Recovering hope

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LAFAYETTE — For Ray Breaux, the Lafayette Parish Correctional Center is a place of hope and recovery.

For Joseph James Elair, it is a place of frustration and hope twice denied.

The two men are linked only by a problem in common and a solution.

Their problem is drug addiction and their solution was Project KITE, Knowledge Is The Effect, a federally funded substance abuse program administered by the Lafayette Parish Sheriff’s Department.

“IT's turned my life around. I can honestly say I’m an addict now,” Breaux said. “I’m a recovering addict and I intend to stay there.”

Breaux turned himself in to the prison just before Christmas 1996, and credits the counselors and fellow inmates with saving his life.

“I saw I was at the crossroads. I was at the end of my addiction,” he said. “I had to get locked up to be free.”

Elair said he has had trouble continuing the program while still in prison. He was transferred to Elayn Hunt Correctional Facility in St. Gabriel on two separate occasions, once in 1996 and once this spring, both times within days of completing the second part of the three-phase program.

“When you’re in the program, you work 100 percent. You cry together,” he said. “The thing is, when will they take that from me? What night, what morning, will they come in and say, ‘Pack your stuff?’”

Elair said he has been a drug user since 1985 and is HIV positive.

“I need somebody to hold on to me for awhile, because I’ve been using for so long,” he said.

Elair said each transfer derailed his recovery program, as he allowed his anger to push him into a relapse.

“I begged God to give me answers,” he said. “Maybe he did and I just didn’t listen.”

Lionel Batiste, who has served 19 months at the Lafayette Parish Correctional Center, said he was “a walking skeleton” before entering Project KITE.

Good success rate

Both cases underscore the importance of Project KITE.

Through 1996, 1,564 inmates had been through at least the first two phases of the program, and the program has an average recidivism rate of less than 10 repeat offenders a year, according to KITE records.

More than 200 inmates went through the program in 1996, according to the records.

But it’s not easy:

Inmates beginning the six-month program are often in terrible physical shape and are unaware of their medical problems, which can run from diabetes to Hepatitis C to malnutrition, said counselor Norma George.

Addicts coming off the street are worn down and out of regular sleep patterns, said KITE counselor Judy Kern.

KITE meetings are held regularly in the law library at the Lafayette Parish Correctional Center.

“THeir biological clocks are all messed up, because they’re used to chasing dope all night,” she said.

Many refuse to believe they have a problem or blame their problems on the police who arrested them or the judge who
The program continues outside the place," he said. "I get a chance to get out there and apply what I've learned."

Breaux has made it through the program and to the outside. Where he now is looking into how he can become a drug counselor for others.

Learning from other's experiences

Knowing and speaking with others who have been down the same path is invaluable in dealing with the aftermath of the addiction process, said Donald Naquin, who is serving a five-year sentence on drug charges and is starting the third phase of the program.

Naquin said he appreciated the way the counselors broke the recovery program down into steps that he could understand as he progressed.

"I had a hard time understanding what was going on," he said. "Being incarcerated, you have a lot of time to spend and reflect on yourself."

Preparing inmates mentally

Former inmate Ray Breaux returns to Lafayette Parish Correctional Center for Project KITE meetings.

P.C. Pazza/The Advertiser

Frank Batson and some of the people he had known and been in business with in the past have stepped forward and offered to be part of his release prevention team, based on their assessment of his honesty about what he has been through.

"Even though, in my mind, I had screwed up to the point of no return, some of my friends came out of the woodwork. It was such a good feeling, that I had looked down my nose at them as straight and that they were willing to help me," he said. "I had a hard time dealing with that. I had turned my back on my friends for so long."

As important as Project KITE has been to Batson, he said the program and others like it are just as important to people who have no problems with drugs.

"I hope people come to recognize that people who are incarcerated are going to get out," he said. "It's not a smart decision not to rehabilitate people in prison, because they're going to be your next-door neighbor."

Ray Breaux looks like a success story.

Joseph James Blair, the inmate who was twice transferred to Hunt Correctional Center, believes in Project KITE. But said he thinks prisoners need more of a guarantee that those with the desire to start out on the road to recovery will be allowed the chance to complete the journey.

"The last two times, it didn't work for me," he said. "I feel unsecured, the way I was shipped."

Blair's frustrations with transfers were shared by the counselors and administrators of Project KITE, said Lt. Russ Dugas, director of special programs and projects at LPCCC.

Recovering addicts can lose their desire to be in a program before a transcript settles down, which can be up to three months, counselor Dauterive said.

The possibility of prisoners being shipped, however, is a part of the prison system, and counselors try to prepare inmates in the program to continue their recovery even if they are uprooted, said counselor Angelie.

Losing a recovering addict to the system is a problem the