

MEN ACCEPT Freedom Challenge IN PILOT PROGRAM

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN W. KENNEDY



“Rebellion against authority is rebellion against God. And I love God.”
— Fernando Martinez

The auditorium is filled with supportive men applauding and whooping it up as Fernando Martinez and Jerry Schmidt receive their diplomas signifying completion of a rigorous voluntary eight-month Teen Challenge program.

Like dozens of other graduates of the drug and rehabilitation ministry in various locales around the country, Martinez and Schmidt make short, heartfelt speeches about the recent transformation in their lives. Then they take a pledge to remain abstinent from pornography, alcohol and tobacco.

However, unlike other Teen Challenge centers, the men won't be moving out on their own anytime soon. Their address for the near future will remain Hutchinson Correctional Facility.

Martinez and Schmidt are two of the earliest graduates of Freedom Challenge, a pilot program at the facility. The cooperative effort involving the Kansas Department of Corrections, Freedom Ministries and Teen Challenge marks the first full-scale implementation of the

drug and rehabilitation program behind prison walls.

Schmidt, who is scheduled to be released in another 13 months, told *TPE* he signed up for multiple reasons.

“I wanted to get right with Jesus Christ,” says the 39-year-old Schmidt, clutching a well-worn study Bible. “I wanted to have right relationships with other people. I wanted to address the issue of lust. I wanted to learn how to apply God's truth to my life.”

According to Schmidt, other mature Christians have held him accountable, a form of discipleship he didn't receive when he made an initial commitment to Christ in a county jail in 1986.

“Back then nobody ever told me how to be in God's Word, and I strayed,” Schmidt admits. “In here I've learned a lot about temptation that I didn't know. Sometimes I still struggle, but I know how Satan works now.”

Martinez told *TPE* he joined because of a lifelong rebellious attitude, stemming from never being

disciplined by his parents. He says he began dropping acid at age 9, and by 13 he lived on the streets. Yet, for brief intervals, he led a more stable existence. For a short time he attended a Royal Rangers program at an Assemblies of God church, moved into a foster home and excelled in school.

Then alcohol and illegal drugs took over. Although only 44, he says he has been locked up for nearly all of the past three decades.

“I realized I needed to learn how to be productive rather than destructive,” says the articulate and intense Martinez. “I know if I want a further walk with God I have to be in the Word every day.”

The weathered copy of the Scriptures that Martinez carries, a Bible held together by strapping tape, indicates he means it. He says involvement in various 12-step programs in the past didn't move him to change his heart.

Freedom Challenge is the first rehabilitation program he's completed. These days, Martinez is up at 4 a.m., reading his Bible and listening to a Christian radio station in his solitary cell before breakfast.

“I always resented being told what to do by authorities,” says Martinez, whose earliest possible release date is 2010. “Freedom Challenge made me aware that I need to comply with authorities.” Martinez proceeds to quote Romans 13:1,2.

“Rebellion against authority is rebellion against God,” says Martinez, who hopes to become a Christian counselor. “And I love God.”

SUPPORTIVE OFFICIALS

Assemblies of God National Chaplaincy Director Alvin Worthley, Teen Challenge representative David Scotch and Tom Bevard — who operates Freedom Ministries in Iola, Kan. — helped get Freedom Challenge off the ground 13 months ago. Kansas Department of Corrections officials appreciated Bevard's efforts in establishing a

Set Free program in Larned (see *TPE*, April 25, 2004), and asked if he could start a more concentrated project in Hutchinson.

The state has partnered with Bevard and Freedom Ministries to develop future programs such as Freedom Challenge in seven other prisons and also three youth correctional facilities. Freedom Ministries already has developed evangelism and discipleship programs in conjunction with Prison Fellowship in all those institutions.

“Just as we have witnessed the success of Teen Challenge in centers around the globe, I believe we will see the same results from Freedom Challenge,” Worthley says.

After consultation with Worthley, Bevard and other Assemblies of God and Teen Challenge officials, U.S. Missions Teen Challenge missionary Don Starnes agreed to serve as director of Freedom Challenge. Starnes makes a daily 90-mile round-trip drive from Wichita to oversee the program, which currently has 47 inmates, ages 20 to 60.

