and running a small business, thereby empowering them to mentor the young people in their lives—the program format has changed. There have been notable improvements, including doubling the number of hours required to complete the program, from 21 to 41, and organizing the curriculum so that half of the classes teach business theory, while the remaining classes offer practical, hands-on activities to reinforce concepts learned on "theory nights." And for our value-added and business-plan competition components, we have enlisted the help of local bank officials.

Stay tuned.

Joe Robinson is a co-founder of ITEM and the author of the recently published book, "Think Outside the Cell: An Entrepreneur's Guide for the Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated" (Resilience Multimedia).

The Inside Scoop

By John Figueroa

Many men enter the prison system without formal educations, addicted to drugs, from broken homes, and bogged down by a host of issues that arrest their development and keep them in a cycle of destructive stagnation.

How can a man who doesn't believe in himself ever accomplish anything? How can a man who believes that what he presently has is all he will ever have aspire to anything greater? He cannot!

It is vitally important for men in prison to tap into those inborn talents they once used negatively and illegally—and begin applying them legitimately and positively so that they may realize their full potential and embrace personal success. It can be done.

In learning about entrepreneurship, business and mentoring, individuals learn about morals, strength of character and giving. Therein lies the importance of teaching a course like ITEM. Not only do we impart theoretical knowledge, but practical application of each lesson. There is hands-on training that shows there is very little difference between legal and illegal business concepts, principles and responsibilities—therefore making the idea of transitioning from a negative perspective to a positive one a logical move. One that is embraced, rather than resisted and resented.

We must teach one another and break the cycles of destruction and failure that plague our lives.

John Figueroa is a Youth Assistance Program facilitator, a writer and an entrepreneur.

Just For Youth

By Jose Soltero

Teaching the youth how to start and eventually run their own businesses is an excellent way to encourage them to become productive and successful members of society. Promoting an entrepreneurial mindset will help to cultivate several qualities that are necessary in life in general, as well as in the business field: self-confidence, effective communication abilities, and being proactive.

In addition, a youth entrepreneur will gain a greater appreciation for what is being taught in school, as it relates to aspects of starting a business: English composition (writing a business plan); math (formulating financial statements); social studies (which promotes an understanding of marketing). This appreciation will easily translate into an enhanced interest in school and improved grades.

In a society that is competitive and business-driven, this

type of knowledge is key to personal success. Even if the youth choose not to start their own businesses, the benefits remain. Understanding the intricacies of how a business operates will cause a youth to stand out as an employee and become an asset to an employer, thereby facilitating their upward momentum towards the managerial sector. Utilizing business concepts as a vehicle to develop a youth's appreciation for education, to enhance positive personal qualities and to develop an appreciation for the "value of a dollar," has the strong potential to achieve a key goal of Ivy League schools—producing effective leaders.

There is no downside to youth learning how to start and run their own businesses, only an upside.

Jose Soltero is the father of two, a co-founder of ITEM, and an executive member of the Youth Assistance Program.