Oakland Tribune

Sunday, January 29, 2006

Locked up potential

Mentors transform lives in California's youth prisons

By Momo Chang, CORRESPONDENT

JACQUINN SCALES has done hard time behind bars since he was 16, often spending 23 hours a day in a small jail cell in Stockton. Now he's out and thriving, working two jobs, going to college with big plans to be a psychiatrist and help troubled youth like he once was.

David Muhammad (left) has been mentoring Jacquinn Scales, a former Youth Authority inmate. Scales, now 23, attends college thanks to Muhammad, who has followed his successful change for the last six years. (Ray Chavez - STAFF)

But the 23-year-old Richmond man is an exception.

Nearly 75 percent of youth under 25 who are locked behind bars end up back in the system within three years; the numbers have been as high as 90 percent in the past.

While California is in the midst of a debate about youth prison reform, a critical piece overlooked in the past is how to make sure youth who leave the system which they all will don't end up returning.

"If someone doesn't have a job, a place to live, no family or no mentors, they're either going back into the youth system, or escalate into the adult system," says Barry Krisberg, president of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

Juvenile justice experts such as Krisberg say that the main focus of rehabilitation should be on how to transition out of prison and into society because all young people who are locked up eventually return to their communities.

Taxpayers have been funding a $450 million system that has continued to fail to rehabilitate youth, yet there are models that work better -- not only from other states, but within California.

Currently, a minimum of $70,000 is spent on each of about 3,000 young people locked up in the youth prison system each year, but none of the funding goes directly to community rehabilitation programs.

The Mentoring Center, based in Oakland, is an example what many juvenile experts would like to see: regional centers focused on rehabilitation and treatment, with a therapeutic environment, instead of jail cells watched over by uniformed prison guards. The mentors work with young men in the system while they are behind bars, then continue to work with them once they leave.

'Mind games'

"(It's) a real funny system," says Scales, who spent four years in several different California Youth Authority prisons, ending when he was 21 at N.A. Chaderjian Youth Correctional Facility in Stockton,

known as Chad. "They play a lot of games. They play with people's minds."

Juvenile justice experts have found that once young people leave California's system, one of the most violent in the nation, they often show signs of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Like Scales, they spend a majority of their developmental years behind bars getting acculturated to prison life. While they are supposed to be in school and learning skills to help them become productive citizens, their minds are being shaped by their lives in jail cells.

Scales entered the system at 16-years-old, at freshman grade level, and with a lot of anger. While incarcerated, he sometimes spent months locked down 23 hours a day -- a practice dubbed "23:1" that has been condemned, but a recent state investigation shows that it's still continuing.

Scales could be out on the streets unemployed or committing more crimes, yet he's far from the volatile young man he was in his teens. He currently works two jobs, is the father of a 7-month-old baby girl, is writing a book, and is taking a full load of college courses. One of his part-time jobs is working at the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, which also advocates for juvenile justice reform. He has plans to become a psychiatrist and open a mentoring center in Richmond.

It's been two years since Scales left the system. He's in the midst of self-transformation. There is a sense of eagerness and urgency in his life, as if he's trying to make up for lost years -- and is determined not to be yet another statistic.

David Muhammad sees a different picture than what is often portrayed about youth criminals.

"These are young people with unlimited potential and innate greatness," he says, a message that he and other mentors try to instill in the young men's minds.

They're battling against negative messages. While educational programs behind bars are lacking -- Chad actually lost its high school accreditation in 2005 -- youth are still learning behind bars from each other and the adults they encounter. Their young minds are soaking in daily lessons about boundaries, relationships, family and how to be an adult.

For example, they quickly learn that instead of throwing urine at staff ("gassing"), which will surely send them to "the pen"-- an adult prison--that they can throw water instead, which may result only in being locked up 23 hours a day, Scales explains.

Almost all young people entering the system take anger management classes, but they also learn from adult behavior about what is acceptable and what is not.

Six correctional guards at Chad were caught on surveillance tape beating two "wards," or youth in 2004. Those guards were fired and then reinstated by the state personnel board in 2005.

"How are they going to tell us about our anger and rage, when they clearly showed their anger and rage?" asks Scales. "You just can't justify hitting wards 28 times like that."

Those "mind games" that the system plays with youth, inadvertently or not, only harden their criminal mentality. The youngest ward to be held in a California youth prison is 11-years-old; many other youths stay up to 25-years-old, when they max out and leave prison.

"You're talking about a child in Chad, which is a maximum security prison, locked up 23 hours a day," says Muhammad. "It can be very traumatizing and have a lifelong effect on their psyche."

The mentor

Scales met David Muhammad four years ago, when he participated in the African American Males Transition program in another Stockton youth prison, O.H. Close. Since then, Muhammad and other mentors from the center have played a stable role in his life.

