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Individuals who have stumbled by making a poor choice or choices often continue to be ostracized not by their crimes but instead by the judgment of individuals who empower themselves to have power over others. Most of us have had a moment that wasn't our finest, but this shouldn't be a reason to prevent anyone from having a fair chance at redemption and making positive progress.

I never considered - not in the slightest way - that I would teach inmates. The only reason that I teach at a jail is that friends and family told me that my inspirational books in the "It's a Crazy World...Learn From It" series would be good to use in jails. These suggestions, along with assisting students with legal challenges in my classes, drove me to be open to the idea of teaching in a correctional institution.

On my first night I was scheduled to teach in the jail, I consciously decided to ensure my attitude was positive, did not prejudice the environment, focused on my purpose, and not the location that I was about to teach. My first experiences in the jail were a little overwhelming; the sights, sounds, rules, structure, and controls were different but not surprising. After I arrived at my assigned housing unit and after I checked-in with the Correctional Officer, I knew that I would be assessed by the inmates from the first moment I turned to address them until I started my program. I knew that I had to own this moment from the beginning or my impact might be minimized prior to getting a chance to connect with the inmates based on my knowledge of the material.

It did not take long for me to establish a relationship with these guys. The relationship developed was not based on my knowledge, but it was related to the manner in which I treated these men. I forced myself to look beyond their uniforms to treat these guys the same as any student that sat in my college classrooms. This approach allowed me to forget the location in which I taught and focus on the purpose of my visit.

From the first night to every night I am in this environment, I look each of these men in their eyes and give them the dignity and respect that they deserve. The reason for their stay at this facility is not any of my concern, but my ability to provide valuable lessons that will help these guys on the rest of their life's journey is my sole objective.

I get very excited each time I'm asked a question, challenged on my position, or my favorite is the moment that one of these men references a lesson learned from me at some prior point. These are the moments that I know that these guys get it, they want more, and it inspires me to develop even more material to transform a feeling of despair to feelings of hope that with a changed attitude, some effort, a dream, a desire, and determination these men can be redirected to be productive members of society.

Prior to being in this environment, I had a presumption about the types of individuals that I would encounter and maybe in some ways questioned my ability to make a difference. Although, with a little soul searching and reflection, I realized that these guys are representative of the types of guys that would walk past me on the street. The difference in this environment is that there are a lot more controls.



It's interesting to me that some of my friends and family tell me that they couldn't teach in this environment --- and I didn't think I could either. However, I realized - and I tell those who make this comment - that if I had to spend a few moments with a resident of a jail: Would I rather spend time with some of these men in a questionable situation or in this environment working to make a difference? After I ask this question, individuals realize that their question is a little silly.

I don't know the reason for their stay, I can't change their situation, but I can make a difference today to help each of them have a better chance tomorrow.

I hope that this article will help others to consider the importance of providing someone a hand-up so that the extension of their arms can be used to help propel themselves forward. All these men need is someone to look into their eyes, give them a chance, and not continue to hold them back from a poor choice that was made at one moment in time and should not always be used to punish them for their entire lifetime.

Sincerely,

S. L. Young
Founder and President