

Freedom Project

from prisoners to peacemakers



C O N N E C T I O N

Spring, 2008

A sharing of inspiration, updates and Freedom Project news and events.

SPOTLIGHTING: Safe Returns Mentoring Program

By Freedom Project Staff

Freedom Project's newest Mentoring Program—is off to a promising start with Community Program Manager Keith Brooks as its developer. This program pairs a person from the community—a “transition coach”—with a prisoner during his or her release from prison. This complements our prison trainings by providing an avenue for newly released participants to stay connected to a supportive network on the outside.

Transition from the prison environment back to the community can be very difficult emotionally and poses unique practical challenges. Without a network of human support returnees can feel overwhelmed by these daily challenges, making them more likely to resort to strategies that could lead back to prison.

Safe Returns seeks to provide the human connection that can contribute to a returnee's success and reduce recidivism. Coaches offer support and guidance to participants as they develop attitudes and skills that will help them become successful in their personal lives and in the workplace. Coaches play a valuable role as listeners, role models and guides to available resources. We encourage returnees to make choices that will help them become successful, which in turn builds their dignity and self-confidence. Working together to recognize and experience our shared humanity is the deep work that creates communities based on safety and respect.

Safe Returns pairs a transition coach with an inmate sev-

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Freedom Project Staff Meet DOC Secretary at Awards Ceremony
Left to Right: Jay Jackson, Freedom Project Executive Director; Eldon Vail, Secretary, Department of Corrections, Keith Brooks, FP Community Programs Manager, Dow Gordon, Prison Programs Manager; and Mary Leftridge Byrd, Deputy DOC Secretary for Community Corrections. See story page 4 on award to Dow Gordon, MCC Volunteer of the Year.

Mentoring Program Recruiting Coaches

We invite anyone interested in volunteering as a transition coach to contact Keith Brooks, Community Program Manager, or Katie Talbott, Volunteer Coordinator, at (206) 325-5678. We would like transition coaches to be willing to commit to the program for a year, and to be over 21. If you are a returnee yourself and you are no longer on community supervision we especially encourage your participation, as your own success can be an inspiration to others facing similar challenges.

The most valuable qualities a coach can bring are the ability to listen, a nonjudgmental attitude and the ability to follow through on commitments. We provide training in basic coaching skills, boundary awareness and NVC plus an orientation to resources in the community that might be of use to your transition partner.

Coaches will work one-on-one with a participant, with the active support of Freedom Project staff. We will train coaches in small groups and provide ample opportunity for coaches to share their experiences with each other and provide mutual support. Our hope is for this to be an opportunity for growth and connection for all involved and a deep experience of building our community one person at a time.

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Carol Battistoni
President
Board of Directors

“I was deeply aware of the uplifting energy that has filled the Freedom Project rooms.”

President’s Perspective

A Day at the Freedom Project Office

Warning: the following comments could generate warm feelings and possibly a smile.

It was a Thursday afternoon, and Jay and I had scheduled a meeting to go over the usual Freedom Project business. I walked in the front door and it was immediately apparent that there was nothing usual about Freedom Project these days. I was greeted by Verne (Freedom Project’s new Office Manager) with a big smile on his face, we hugged and Verne returned to his computer to continue with his work. Next I was greeted by Keith (Freedom Project’s new Community Program Manager) who had even a bigger smile if at all possible! Soon the main room of the office was filled and I was hugging my dear friend Katie (Freedom Project’s new Volunteer Coordinator) who was

grinning from ear to ear as well. This was followed by a warm hug and good-hearted teasing (I’m sometimes referred to as the Big Kahuna-ess) from Dow and another warm welcome and hug from Jay. The office was buzzing! I was deeply aware of the uplifting energy that has filled the Freedom Project rooms. Keith and I began to talk and within 10 minutes I realized I was in the presence of a wise man. As Keith and I spoke I could hear the sounds of Katie, Dow and Jay talking in the background mixed with occasional bouts of laughter. I remember thinking, the Freedom Project office is a joyful place, and I really feel welcome! Then Verne joined Keith and me with an almost empty box of chocolates in hand and offered me the last chocolate-covered macadamia nut; I replied, “I feel special”. I realize now it had nothing to do with the chocolate and every-

thing to do with this extraordinary group of people. This is Freedom Project’s new core team - and what a blessing!

