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ST. LUCIE JAIL EYES SUCCESS WITH INMATE PROGRAMS

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Shaun Sneider has been in and out of jail.

Like many drug addicts, Sneider, 25, began smoking marijuana as a teenager. As he got older, he tried other drugs and eventually became addicted to Oxycodone. The drugs and an occasional theft to pay for them resulted in plenty of arrests.

After his last arrest, Sneider joined the St. Lucie County Jail's substance abuse program. He was one of about 50 inmates to graduate last week from jail programs intended to help those incarcerated succeed after their release.

The three programs, each separate from the other, include earning a GED, learning culinary skills and The Journey Forward, which combines a 12-step program to treat addiction, spiritual lessons and cognitive behavioral therapy.

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Most inmates graduated from one of the programs, while a few graduated from two.

"I always thought I could change on my own, (but) I couldn't," said Sneider, who graduated from The Journey Forward.

Trevor Morganti, the classification manager at the jail, said about 85 percent of inmates at the jail have substance abuse issues.

Only about 20 percent of people who seek treatment for substance abuse become clean.

Morganti said law enforcement officials asked themselves what it would do for the community if 20 percent of the inmates were able to turn their lives around.

It would save the taxpayers money, he said, and decrease the crime rate in St. Lucie County.

"And we think we can do better than 20 percent," he said.

The three programs give inmates skills they need to succeed in the outside world, Morganti said -- an education, the opportunity to get clean and an employable skill, cooking.

David Gibbs, clinical coordinator with The Journey Forward, said an important part of the program is teaching inmates about their thinking patterns and how to change their "life script."

"We think and then we behave," he said.

The Journey Forward is a 90-day program, while the culinary program takes about six to eight weeks.

Earning a GED depends on when the inmate dropped out of school and what level they reached academically, jail officials said.

The programs are open only to non-violent offenders, and jail officials consider their criminal backgrounds and past behavior before admitting them, Morganti said.

Inmates must volunteer to participate.

About 200 inmates graduate from the programs each year, while about 400 participate, he said.

Some inmates get out of jail or are moved to state prison before they can complete the programs, he said.

Sneider, who dropped out of Port St. Lucie High School in 10th grade, also took the GED program at the jail and will learn soon whether he passed.

He credits The Journey Forward with changing how he thinks and, hopefully, what he'll do when he gets out of jail in December. He admits to being nervous, but wants to stay clean for the sake of his wife, Mayra, and 3-year-old daughter, Brianna.

"It just opened my eyes to a lot," he said of the program.

~cara_fitzpatrick@pbpost.com

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