

Building a better life on the outside

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Working together: Liam, David and Peter (extreme right) working in the former Lower Gardiner Street labour exchange while taking part in the Trasna programme under the supervision of Sean Maher, supervisor, third from left, and plasterer Luciano Hdz, fourth from left. **Photo: Frank Miller**

A new back-to-work scheme for former prisoners gives them the chance to learn essential skills and gain a foothold in the world of work. They explain why it's so important, writes Róisín Ingle

IT'S LUNCHTIME ON a construction site in Dublin's north inner-city. The men in high visibility jackets and hard hats down tools, troop outside for cigarettes and chat in the sunshine as they unwrap sandwiches. There's nothing remarkable about them except maybe a certain toughness to their features - a missing tooth here, a scar there - that hints at all the places they've been. Mountjoy, Wheatfield, Midlands, Clover Hill. But since January they have been helping to restore this old church building on Lower Gardiner Street, slowly building new lives on the outside.

Liam, who used to run a computer network for a national newspaper, retains a twinkle in his eye despite regrets about missing Dublin's boom years while he was locked up. David (32) is struggling to come to terms with three recent bereavements but is determined not to go back to the life of drugs and crime he describes as "mayhem". Both in their early 20s, Peter and Carl have been in and out of various institutions since they were 15. Softly spoken Peter wants to be a brickie and Carl, now father to a young girl, is hoping to train as a gym instructor.

THEY ARE AMONG a group of 11 men and one woman who are part of Trasna, the year-long back-to-work course for ex-offenders being held on the building site. It's a pilot scheme run by Jobcare, an organisation founded by a group of seven Christian churches in the city which has been helping Dubliners find employment since 1994.

"There are additional pressures on ex-offenders, different barriers they have to overcome," says chief executive Paul Mooney at the Jobcare offices on Pearse Street, before we walk over to the site. "They need skills, but what they really need is work experience. It's a big thing for an employer to take on an ex-offender and it's understandable that many don't want to take that chance. With Trasna, the idea is that the former prisoners learn to be in the world of work again, so when hopefully they get an opportunity, they are not seen as a risk by employers because they have that experience behind them."

He says employment can be crucial to staying out of prison but that ex-offenders mostly struggle to get a job without experience and cannot get experience without a job. Placing people in realistic work environments while offering training is how they can rebuild a "constructive, crime-free" life outside. Jobcare's John McKeever has pioneered a personal development programme for prisoners called Staying Real that is run in prisons and at outside centres. Both this and a pre-employment course are compulsory for all Trasna workers.

For the majority of the participants, this is the longest they will have gone in their adult lives without facing new criminal charges, some outstanding charges are still being negotiated through the courts. Sammy Reilly, supervisor, father-figure and confidante to the participants, says that when a group of prison officials came to visit recently they were amazed that the men were still here and not back in prison.

"One of the wardens asked how come they weren't back inside," recalls Sammy, who has an easy rapport with the men on the site and describes himself as "a Bible-believing Christian".

"I said to him 'look at that guy, I know his name. You might have had him for eight years and only known him as a number'. Working with them I know their faults, their strengths, their moods and how to get them out of those moods. They are not just numbers to us, they are people who need help, people who have done wrong and who have paid their debt to society. When they come out they are sore and suspicious, then you get working alongside them and with a little bit of love and kindness, that's all it is, things change."

THE BUILDING WHERE the Trasna participants clock in every morning at 8am dates back to 1839 when it opened as Trinity Church. With the decline of the north inner city, it closed in 1909 and years later became one of the city's largest labour exchanges.

The building has been bought by Trinity Network Church, one of the founders of Jobcare, and the project includes restoring the original bow windows and doors, cleaning and illuminating the impressive facade and painstaking restoration of cornices, friezes and ceilings. When it opens, facilities will include a creche, a large room for worship and exhibitions, a counselling centre and a library.

Downstairs in the makeshift canteen, former computer network manager Liam is explaining what it's like to be on the outside. "Once you are an addict and you've been in jail, people lose their trust in you and you have to build it again . . . there are people who don't expect you can change, who almost want you to fail and then there are people who wear their heart on their sleeve and are genuine," he says.