I want to extend a huge welcome and gratitude to Verne, Katie and Keith for bringing your beautiful energy and talents to Freedom Project. I’m so impressed by your intention and focus on teambuilding and utilizing each others strengths. I also want to extend my deepest gratitude to Jay and Dow for your unwavering commitment to our community. Jay, for your generosity in VOLUNTEERING your time as our Executive Director. Dow, for your steadfast commitment to Freedom Project while facing serious health issues.

Carol Battistoni is President of Freedom Project’s board of directors. She is also Psychotherapist/Counselor in private practice in Seattle.



Tom Serie

LOVE IS

By Tom Serie

When a drop of rain lands in the ocean, there truly is a change.

A change for the raindrop - maybe a really big one; and a change for the ocean - maybe a very small one.

No different than when a person from Minnesota lands in Seattle. Change is Change!!

My Observation of the Freedom Project started with Jay, Dow and Ruby, then expanded to include Lucy Leu and the

"Peacekeepers," the Freedom Project Board, and all of the people that I have met who either have been released from prison or are still incarcerated.

My Feelings cannot be described through the tears of happiness as I type this note to each of you. Where else could a Conservative-Catholic-Republican have so much fun?

My Needs have not been met. Fourteen months in Seattle have left me with the feeling that

I did not do enough, did not commit enough, and “should” do more.

My Request is that each of us, both you and I - whether you and I are the raindrop or the ocean - keep trying to change humankind for the better because ... **LOVE IS.**

Tom Serie was a Companis Worker placed as a volunteer with Freedom Project from February 2007 until April 2008.

Joys of Small Gifts

The work we do is about small changes. It is the rare case when someone is transformed overnight. One less angry word, one less fight in the prison yard, one less offense in the community—these are our successes. The good thing about these kinds of successes is that even though they may not seem big, they happen every day. The same is true with our fundraising. We love checks for \$1,000 but our real success comes from the small gifts that come every day from people like you. Not only does it support our work, but it is these small gifts that form the web of connection that links us together in this work. Every time you make a gift, a person in prison gets a tool that makes a small difference today. And that small difference leads to another small difference, and then another. This is what real transformation is made of. We want to say “Thank you!” to everyone who sends us gifts and to let you know what your gift gives to others:

- \$10 – Introduces a prisoner to NVC
- \$20 – Provides a prisoner with a month of mindfulness support
- \$25 – Offers a weekend training to help a prisoner use NVC to handle anger
- \$50 – Facilitates a Community Circle meeting
- \$100 – Supports a transition coach and partner for one month.

What Prisoners Say about Volunteers

By Sally Neiland

Volunteers are my connection to the outside world.

Volunteers offer a slant on life that is not so influenced by DOC.

Volunteers offer opinions and new ways of thinking about things.

I feel special and important and not forgotten.

Because someone cares, I feel more self worth.

Some of the volunteer programs offer the only continued support I will have in the community.

That people out there care enough to come in here to help me increases my hope that I can make it out there.

Volunteers come in all types. Some are unemployed and just making ends meet. Some are wealthy and traveling the world. Despite their life situations, they all make time to help us become better people.

Sometimes volunteers will talk to us about everyday things. We don't often have opportunities to do that in prison. It makes me feel connected to the community. It makes me feel valued. It makes me feel normal. Staff have directive; volunteers have time to listen.

Excerpt from the keynote address by Sally Neiland at the Volunteer Appreciation Ceremonies at Monroe Correctional Complex, May 16, 2008.

“I see your work with the offenders as primary prevention work. Each interaction you have with an offender is a learning opportunity; an opportunity not only for increasing the meaningfulness of their lives, but for the increased safety of the community upon the offenders release.”

Sally Neiland,
Program Director, Sex
Offender Treatment
Program

(Mentoring Continued from page 1)

eral months before his or her release from prison. The coach meets regularly with the inmate while he or she is in prison, developing a trusting relationship and helping the participant prepare and plan for release. The coach continues to meet regularly with the participant—both one-on-one and in group settings—for up to six months after his or her release.

The primary role of a transition coach is to be a nonjudgmental listener. Coaches do not direct or make decisions for the returnee, but rather provide a supportive environment

that builds connection and trust. Coaches help participants stay focused on the big picture and learn how to make wise choices among competing alternatives. They may offer practical support by assisting participants in setting goals, coping with stress or budgeting money as well as by passing on leads about jobs and housing. Most of all, the coach is a reliable friend who can be counted on to listen with empathy while modeling healthy boundaries.

