

## Rehabilitating prisoners

## A new deal

CLEVELAND, TEXAS

## Finding promise in prisoners

**S**AM AMAYA was six years old when he first pulled a gun on another person—his father, who was beating his mother. At eight he would produce the gun when he wanted his sister to change the channel from a soap opera to a cartoon. At 13, after a fight with his father, he fled from his house to his school's playground, where some members of the Two-Six gang were meeting. He was initiated later that afternoon. He began running drugs as a teenager, picking up consignments of marijuana and cocaine near the border with Mexico and selling them around Texas.

With such a background, it is perhaps not surprising that Mr Amaya was arrested after pistol-whipping a girlfriend and is today, at 28, about to finish a long sentence for aggravated assault. Statistics would suggest that he will be back before too long: according to the Pew Centre on the States, more than half of released offenders return to prison within three years, and Texas has the country's highest rate of incarceration. In fact, Mr Amaya's future should be more cheerful than those numbers suggest.

Just before he is released on June 23rd, if all goes to plan, Mr Amaya will graduate from the Prison Entrepreneurship Programme (PEP), a remarkable effort to prepare some of Texas's harder cases for their transition back to freedom. The programme was founded in 2004 by Catherine Rohr, a venture capitalist who changed careers after visiting several Texas prisons.

Her premise is that many criminals are intelligent people with good heads for business and healthy appetites for risk, and that these traits can be put to productive use. She is particularly interested in people who have already demonstrated these skills—for example by running a successful drug business or achieving a high rank in a gang.

During the past four years PEP has put more than 300 inmates through four months of business classes and study. They meet MBA students to develop business plans, and hundreds of businessmen have taken part in special events at the prison. About 40 graduates already have businesses up and running. The vast majority are employed. Fewer than 5% have reoffended. The programme is privately funded, and that success rate has helped it grow. In 2004 Ms Rohr used her savings to get things going; this year the operating budget is \$3.2m.

PEP's success is partly due to the fact that the programme takes only the most serious applicants. Prospective participants first fill out a lengthy questionnaire. Those that pass have an interview, where Ms Rohr claims she rumbles the fakers. Once selected, a participant can be booted out at any time for a variety of infractions, such as cheating or maintaining gang membership. The current class started with 87 members and is down to 39.

Participants say that PEP provides male role models, and helps them have hope for the future. Ms Rohr considers it her job to build character. "They're not in here because they were bad businessmen," she says. "They're in here because they were lacking moral values in their lives." She assigns them ethical case studies and leads discussions on everything from honesty to sexual relationships.

Texas is making its own efforts to improve results for released offenders, but re-

leased prisoners typically get just \$100 and a bus ticket to Houston or Dallas. PEP picks up its graduates at the gate with packages of sheets, toiletries and business suits. It helps them find work and housing, and even offers a free trip to the dentist. According to Gregory Mack, a participant, all this makes a big difference. Mr Mack has been in and out of prison on drug charges for the past two decades. He completed a behaviour-modification programme in 2002 as a condition for parole, but its value was limited. "They really had nothing to offer outside the walls," he explains. By 2005 he was behind bars again. Mr Amaya now has a chance to avoid that fate. ■



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