



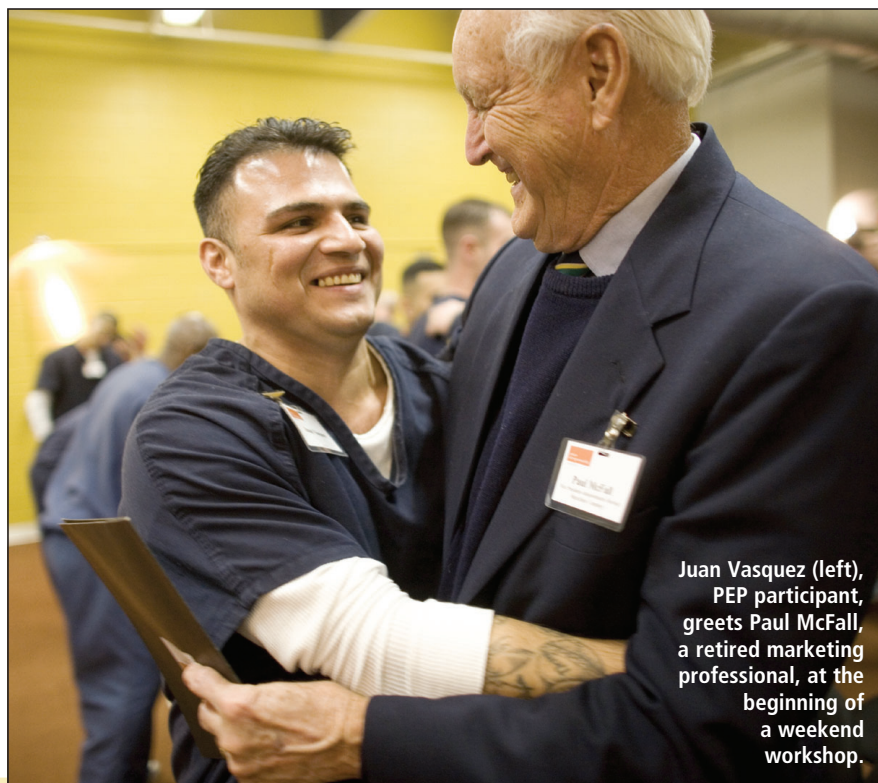
Investing in Second Chances

An innovative program helps
prison inmates make a fresh start
—and a business plan.

by **CATHERINE CUELLAR**

*photos for Sojourners
by Allison V. Smith*

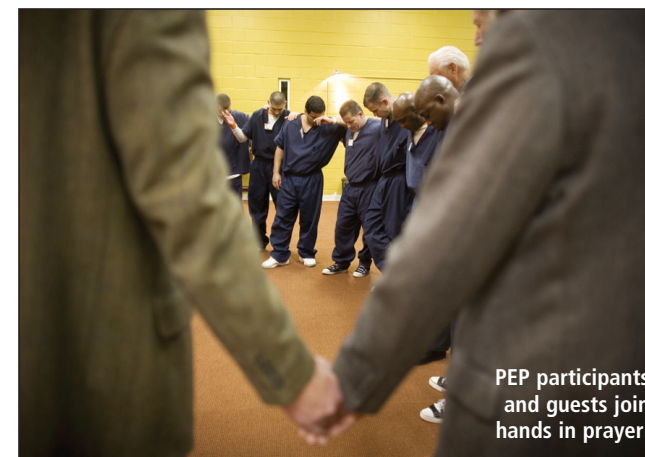
Graduates of Class VIII of the Prison
Entrepreneurship Program in Texas' Cleveland
Correctional Center outside Houston.



Juan Vasquez (left), PEP participant, greets Paul McFall, a retired marketing professional, at the beginning of a weekend workshop.



Class VIII participants and mentors in mock interviews as part of the Prison Entrepreneurship Program.



PEP participants and guests join hands in prayer.

DOZENS OF GUESTS ARRIVE BY THE CARLOAD FROM HOUSTON and Dallas just before sunset on Friday night. After showing ID, they're escorted to a carpeted room with leather couches, warm lighting, and OutKast's "Hey Ya" blasting.

Among the new arrivals, about 15 percent are MBA students and professors from graduate degree programs like one at the University of Dallas, a private Catholic liberal arts school. The other 85 percent are business professionals recruited by their peers, social entrepreneurship programs, and guest speakers at their churches.

All are welcomed in a receiving line with firm handshakes, warm smiles, and hearty bear hugs from students in the Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP). Soon, about three dozen of 90 inmates initially selected for Class VIII will graduate from the four-month program and be released from Texas' Cleveland Correctional Center, less than an hour's drive from PEP's Houston headquarters.

