

PROVIDING OPPORTUNITY

Area organization helps children in crisis and inmates get back on track.

BY DAVID FALCHEK
STAFF WRITING

James Hood has a job, a house, a fiancée and just got back from a vacation at the beach.

Normal stuff, but they are experiences the 36-year-old could never have imagined growing up in a broken family with a life nearly lost in the haze of drugs and incarceration.

Mr. Hood credits his turnaround to Lackawanna County Drug Court, his fiancée and the EOTC of Northeastern Pennsylvania, a little-known organization that works with children in crisis and the incarcerated at the Lackawanna County Prison.

When Mr. Hood looks back on his life, a third of which he spent behind bars, he is appalled at what he was and encouraged by what he is.

"Selling drugs was the only way of life I knew," he said. "I had to learn what a normal life was and realize I needed help and needed to listen to people."

The intensive services of drug court primed him. When he began his nine-month sentence for possession in 2003, he began working with EOTC staff member Kelly McAndrew in the relapse prevention class.

She convinced him to open-up and be receptive to help, which helped him open up to a different kind of life than he was used to. When he got out of prison, he attended the EOTC's responsible fatherhood program and a job seeker's group. Through an old friend, he got a job with a construction company specializing in roofing and siding. Three years later, Mr. Hood is a foreman.

His is one of a growing number of successes where the EOTC has played a role.



MICHAEL J. MULLEN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

James Hood, foreground, and Vince Verrone of Verrone Roofing and Construction unload foamboard insulation as they work a roofing project.

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James Hood, 36-year-old construction foreman

The group has more than 10 programs at the Lackawanna County Prison, everything from the basics such as life skills and literacy to job interviewing, computers and GED classes. EOTC's funding comes from Lackawanna County, the federal government and private donations.

The EOTC started its work at the local prison somewhat by chance. The organization was working with families and children and found that many children had parents

in jail. They thought they could help the children by helping jailed parents in 1995. The programs expanded from there and today serve about 700 inmates annually. The prison program proved to have side benefits of reducing recidivism, turning former lawbreakers into jobholders who contribute, rather than drain, the economy.

Jane Augustine, EOTC team leader and life skills instructor, is in the prison daily. The average inmate has drug problems that lead

to crime, she said, adding that most had horrific upbringings and didn't know their parents. But they are also often very smart.

"They're too smart for their own good," she said wryly. "They've been using their skills inappropriately."

Skills such as parenting and job readiness, second nature to those raised in sound households, and taking control of their lives, are often unknown to the average inmate, she said.

"Once you tell someone how, and convinced them they can, they get excited," she said.

Marywood University sociology and criminal justice professor Walter

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EOTC: Group helps people help themselves

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Broughton evaluated the EOTC program for the federal government, finding that a typical inmate attending two EOTC classes has a one-third less chance of winding up back in jail compared to those who do not take EOTC courses. He said the courses are effective because they are mostly voluntary and fill the void within many inmates.

"Being incarcerated is deadly boring. With no way

"These programs give people the tools and resources to help themselves, to modify their behavior and motivate them."

Janine Donate, Lackawanna County Prison warden

to use drugs and a chance to reflect, getting a GED or learning to be a better parent become more attractive options," he said.

The prison, and its inmates, would be in a sad state without programs like those offered by EOTC, said

Lackawanna County Prison Warden Janine Donate.

"These programs give people the tools and resources to help themselves, to modify their behavior and motivate them," she said. "From a taxpayer's standing, it reduces recidivism and keeps peo-

ple out of jail."

Even with the poor economy, Mr. Hood has been busy with work. He still calls the EOTC and speaks with Ms. McAndrew or Ms. Augustine once in a while just to talk. It's helps keep his past far in his past, he said.

"They pointed me in the right direction, and my life has been transformed," he said. "For the first time, life has been treating me pretty good."

Contact the writer:
dfalchek@timeshamrock.com