Muhammad sees working with young, African American men who have been caught up in the system as an opportunity to transform young lives. Many youth, like Scales, were formerly foster children. Even for those who have family support, being in prison can cause a severing of relationships and mentors become that family support, says Muhammad.

"Ultimately, one of the greatest needs of the system is to understand the young people in the system," says Muhammad, 32, executive director of the Mentoring Center and a Muslim minister in Richmond.

While this sounds simple, the state has had a tough time figuring out how to understand and motivate young people behind bars, and, over the years, has almost completely given up the mission of rehabilitating youth. Part of the problem is not enough adult staff who are trained in counseling and educating young people who have been in trouble.

The recidivism rate of youth fully participating in their programs is 15 percent, according to Muhammad, compared to the overall recidivism rate of 75 percent in the entire system.

Currently, only one in three in the state's youth prison system even participate in rehabilitation programs while behind bars, according to Bernie Warner, who heads the state's Division of Juvenile Justice, formerly the CYA. That means the majority of youth sit in jail cells and wait for parole or release.

"We have to ask, from day one, how are we going to get them home?" asks Krisberg. "Are they coming home a productive, young member of our society? Or someone coming home angry, hostile, and likely to commit more crimes?"

Muhammad and other mentors in the program work with youth while they are locked up, and try to follow them once they leave.

Scales explains what worked for him in the transitions program: he got to read books he wanted to read, like "How to Love a Black Woman," "Spirit of a Man," and "Daily Motivations for African American Success," titles that he rattles off the top of his head as if he'd just read them a few weeks ago -- though it's been two years since he's been in the program.

Each time, a mentor would bring in one book. Youth in the program would read the book and write a report about what they'd learned. Once completed, they could get a new title of their choice, based on a list from Marcus Books, an African American bookstore in Oakland and San Francisco.

Scales says this worked as a motivating factor for him to finish reading the texts and write the reports, because he was always eager to receive a new book.

'Who they are'

The Mentoring Center's adults seem to have figured out what many have not, which is how to reach youth, at least the African American male population. African Americans makes up 35 percent of the youth prison population -- compared to about 7 percent of the state's population of African Americans.

Each year, they serve about 50 young men in the transitions program from Alameda, Contra Costa and San Francisco counties. In their entire program, they serve 400 youth a year.

Scales is a college student now, and began taking courses at Contra Costa College in the fall after participating in a 36-week program at the Omega Boys Club in San Francisco.

He says he's earned a B-average in five classes this semester, including psychology, math, English and humanities.

While Muhammad was being interviewed for this story, he was in the midst of taking a young man, who was recently released from prison, shopping at Ross. The young man left the system with almost nothing, and they were getting clothes for him for a job interview.

"So often, these young people are called savage, unredeemable, super-predators, criminals and delinquents, as if that is their identity," says Muhammad, who has worked with juvenile offenders for the last nine years. "Maybe they've exhibited that behavior, but that's not who they are."

"I can talk to him about anything without being judged," says Scales about Muhammad. "I've changed my whole outlook on life. I've learned to appreciate my life, instead of taking it for granted."

Foster youth in prison

Scales' past shows a story of a child who was transferred from one person, or institution's, custody to another.

He goes through a timeline, listing places where he's stayed, the number of foster families he lived with, the times he was sent to a group home, the number of times he was locked up in Solano County's juvenile jail, and the names of four CYA prisons he's been in.

"There's a strong link between kids in the child welfare system and the criminal justice system," says Krisberg. "And yet these are two systems that barely talk to each other."

Youth who end up in places like Chad are often funneled through a pipeline of systems.

Many have been written up multiple times by staff schools, jails, and prisons for "defiance," "assault" (fighting), cussing, and other types of behavior that are not always criminal. They have been kicked out of foster care, group homes, institutions, county jails, and other youth prisons time and time again. In that sense, they are "repeat offenders."

Scales' trajectory from being a foster youth to the prison system is, unfortunately, too common a story, say juvenile justice experts.

When asked about his biological parents, Scales is painfully candid. He says he didn't know his father. "I think he was killed," he says.

At 2-years old, he says he was "taken away" from his mother, who died of pneumonia when he was 7. "But I don't even know the whole story. That's just what I've been told."

Scales still regularly checks in with his former foster parents, Deidre and Bryan Myles. They say they are proud of him for continuing to better himself.

"He's always trying to prove that he can he can live in society, as a black male, as a foster child," says

Myles, who lives in Suisun. She and her husband have fostered 100 children in the last 12 years. "Through all his trials and tribulations, he's been steadfast at what he wants out of life."

Scales has visited Missouri's juvenile justice system, where they have gotten rid of the large youth prisons, and the recidivism rate is about 15 percent.

Scales knows there is hope for a better system. As a participant in a successful transition program, he knows first-hand what works.