

For 4 decades, Thresholds volunteers have been helping prisoners turn around their lives

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ASTON >> Although Jerry Nowell of Middletown Township was pleased with his career in school administration, he still missed his earlier career years as a teacher. As the former principal of Indian Lane Elementary School and Springton Lake Middle School and the former vice principal of Penncrest High School, Nowell said that his career moves took him away from the classroom and into administrative offices. He found himself missing the direct one-to-one exchange between student and teacher and the daily interaction with students, helping them to grow and learn. He yearned to teach again.

“In addition to missing teaching, I also had the desire to help incarcerated individuals who were basically good people, who just happened to make a poor decision that landed them in jail,” Nowell

recently explained in a conversation. “I wanted to help those behind bars to find a positive way to make good decisions once they were released so that they wouldn’t return to prison but, instead, could be contributing members of society.”

About 28 years ago, Nowell combined his desire to teach and his desire to help prisoners go on to live healthy and productive lives by getting involved in the Thresholds in Delaware County program, an involvement that has lasted almost three decades. Now retired from his career in the Rose Tree Media School District, Nowell is a current board member and past president of the Thresholds organization. Through the years, he has taught at all three of the prisons served by Thresholds: the George Hill Correctional Facility in Thornton, the State Correctional Institution (SCI) in Chester and the Delaware County Juvenile Detention Center in Lima. He currently teaches decision making in the women’s division of George Hill and at the Juvenile Detention Center.

Founded in 1975, Thresholds is a nonprofit organization that teaches a six-step decision-making course to inmates in Delaware County’s prisons. After a day and a half of intense training, volunteers are paired with inmates to help them develop better decision-making, goal-setting and problem-solving skills during individual and group sessions for seven weeks. Volunteers, who can choose the facility where they want to serve, teach inmates an essential thought process needed to make decisions, to solve problems and to set positive goals. This allows participants to gain control over their lives and develop a more positive self-image so that they are better equipped to cope with life when they return to their families and the community on the outside.

“Better decision-making empowers an inmate to be more productive upon returning to the community,” explained Maggie Arbuckle of Concord Township, a Thresholds board member who has been a volunteer with the program for 19 years. Retired from her job as a training manager in Human Resources at the former CoreStates Bank, she currently teaches the women at George Hill and the children, ranging from 11 to 16 years-old, at the Juvenile Detention Center.

“Our program is not mandatory for prisoners,” Arbuckle continued. “They choose to participate. Once they go through the program, they often ask us, ‘Why didn’t you teach us this stuff before we came in here?’ because it’s material that can be really helpful for them.”

Each client who participates in the program receives a “workbook” or guide to learn the six steps of good decision-making. Teachers lead the way with two companion lesson plans, one for group “macro” meetings and another for the one-on-one “micro” meetings. A client must complete all six steps in each curriculum to receive his or her graduation certificate on the final day, following the seven-week course. In addition to the certificate, Thresholds volunteers hand out informational materials on the final day, about valuable resources and other information that the inmates can use to better their lives and get additional support.

Thresholds got its start in Delaware County more than 40 years ago. The program was originally developed by Milton “Mickey” Burglass while he was incarcerated in a Louisiana prison in the mid-1960s. While teaching literacy to his fellow inmates, Burglass observed that many inmates had great difficulty solving problems and making personal decisions. This inability affected all aspects of their lives and often led to arrest and incarceration. He also found that these inmates learned to read more quickly if they were taught decision-making.

After Burglass’ release, he attended Harvard University where, for his doctorate, he formalized his decision-making process into the highly successful program known as Thresholds. He founded his own organization called Correctional Solutions Inc. and helped to establish the first Thresholds in Bucks County in 1972.

In the fall of 1973 in nearby Delaware County, members of a group called the Delaware County Justice Coalition began meeting. They were inspired to form after hearing a prisoner, recently released from Broad Meadows Prison, as the county prison was then known, speak at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Delaware County in Upper Providence. It was their hope to make some public statement about the need to improve conditions at the Delaware County Prison, which had been receiving negative attention in the press. The group had a difficult time determining its mission but knew they were seeking greater citizen involvement and awareness of the criminal justice system.

Members of the group learned about the Thresholds program in Bucks County and invited Dr. Burglass to come down to Media to make a presentation. They also invited concerned citizens, the county’s judges, commissioners and prison board representatives to Burglass’ presentation. As a result, in 1974, the Delaware County Prison Board approved the expansion of the Thresholds program into the Delaware County prison, Broad Meadows, the following month. Volunteers were then recruited and trained and a grant was received to cover the initial operating expenses.

Thresholds in Delaware County has been operating ever since, training hundreds of volunteers and helping countless clients in local prisons. The program expanded into SIC in Chester in 1989 and into the Juvenile Detention Center in Middletown Township in 1990.

The Thresholds program calls participants “clients” to signify how they are participating by their own free will, making their first positive decision by deciding to attend. Participants enroll voluntarily and are seeking to transform “reacting” behavior into “deciding” behavior.

