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Local program gives ex-offenders real chance at job, new life

FORT WAYNE—Everyone deserves a second chance, but they have to earn it. That's the mantra Anthony "Tony" Hudson brings to work with him everyday. And, that's a mantra that has proven a true blessing to a number of people from an often-neglected segment of society—ex offenders.

Hebrews 13:3 in the Bible says, "Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." That's a commission Hudson, executive director, and his staff at Blue Jacket Inc. take to heart.

While the non-profit organization isn't a religious organization, the people at Blue Jacket don't hide the fact that they undertake their mission with a spiritual fervor and commitment. As stated in their literature, that mission "is to provide ex-offenders with the tools and opportunities to be productive members of society. The philosophical foundation is to provide these opportunities to those who want to earn their way back to the table and are motivated to work."

One of the major problems people returning back to society from prison face is employment. According to Hudson, 60 percent of ex-of-fenders were still unemployed a year after they got into society, and many businesses are reluctant to hire ex-offenders. That lack of legitimate job opportunities leads many people to frustration and, say experts, increases their chance of going back to crime and prison.

Blue Jacket is designed to help break that cycle by giving ex-offenders skills that will enhance their ability to get a job—despite having a felony conviction on their records. Over the past several years, the organization has enjoyed what some consider surprising success in giving ex-offenders that earned second chance through the organization's Career Academy, which Hudson says "is changing the playing field for job seekers."

Blue Jacket has enjoyed what some might deem extraordinary success in serving ex-offenders. The organization, which has been in operation since October 2005, has provided services to those predominantly in Fort Wayne and Allen County. Since its inception, up to 80 percent of job candidates who graduate from Blue Jacket's intensive training program become employed within four weeks during good economic times. Some have come back to work at Blue Jacket in various capacities, providing training and experience to other ex-offenders in need of a new life.

The corporation, which has been funded in part by Department of Labor grants over the years, serves about 300 clients per year. Even in tough economic times, the organization continues to do what others haven't been able to do

For example, even in the difficult economic times of 2008, around 50 percent of participants found work just after graduating from the program, whereas the vast majority of ex-offenders can go years without getting job opportunities due to having a felony on their record. Those and last year's numbers were down, explained Hudson, because of the economic crash, but even then, Blue Jacket was succeeding in

preparing clients for job market success resulting in a number of them getting jobs while the general population was losing jobs. Hudson and his staff said they expect the numbers to climb again as the economy improves.

Again, the philosophy behind the program is simple:

“You’ve got to earn your seat back at the table. Trust takes time and it takes effort—actions not words,” said Hudson, explaining the mantra that participants learn from day one.

The first step for a person hoping to get their life back together through finding employment with Blue Jacket’s assistance is to show up at the organization’s office at 3702 Clinton St. at noon on Tuesday for the intake process. Hudson said some folks initially might be unnerved that they’re met at the door by an armed police officer, but that’s part of the process.

“They’re here to help protect the integrity of the program. They treat our people (clients) with respect,” he said, adding that the officers are specially selected from the city and county police officers because of their empathy for the program and understanding of the difficult circumstances affecting the programs clients.

Potential applicants then go through a candid orientation discussion about the program and expectations for those who participate. They then are given the opportunity to sign on to the program. There’s no pressure, however, for anyone to participate. It’s a decision people must make on their own, explained Hudson.

“If they’ve bought into the benefit of being here, they’ll be here,” he said.

Once they’re on board, clients come back the following Monday and start a series of classes. The training lasts three hours per day, five days per week for two weeks. From the beginning, there are expectations.

Participants must be on time everyday, with no exceptions; dress in business attire, which includes ties for men, and complete all assignments, again with no exceptions.

“We tell them, if you can’t do this for two weeks, you can’t keep a job for two weeks,” explained Hudson.

During that time, the participants go through a number of training exercises in various areas, including:

- Doing a personal assessment. That includes a vocational assessment to determine one’s skills and work potential and a personality assessment to determine where the client is as a person. That, said Hudson, all goes toward “selling” one’s self to potential employers.

“How can you sell a product if you don’t know anything about it?” he asked, applying that to products and the person. “We teach a great deal in the class about sales.”

- Developing a resume and cover letter on computer. Part of that assignment includes sending a resume to at least three to companies where participants would like to work.
- Practice interviewing skills and filling out applications—which include going out to fill out real job applications.

“We don’t talk about it, we do it,” explained Hudson. “This is kinesthetic learning—you learn by doing.

- Conducting a job search. Blue Jacket personnel work with clients to help them match their skills and potential with the proper job.

A major portion of the class is spent on developing goal setting and time management skills—both of which Hudson said are essential to being successful in the job market.

Hudson said people who go through the program, no matter their education level, say they have gained at least 30 percent more knowledge than they previously had. Former participant Quiante Thomas, who recently earned his American Welding Society certification through a program jointly operated by Blue Jacket, WorkOne Northeast, Ivy Tech Community College and Leadership Fort Wayne, said the program has been a real boon to him.

Thomas, who did find employment after going through the program, said Blue Jacket gave him valuable information and experience— especially through the welding program.

“I’ve got to say it was more of a new experience to me. It showed me a lot. They just taught me a lot about getting a job with a felony,” he said.

“I would gladly recommend someone one to go through their program. They have a lot to show... a lot to help people,” added Thomas.

It also gave him an opportunity to give something back to the community. Thomas recently finished a bike rack to be used downtown as part of the city’s focus to make bicycle travel more accessible in Fort Wayne.

“I did that voluntarily. It was another new experience for me because I’d never done an actual job with anyone with welding after getting my certificate,” he said. “It was something to give back to the community. I didn’t think I was going to get the opportunity to do something like that.”

Meanwhile, the non-profit Blue Jacket venture—which evolved largely from Hudson’s experiences with the county’s Reentry Court program through Community Corrections nearly 10 years ago, has cultivated a number of valuable connections in the community and beyond.

“There are a couple of churches that have really wrapped their arms around our ministry—Westview Alliance Church, Fellowship Missionary on Tillman Road,” said Hudson.

In addition, Blue Jacket is partnering with Ephesians 13:3 halfway houses that have a spiritual base and Second Chance Coffee out of Wheaton, Ill., which employees exoffenders as part of their mission to “use every part of our business to love your neighbor as yourselves to positively impact the spiritual, social and economic condition of our employees, their families and the communities in which they live.”

“We’re secular based, but we’re really trying to get involved with the faith-based community because they know our hearts,” said Hudson of Blue Jacket’s partnerships.

Blue Jacket career developer Breanna Jackson agrees.

“Everyone in this office truly has a heart to serve the people that we serve. All of us are here because we really want to be here,” she said.

Jackson, a former probation officer, said Blue Jacket’s mission azlso involves helping ex-offenders return to being productive members of society by helping them as they help themselves.

“We’ll walk the walk with them as long as they want us to,” she said. “I think that we present to everyone who walks through that door that we’re here because we care.”

For more information about Blue Jacket Inc.’s programs, call (260) 744-1900.