He got involved with drugs, ecstasy and cocaine, in the 1990s, when he was a DJ, and started taking heroin when he moved to England. He was clean for a few years but eventually went back to drugs which led to crime and in 1999 he was responsible for a car crash which left a woman in a coma.

He got 12 years which was reduced to six and says he detoxed "the minute I landed in Mountjoy". In 2003, the woman who he injured came to visit him while in prison and continued the visits until his release last year. "I had coffee with her recently," he says. "The first time she came, she said a prayer with me and forgave me. It was strange but it felt good. She is lovely woman."

He was released to Pace, the community-based voluntary agency that supports ex-offenders, which in turn linked him to Jobcare and Trasna.

Getting used to ordinary life has been difficult. "I hadn't seen the euro before, so that was weird."

There have been challenges at work, as there have been for all participants. "When I first came out I had a major problem with authority, you were used to people in uniforms telling you what to do . . . but I love working now," he says. "I used to work on a big network and I never minded responsibility, but it's hard trying to get back into it after years inside. I missed out on the boom, in the line of work I was in I could have done very well. First I was thinking, I'm 38, what's the point of being here, but now I've realised it's not too late. These people around have

shown me I can go and train myself up and get back to work." He is receiving counselling for the first time and hopes to train as a sound engineer when the course ends.

HE IS ANGRY that people leaving prison don't get more support, and says programmes such as Staying Real are worthwhile, but only with the proper support structures in place. "There are lads coming out of prison with a voucher for one night in a hostel and no chance of anything and they are back inside within a few weeks," he says.

Growing up in the inner-city with heroin-addicted parents, Carl knows all about that scenario. "There were always spoons and needles around when I was growing up," he says. "I got into ecstasy and tablets and cocaine, but I never got into heroin because I saw it kill my father, my aunty and my uncle . . ."

He was first arrested aged 15. "I'd get arrested for robbing then I'd go to prison then I'd get out and there'd be nothing for me and I'd go back robbing again," he says. "I was on the run most of the time, so I really don't know myself now. I'm a different person. Getting up every morning is a bit hard, but I never want to go back on the labour again."

Carl is hoping to complete a gym-instructor course and says his young daughter, who he has access to on the weekends, is "definitely Daddy's girl. I don't want her growing up seeing all what I saw. My Da died in Mountjoy, and I want her to have a better life," he says.

His colleague Peter has also turned his life around after years of "robbing bikes and cars and shops and taking drugs". His last sentence was for armed robbery. With help from his probation officer, he has managed to stay clean, get a job with Trasna and is also doing a literacy course. "I did find it difficult because I had never worked before. I didn't think it was for me at the start, but now I am doing roofing, building walls, slabbing and I'm hoping to get a brickwork course out of it," he says. "If you have support when you get out, it's completely different."

David, a heroin addict who grew up in a family of 10, has had a difficult time lately. His mother died before Christmas, his uncle died a few weeks later and on St Patrick's Day his best friend hanged himself. "I couldn't cope, but I went back on methadone rather than go back on the gear," he says. "But now I am getting up in the morning, getting the extra few bob for my partner and her baby. I am learning different skills every day and I don't have to think about crime because I am earning my own money. I know loads of lads who need a chance like this."

THE STATISTICS TELL their own story. The lack of dedicated resources to support the transition from prison to accommodation and employment is viewed by experts as part of the reason why almost 30 per cent of prisoners re-offend within a year of being released, and more than half commit another crime within four years.

And the stigma of being an ex-prisoner is just another barrier they have to overcome. Over coffee, supervisor Sammy expresses his concern about how the group he protectively calls "my lads", will be portrayed in this article.

Back when the programme started, he had his own doubts about the ability of ex-offenders to change, so he knows some people may not believe they are really capable of moving on and away from crime.

"I am worried about them being described as a bleeding shower of gangsters," he says.

"Is that not what we are, brother?" asks Liam with a smile.

"No, brother," says Sammy, smiling too now. "That's all in the past".

Some of the names have been changed.

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