A program application to begin work at the Monroe Correctional Complex's Minimum Security Unit has been submitted to the Department of Corrections for approval. At

this time we are recruiting volunteer coaches and developing training materials and plans.

Keith Brooks is enthusiastic about the possibility of this program to provide its participants with real hope for their futures. “We at Freedom Project feel that the Safe Returns Program will be a positive step forward and will give hope to those returning to the community as well as those who are already here. Men and women getting out of prison need assistance re-acclimating to society. Mentoring helps save lives, futures and communities.”

Dow Gordon Makes History for Freedom Project

By Matt Zemek

“Dow Gordon has achieved a first in the history of Washington State.”

A man who was once a prisoner has now been recognized as a friend, teacher and mentor to present-day prisoners. Freedom Project volunteer and trainer Dow Gordon has achieved a first in the history of Washington State, becoming the first ex-prisoner to be named Volunteer of the Year by the Department of Corrections and its Monroe Complex.

Let the power and poignancy of that reality sink in... but don't think Dow Gordon is seeking or clamoring for any special recognition. His honor is much more than an individual achievement; it's a reflection on the work Freedom Project has done in prisons since its inception in 2001.

Hundreds of organizations and at least 1,000 volunteers work in the Monroe Complex on a regular basis. Gordon has become the second Freedom Project volunteer in the past seven years to win the facility's Volunteer of the Year award. Freedom Project is clearly doing something right, something that is providing valuable and effective outreach to prisoners who want to mend their lives and find fresh hope for their futures.

What is that something? Let Dow Gordon tell you.

"At Freedom Project, it's about practice, practice, practice, and looking at anger in a different way," Gordon said. "Anger is caused not by others, but by what I think about others. If I choose to get angry, I'm at the world's mercy. We can choose how we act or react, (so) we tell prisoners to stop, slow down, and recognize their thoughts and feelings. We then teach prisoners how to go underneath those feelings and get in touch with universal needs shared by all human beings."

The concepts designed to get prisoners in touch with their feelings are Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and mindfulness. There's no complex formula involved in the Freedom Project classes and training sessions that take place inside prison gates.

Experienced volunteers, led by Gordon and other expert trainers, simply teach prisoners how to express themselves and then discover themselves in the process. Learning Nonviolent Communication and mindfulness happens very slowly and gradually, but it's be-

It has been said that freedom--real freedom--is not about geography, but about choices. A person can be a prisoner in his own home, but be free inside Monroe or any other prison complex. When Dow Gordon speaks about the power of choices, he's talking about the



Dow Gordon receiving Volunteer of the Year Award from Marjorie Petersen, Community Partnership Programs Manager for Monroe Correctional Complex

come a proven method for Gordon, one of eight people who was there at the beginning of Freedom Project's existence. Gordon was moved to join Freedom Project in the first place precisely because NVC and mindfulness led to his own transformation back in 1995, when he was still in prison himself.

"It was one grain of sand at a time," Gordon said. "They just piled up. I first encountered a spiritual practice that led me to a spiritual connection. The practice changed me, not in the sense that I'm a totally different person--I still had the same capacity for violence--but because it hugely expanded my self-awareness. I gained an abiding confidence that I always have choices in terms of what I can do in every situation."

amount of internal freedom a person has. The extent to which a prisoner can discover and understand his deepest feelings and needs is the extent to which he'll find new ways of thinking about his life. These new thought patterns open a person to new possibilities and horizons. These are the new choices that NVC and mindfulness training can offer students in any place at any time. These new choices represent the freedom found in Freedom Project. Dow Gordon gained this kind of freedom when behind bars; now, he's offering the hope of real freedom to the prison community in Monroe.

"I'm just passing on what people gave me," Gordon said, with the humility of a man all too aware of where he once had been.

(Dow Gordon continued on page 5)

Freedom Project Adds Three Staff

By Matt Gras

Freedom Project is proud to announce the addition of three new team members to our core office staff in April: Keith Brooks, Verne Garvie and Katie Talbott.

