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His 'positive thinking' combats DWI recidivism

Jim Ryan, who counsels convicts, is writing a book exploring "the art of happiness"

by Elise Pearlman

Five years ago, in an effort to "give something back" to the greater Long Island community, Jim Ryan happened upon a vocation that changed his life and the lives of others in ways he never imagined.

"Brother Jack" Moylan, director of prison ministry for the Archdiocese of Rockville Centre told Ryan about the Suffolk County Sheriff's Jail DWI Alternative Facility in Yaphank. With the goal of combating driving while intoxicated (DWI) recidivism, men and women with multiple convictions spend one to four months in the dormitory-style facility where they are evaluated, supervised and counseled as part of a correctional treatment program.



Ryan was recruited as a volunteer for the facility in 2000. Guided by his belief that "our thoughts determine our actions," he developed a 10-week course for personal development aimed at helping male offenders reorient their lives, set positive goals, and create a better self-image.

One of the weightier issues involves helping clients deal with the guilt that offenders may feel for having injured someone and for afflicting pain on their own families. By conceptualizing the past as "a wake left by a boat" with the potential for undermining the present, Ryan offers the men strategies for regaining control of their lives.

Ryan said that perhaps his most inspirational talk is one in which he asks the men to envision themselves at a testimonial dinner 20 years from now and to reflect upon how they would want to be remembered. The talk always ends with a round of applause, he said, because the exercise offers the men a new vision of who they want to be.

Ryan said that the positive response he has received from his clients at the DWI facility encouraged him "to take his message to the public." Ryan wrote to libraries throughout Long Island and was hired to give a motivational speech that he calls "The Art of Happiness." The subject is one that he continues to share with clients at the DWI facility. Ryan has written two other related speeches and he estimated that he has delivered the three talks to over 100 audiences during the past few years.

"Folks are as happy as they want to be," Ryan said, emphasizing his belief that, to a great extent, happiness is a choice. It is his belief that "little turns in consciousness" gradually lead to great strides in terms of our perspective on life.

Adding that "life is not a dress rehearsal," he teaches people to live in the moment with a greater sense of joy and fulfillment.

In order to live "the life of your dreams," Ryan said that it is important to set material and personal goals. Ryan cited a study that stressed the importance of concretizing goals. Findings revealed that Harvard University graduates who had set written goals had an income that was three times higher than graduates who did not do so.

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At the same time, Ryan said, it is important to consider a person's "spirituality," the part of us that we don't see. He stressed volunteering as a means of expanding this part of our nature.

Ryan noted that three or four of the men he has counseled at the DWI facility show up routinely at his library talks.

Ryan recently elaborated on the "art of happiness" during a new Northport community gathering called Consciousness in the Courtyard. While discussing the eight characteristics of happy people, he pointed to the possibility of "recasting" difficult situations so that they yield hidden opportunities. He also noted that too often people don't take the time to "follow their bliss" or pursue the activities that bring them pleasure.

Ryan is president of the Rotary Club of Northport. A five-year member of this philanthropic organization, he enjoys the camaraderie of "other community service-minded individuals who like to raise money and give it away." The local Rotary helps fund Gift of Life International, Inc., an organization dedicated to providing life-saving heart surgery to critically ill, indigent children from other countries. Rotary also provides scholarships to needy students locally and supports the Ecumenical Food Pantry of Northport, The Place — which is a counseling center in Northport — and the Family Service League.

Ryan, a resident of the Northport-East Northport area for 32 years, says his approach to life's challenges enhances his performance as an independent financial planner for LPL Financial Services. The listening and counseling skills that he has developed have proven instrumental in assessing clients' risk tolerance and helping them set investment goals.

Ryan is in the process of writing a book of 52 vignettes that provide "positive strategies for leading a happier and more fulfilled life." This morning he gave the keynote address at Superintendent's Conference Day attended by teachers in the Mount Sinai School District.

Ryan enjoys spending his free time with his wife, Diane, and three children: Joseph, who is pursuing a PhD in industrial and organizational psychology at Hofstra University; Louis, a U.S. Navy lieutenant serving as an exchange officer in France; and Gina, a management trainee at a rental car agency in Huntington Station. Ryan also loves golf, tennis, and singing and playing the guitar. He speaks fluent French, having taught foreign languages in the Bethpage School District for 14 years.

Jonathan Scherr, director of Suffolk County Sheriff's Jail DWI Alternative Facility, praised Ryan's efforts, noting that the men in the facility are understandably depressed, saying, "They are away from their jobs and their families. They feel that their life is over because of their DWI convictions."

"Ryan is a positive and comforting person who helps them move on despite the fact that what they have done will always be part of their lives," Scherr said. He added that it makes a big difference to the clients that they have Ryan's continued support once they leave the DWI facility.

"He finds the good in each person and focuses on it" Scherr said.

The program and the efforts of volunteers like Ryan may be paying off. According to Scherr, a follow-up study found that over 85 percent of the first 1,000 offenders served by the facility were not re-arrested during the ten-year period encompassed by the study.