The Prison Entrepreneurship Program is unique in the United States, helping people with felony convictions break the cycle of incarceration by starting their own sole proprietorships. During its first four years, PEP training and support have enabled more than 10 percent of its graduates to launch their own businesses—some with outside funding. Most inmates know how to hustle and possess employable skills. (Drug dealing, after all, requires an understanding of sales and distribution.) Several PEP students also earned associates degrees while incarcerated.

Outside MBA candidates not only volunteer as mentors, they actually pay tuition for credit hours earned while visiting the prison. The first grad school to affiliate with PEP was Harvard. Since then, mentors have visited Texas from around the country, and PEP has formalized relationships with several business schools and sponsor churches.

Do a little dance. After a rigorous selection process including written tests and interviews, PEP students must first learn to get along with each other. Founder Catherine Rohr starts with an exercise familiar to anyone who has participated in church camp ice-breakers: the chicken dance. At first, it's visibly, painfully awkward for these men (conditioned to watch their backs and avoid physical contact



Catherine Rohr, CEO and founder of PEP

Owning a business will allow PEP students, who can't easily find jobs because of their criminal records, to support themselves in the free world.

with other inmates at all cost) to look silly in front of each other, much less swing each other 'round by the arm.

Cleveland Correctional Center is a minimum security facility for prisoners in the final years of sentences they're serving for unpaid taxes and child support, violent crimes, and various drug charges, among other offenses. It's a joyless, colorless building with fluorescent lighting, cold slab floors, and cinder-block walls. About 40 percent of Texas inmates are black, 30 percent are Latino, and 30 percent are white, and inmates of different races rarely socialize with one another due to the threat of gang violence in prisons. About one-fourth of Cleveland's 530 inmates are in PEP. The program has been supported by both the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and the private company that now runs the jail—largely because of the program's proven successes.

As the PEP visitors' weekend begins, the goofy music quickly breaks down barriers. Through repetition of dancing at the start of every session, these students gradually become more relaxed. Mentors join the dance as well. PEP also lets pupils rename each other. Most are just a number in the system, and inmates call each other by nicknames that are often gruesome and raunchy, recalling the incidents that led to their conviction. (PEP does not accept sex offenders.) Being identified solely by the worst thing they've ever done undercuts the inmates' self-esteem, and overcoming that isn't easy. In PEP, they give each other new names as innocuous and playful as their dance moves, like "Peaches," "Baby D," and "Moon Pie."

Visitors and classmates are further introduced through a drill from the movie *Freedom Writers*, where a strip of tape on the floor dividing volunteers and inmates becomes common ground. Rohr asks participants to "step to the line" if they like country music or hip-hop; grew up in a single-parent household; have been evicted; joined a gang; witnessed or survived abuse; and so on.

"Feathers" and "Dora." Owning a business will allow PEP students, who can't easily find jobs because of their criminal records, to support themselves in the free world. Their concepts range from general contracting and automotive detailing to janitorial services. The visiting mentors help PEP students write and revise business plans and practice soft skills like making small talk. In front of the entire group, each inmate must share his nickname and tout his employable skills in a 30-second "commercial" for the company he dreams of starting. The inmates also practice making cold calls, with guests playing the role of potential customers in one-on-one conversations across tables in the mess hall. Mentors offer constructive criticism of verbal and written communications.

Awaiting his turn to practice with a visitor, "Feathers" starts shaking.

Most inmates know how to hustle and possess employable skills.

"Are you okay?" a guest asks. "I just haven't had free-world coffee in a long time," Feathers admits, contrasting the java offered during PEP visitation weekends with the instant powdered mix he and other inmates usually drink.

Another PEP student, "Dora the Explorer," wants to offer computer repair services to Spanish-speaking customers. Dora (whose real name is Juan) is 34 and earned an associate degree during his 15-year sentence. As he talks about his release in a few months, he breaks into a nervous sweat, confiding that he's never seen or used a cell phone. He says PEP is "providing the footstool I need to step up in life."

Changing lives. Thirty-year-old Rohr doesn't have a degree in social work or counseling. She previously worked for venture capital and private equity firms in California and New York City. Rohr describes her attitude toward people in prison at that time in her life: "Who cares if you kill a couple of them who are innocent, 'cause they're sucking up our taxpayer dollars. Just wipe 'em out.' I used to say horrible things. I was definitely a lock 'em up and throw away the key type." Getting married prompted Rohr, a Catholic who "wasn't feelin' it," and her husband, a "good Lutheran boy," to start visiting new churches together.