“I think I can speak on behalf of most volunteers to say it has been a real blast doing this,” exclaimed Nowell. “Our clients really appreciate what we do and they are so receptive to learning, which makes a fun and enjoyable teaching experience. We do not lecture. The Thresholds program is very interactive. The clients do more talking than the volunteers once the program gets underway. They get very involved.”

“Every once in a while guards at the prisons will stop us to ask what we are teaching,” Arbuckle interjected. “They tell us that they are curious because they observe such a change in the clients after they begin the Thresholds program.”

Thresholds operates on an annual budget of about \$50,000, drawing its funds from a variety of sources, including an annual capital campaign, grants, the United Way and private donations from businesses and community groups like the Rotary Club of Media. Even the Inmate Improvement Group at SCI gives an annual donation. The operating budget pays for the guides and other materials, as well as part-time staff to coordinate Thresholds’ activities inside of the prisons.

All Thresholds chapters are autonomous and are staffed, supervised, funded and administered at the local level. All chapters in Pennsylvania, Delaware, Georgia and New York are affiliated with Mid-Atlantic Thresholds.

Tina Stanton of East Lansdowne, a 14-year volunteer with Thresholds, is a part-time contractor at SCI Chester who coordinates the Thresholds program there. She used to own a senior home care business, before taking the staff position with Thresholds in Delaware County.

“I just felt this job really makes a difference in others’ lives,” Stanton stated. “Before the guys even leave prison, I see them using the program to make practical decisions in here. We teach them to repeat these three key phrases as a ritual: ‘I am unique, I am important and I am irreplaceable.’ We teach a lot of rituals like that because if you don’t keep using the program and making it a routine part of your life, you will lose it. We want it ingrained in our clients before they leave here.”

Upon completing the program, graduates take part in an inspiring, hope-filled graduation ceremony, which for many marks a significant achievement toward creating a balanced, productive and goal-oriented approach to life.

In addition to Stanton at SCI, other staff members consist of Bill Vernon, who oversees and coordinates the program at George W. Hill Correctional Facility; Fran Battista, along with Vernon, who coordinates the women’s division at George Hill; and Maggie Arbuckle, who coordinates the Thresholds in Delaware County program at the Juvenile Detention Center.

Thresholds, under the leadership of current president Joanne Matteucci, recently partnered with Delaware County Community College, which offers a Pathway Forward program to assist graduates of the Thresholds in Delaware County program to pursue their education upon release. Thresholds volunteers often help out with prison GED instruction, as well.

The non-profit Thresholds is always looking for new volunteers to help with teaching decision-making skills to incarcerated adults and juveniles. Thresholds will hold a two-day training session at Neumann University in Aston Township 8:45 a.m. to 4 p.m., Sat., Oct. 21 and 8:45 a.m. to 12 noon on Sun., Oct. 22. Caring individuals who can commit to meeting with an inmate for one to two hours each week, for a seven-week teaching cycle, can sign up for the two-day training. The volunteer hours are flexible. The commitment is different for the Juvenile Detention Center, which entails volunteering 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., one weekend a month.

Volunteers will always meet with their client in a safe, secure environment, and no prior teaching experience is necessary. If volunteers do not want to teach in the prisons, but believe in Threshold’s mission, they can also help out by serving on the board, working on publicity, helping with financial development or in some other capacity.

The men and women who go into the prisons to teach must be 18 years old and can be from all adult age groups, all backgrounds, and all walks of life. All volunteers work one-to-one with the clients and more experienced volunteers are the group leaders.

Volunteer training sessions are very thorough, and are a prerequisite to working with inmates. A \$35 registration fee covers the cost of training materials, plus a continental breakfast and lunch. Pre-registration is required.

“This is a powerful program,” Arbuckle stated. “I have been a volunteer for Thresholds in Delaware County for 19 years and every single time that I volunteered, I learned something new, from my fellow volunteers and from the clients. The people that I’ve helped have been a diverse group, everyone from career criminals to elite individuals who got into difficulty with the law. Once I began with Thresholds in Delaware County, I got hooked on volunteering here because of the difference we make. Most volunteers who get involved in Thresholds rarely quit, unless some big thing in their own personal life like a move or illness makes them, because it’s such a rewarding volunteer opportunity.”

Many motivated inmates are on long waiting lists and cannot participate in the program unless there are more volunteers. No special skills are required to become a volunteer, except the desire to help others.

“Our clients take to this program because they finally learn ways to take control of their own lives. We come in from the outside and give them the tools that they need to make their own decisions, enrich their lives, set goals and make the right choices,” explained Stanton. “We treat them like human beings who deserve to build skills to open the door to a better future.”

Those who are interested in learning more about Thresholds in Delaware County and/or would like to register for the Volunteer Training at Neumann University this month, can call Bill Vernon at 484-301-0590 or email thresholdsdelco@gmail.com/. For more information about Thresholds, visit www.thresholdsdelco.org/.

URL: <http://www.delcotimes.com/general-news/20171001/for-4-decades-thresholds-volunteers-have-been-helping-prisoners-turn-around-their-lives>

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