Freedom Challenge (www.freedomchallenge.net) is similar to other Teen Challenge programs in that students are given daily time

for group instruction, individual study and prayer. To a greater degree than Teen Challenge centers on the outside, veterans in this program mentor the neophytes.

Freedom Challenge is one of several faith-based alternative programs recently introduced in U.S. prisons in which inmates from any faith tradition — or no faith — must be accepted as participants. Inmates who voluntarily choose to be involved understand what specific religious materials will be used to teach character and values.

Steve Dechant, deputy warden of programs, says the prison is a better place because of Freedom Challenge. The prison doesn't reward participants with any time shaved off their sentences. Graduates who end up staying months or even years afterward are prone to better behavior.

“Anytime there are positive values being imparted, it leads to the incorporation of changing antisocial thoughts,” Dechant says. Some enrollees are lifers, and their participation suits officials just fine in the facility that houses 1,100 medium- and maximum-security prisoners.

“When pro-social values are implemented, it should change be-



Jerry Schmidt (left) and Fernando Martinez are Freedom Challenge graduates.



Don Starnes heads Freedom Challenge.

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havior,” Dechant says. “If nothing else, this gives us 40 productively occupied people we didn’t have before. Idle hands are the devil’s playground.”

Although Freedom Challenge technically is open to any prisoner, the spiritual direction offered is based on the gospel. The men also learn personal life skills, including how to manage anger and how to forgive others.

Typically, participants are involved in Freedom Challenge 3½ hours every weekday, taking courses such as “Now That I’m a Christian” and “How to Study the Bible.”

Students also are encouraged to redeem their time. For example, rather than watch television or take a nap for two free hours in the afternoon, men are urged to engage in a more worthwhile activity such as memorizing Scripture.

“Being able to make choices and set goals is a different experience for men in prison,” says Starnes, 47. “In here they are told when to wake up and what to eat every day.”

CHANGING LIVES

At the graduation ceremony, Starnes plays guitar and leads worship with joyful, hand-clapping choruses such as “I’m Trading My Sorrows” and “Shake Off Those Heavy Bands,” songs that seem to take on special significance inside a penitentiary.

Warden Louis E. Bruce spoke to the Freedom Challenge attendees at the event and encouraged them to stick with it. “These spiritual programs help us to come to grips with the everyday challenges of life,” he says. “God puts us all on this earth to serve others.”

Officials at the century-old massive limestone penitentiary allow Freedom Challenge to occupy what had been a sparingly used wing that contains four glass-enclosed classrooms.

Prison officials reviewed the faith-

based materials and didn’t require Freedom Challenge to compromise any of its teachings.

Paul Hughes, 51, is the lead instructor, in addition to serving as a full-time Church of God (Cleveland) pastor in Wichita. He volunteers at the prison 6:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., four days a week. Ken Connor, pastor of Sterling (Kan.) Assembly of God, teaches three times a week. Allen Riley, a Pentecostal Holiness pastor in Wichita and a Teen Challenge graduate, works at the prison each weekday.

“We’re trusting the Word of God will be worked into them over eight months,” says Hughes, a retired Air Force education specialist with a clear, strong voice. He conducts a spiritual assessment on the applicants, and then tailors the studies to meet the needs of individual inmates. A man dealing with a sexual addiction needs a different approach than one harboring resentment toward his father.

For the next few months, Schmidt, Martinez and other recent Freedom Challenge graduates will help mentor those still taking classes. Schmidt says he is blessed that Freedom Challenge opened in Hutchinson.

“Thank God these people cared enough about our spiritual condition to teach us,” he says. “They didn’t have to do it. I thank God that He didn’t give up on me.”

Martinez hopes others will be willing to become involved in prison ministry and in sending Christian literature such as *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel* to institutions.

“While we have broken the law, don’t give up on us,” he says. “In here, God has saved us from our own ignorance. Although I’m still imprisoned, I am no longer in bondage to my past way of thinking.” **tpe**

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