Keith Brooks first came into contact with Freedom Project through NVC and mindfulness trainings he took in 2006 while completing his sentence at Monroe Correctional Complex (MCC). He came to appreciate how NVC fosters an attitude of patience and understanding that emphasizes compassion, contribution and service. Not only were we participants," said Brooks, "we also had leadership roles that allowed us to be fully vested in the organization's mission of service." Brooks also serves as board member for Village of Hope and as community liaison for the Black Prisoners' Caucus. He joined the Freedom Project team as our Program Manager.

Verne Garvie first came to Freedom Project in 2001 while an inmate at MCC/TRU, where he began studying Nonviolent Communication through Freedom Project's program there. "The dedicated, honest contact with caring people from Freedom Project lifted my spirits and touched the humanness I thought I had lost," said Garvie. "I'm ecstatic to now be a member of Freedom Project's team." Garvie continued studying NVC with Freedom Project

when he was released from prison in May of 2006. He joins Freedom Project as our Office Manager.

Katie Talbott first heard about Freedom Project through her friendship with Mark Goodman, one of the original core team and training team volunteers. Attending a fundraiser last fall cinched the attraction. There Talbott met and came to know Rusty Thomas, Verne Garvie and Dow Gordon, and from that point there was no turning back. "Their openness and commitment to connection inspired me to attend a community circle, and then to volunteer in the prison program," said Talbott. "I feel so grateful to all of the members of this community—both inside and outside prison—for opening their hearts and sharing their stories, and for being willing to participate in this shared path of growth." Talbott joins the Freedom Project staff as Volunteer Coordinator.

"Freedom Project now has two returnees as staff and two as members of our board of directors," said Executive Director Jay Jackson. "We're proud of our tradition of creating peace from the inside out: of recognizing the humanity inherent in everyone and the feelings and needs common to all. We value the diversity of experiences we now have on both our office staff and the board of directors."



Keith Brooks



Verne Garvie



Katie Talbott

(Dow Gordon continued from page 4)

It's this humility, after all, that leads violent men and women to misidentify with their egos and abandon their low self-esteem. This shedding of the ego is the true goal of Freedom Project's NVC and mindfulness training sessions, because it leads prisoners to turn away from habitual behavior patterns and seek a new and healthy identity... often for the very first time in their lives.

Gordon wants for other prisoners the very things he found for

himself when he began practicing NVC and mindfulness back in 1995.

"My whole worldview shifted," Gordon said in reflecting on his own interior conversion. "You sit with yourself and get to know yourself. I knew, after practicing mindfulness, that I wasn't who I thought I was. I didn't know that underneath the violence, there was a real human being. My great contribution to the whole process of mindfulness is that I knew I was learning. I was thinking thoughts I never thought be-

fore."

Now, Dow Gordon has won an award that no ex-prisoner in Washington State had ever won before.

New thoughts, new awards, new lives. One man's moment of recognition is Freedom Project's shining success story.

Matt Zemek is a Companis Worker placed with Referrals, Opportunities, Advocacy, & Resources (R.O.A.R.) of Washington.



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We Welcome Your Participation!

If you are inspired by our vision and would like to join our team please contact Katie Talbott at (206) 325-5678. We especially need volunteers to:

- **Provide mentoring** and support for prisoners during their transition back to the community.

- **Help conduct trainings** in mindfulness and Nonviolent Communication at the Washington Correctional Facility for Women and the Monroe Correctional Complex.

We also invite you to join with us to create a

safer community through connection by attending:

- **Community Circles**, which provide a place for dialog between people who are returning from prison and people who have no experience of being incarcerated. (1st and 3rd Mondays, 6:30 – 8:30 pm, Freedom Project office.)

- **NVC trainings** offered each month by Freedom Project for all members of the community. (Call or see our website for current schedule.)

FREEDOM PROJECT MISSION

Freedom Project strengthens our community through supporting the transformation of prisoners into peacemakers. We offer trainings in concrete skills of nonviolence leading to reconciliation with ourselves, our loved ones, and the community. Our work addresses the healing of relationships ruptured by violence and the forging of community founded on genuine safety through connection.

FREEDOM PROJECT VISION

We dream of a world where each person is held in the circle of humanity, where every individual experiences a deep knowing that all members of the human family belong to and are connected to each other. We dream of communities and nations dedicated to non-violence as a soul force for the healing of all relationships fractured by injury, violence, anger, and mistrust. Freedom Project offers a new vision of what is possible.