Rohr's view of inmates changed one Easter weekend, when she and her husband visited a prison through a program led by Chuck Colson. "When I went on that first prison tour ... I really thought that I was going to see these wild caged animals. When I arrived to prison and saw human beings who were just as much in need of grace as I am, I was humbled, more than ashamed, and really saw the ugliness in my own heart."

The experience led Rohr and her husband to reaffirm their Christian faith, and in their new zeal they felt called to found PEP.

"I cannot really see myself doing this without someone who really loves God. [Otherwise] I don't think he could support the very difficult life decisions we've made that have been led by obedience," says Rohr. "You don't do this kind of stuff to be a good person. You do it because you're called to do it and you believe God's promises."

Rohr and her husband cashed in their 401(k)s, with penalties for early withdrawal, to found the Prison Entrepreneurship Program. "We packed up all of our stuff,



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everything that we owned. We didn't even know where we were going to be living," she recalls. "Everything we needed for the next four months ... we put in a minivan, drove out, and it was 1 in the morning when we arrived in Texas. We were too tired to unpack the car."

Before dawn, they were robbed. "Everything was taken, all of my clothes, everything. I woke up my first morning in Texas and had no money, no home, nothing to wear."

Rohr went to church, where strangers worshipping with her collected a love offering to help restart her life. Rohr was humbled, her faith strengthened, and she felt more empathetic than ever to those she felt called to serve.

Church outreach. "This is also a ministry for the free world people," says Luis Romo, an ordained Methodist minister. "It gives business people and business students a way to put their faith into action without having to negate their current occupation or career or studies," Romo says. "In the church, we tell business people 'Go to work and share your faith,' but the business people are saying, 'How can I put my business skills and passion, something I believe God's given me, into a practice that helps others?'"

Romo was a pastor in an affluent Houston suburb. "When I invited Catherine to come speak at our church, I wanted our church to partner with her and say we will back up PEP, not just with money, but with our people and whatever else we can do ... and [I] saw very little response from the church overall. I was very disappointed." So Romo left the pulpit to work full-time as the Prison Entrepreneurship Program's director of church relations, "not just to help churches help PEP, but hopefully to reframe the way they think about justice, the way they think about prisoners, the way they think about redemption."

"As the book of James says, faith without works is dead," Romo continues. "We try to bring those together in a way that says 'Christ loves you and so do we. More important, we love Him, and this is how we do it.' And I think they see it in a practical way. That doesn't mean it's all 'Do you accept Christ in your heart?' but we're going to hold you accountable, and you choose to enter in these principles. Whether or not you choose to follow 'em when you leave

here, that's between you and God, but as long as you're here, it provides a guideline for these guys to interact with each other and to grow and to learn."

Reunion and re-entry. In addition to Romo, the Prison Entrepreneurship Program has hired staff (including several PEP graduates) to meet alumni at the gate when they're released, offer ongoing support through Dallas and Houston field offices, and handle public relations. Another employee helps inmates regain their family members' trust. Guests and churches sponsor reunification scholarships of \$750, which covers travel, lodging, and food for inmates' relatives on visitation weekends. Graduates who live with family rather than in a halfway house decrease their chances of getting in trouble.

For those unable to reconnect with family members, re-entry scholarships pay for an interview suit, halfway house rent, food, and a phone for electronic monitoring and job-seeking. So far, 97 percent of PEP alumni have found jobs within three weeks of release, and most earn at least \$12 an hour. The recidivism rate of graduates is a mere 4.4 percent within three years of release.

Success story. One Class VII alumnus, Will Gibson, is a baby-faced 28-year-old redhead who was paroled five weeks ago. He lives with his parents in an upscale Dallas suburb and was hired as a waiter five days after his release. He is visiting the prison this weekend as a PEP mentor.

"There's a new nervousness that comes upon you," he tells the class. "You can't practice this stuff enough in here, because it's much harder out there ... but I'm here to tell you, the free world's really good."

When reflecting on his experience in the class, Gibson says, "PEP taught me a deeper sense of accountability and what it means to *live right*."

Gibson is among those who offers the program its financial support, using tips from his newfound job to sponsor a scholarship for "Peaches." Like Gibson, most Prison Entrepreneurship Program alumni tithe to PEP or their churches following their release.

PEP spends approximately \$10,000 per student, compared to Texas' annual cost of \$30,000 per inmate. The program provides a model other states may wish to follow. ■

Catherine Cuellar lives in Dallas and works as managing editor of PegasusNews.com.

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