

ROUNTREE DETENTION CENTER

RISE UP

Inmate program aims to end repeat offenses

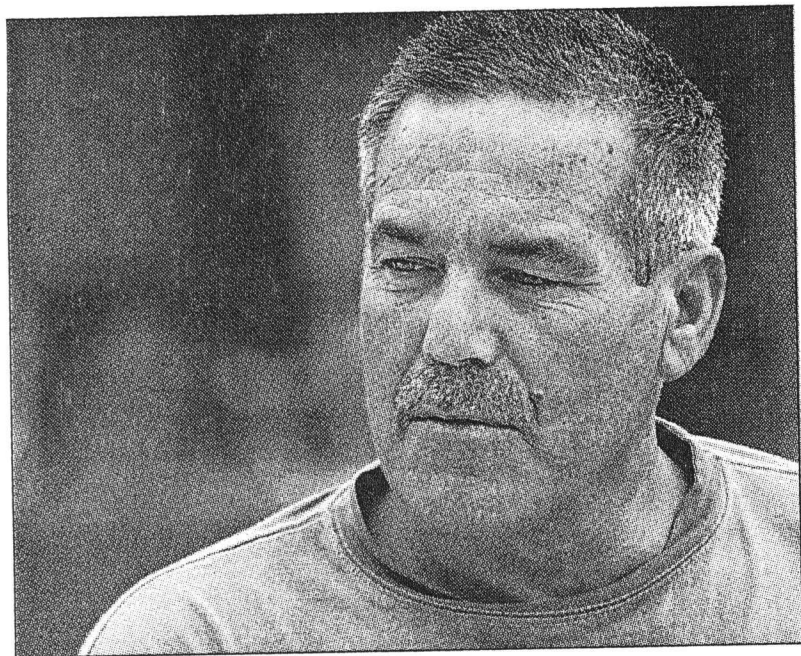
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DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Rountree Detention Center inmates participate in the first 10-week phase of the RISE program, which aims to help them make a successful re-entry into society and reduce rates of recidivism.



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

'It's been life-changing. I've been given a self-awareness that I lost for many years because of drug addiction.'

TIM LOPES, RISE participant

By STEPHEN BAXTER

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WATSONVILLE

Fifty-four-year-old Tim Lopes says he's at a crossroads.

Wearing a jail-issued T-shirt and sitting on a bench at Rountree Detention Center outside Watsonville on Friday, Lopes said he worked as a heavy equipment operator off and on for years. He lived in Watsonville, had two children and has been divorced for 20 years.

Through his life, he said, an addiction to methamphetamine plagued him.

Lopes was caught with stolen property. He had three meth-related convictions that led to state prison terms. As one of thousands of "nonviolent, nonserious, non-sex offenders" defined by the state in its prison overhaul in 2011, Lopes was sentenced to County Jail in his most recent drug case.

Sure, he had taken and even graduated from substance abuse and behavioral classes before, but he said a new program at Rountree called RISE finally seemed to stick. He and 10 other inmates in the program created the acronym. It stands for Reclaiming

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RISE

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Integrity, Self Awareness and Empowerment. The first 10-week phase finished Friday.

"It's been life-changing," Lopes said. "I've been given a self-awareness that I lost for many years because of drug addiction."

Not only has he treated his fellow inmates and correctional officers with more respect, he also wants to go back to school to become a counselor and help others.

"It might stop someone from following in my path," he said.

THE ROOTS OF RISE

The idea for RISE has been brewing for a while.

It is based on a program called Gemma — named for a budding flower — which has helped almost 200 women in Santa Cruz County transition to life after incarceration since 2003.

The goal of the program is to have fewer women re-offend, and about 30 percent of the women have had new offenses, said Cynthia Chase, program director for both Gemma and RISE. That's a significant improvement from the roughly 70 percent of inmates who re-offend in Santa Cruz County.

Both programs are run by the nonprofit Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County in collaboration with the Sheriff's Office.

"We wanted to create a program for men that was as successful as the women's program," Chase said of RISE. "The whole focus of both programs is behavioral change and to be aware of what triggers behaviors."

At Rountree, which is a medium-security jail off Buena Vista Drive, the men talk about their anger and how to effectively communicate. Exercises try to build their self-esteem. They talk about being aware of drug and alcohol addiction.

Led by Program Coordinator Jason Murphy — who holds a master's degree in recovery psychology — the class takes place three mornings a week in a portable classroom at Rountree.

Friday, 11 tough-looking tattooed men sat facing each other around four folding tables pushed together.

They started with what Murphy called a "mindful moment." He chimed a small bell. The men closed their eyes.

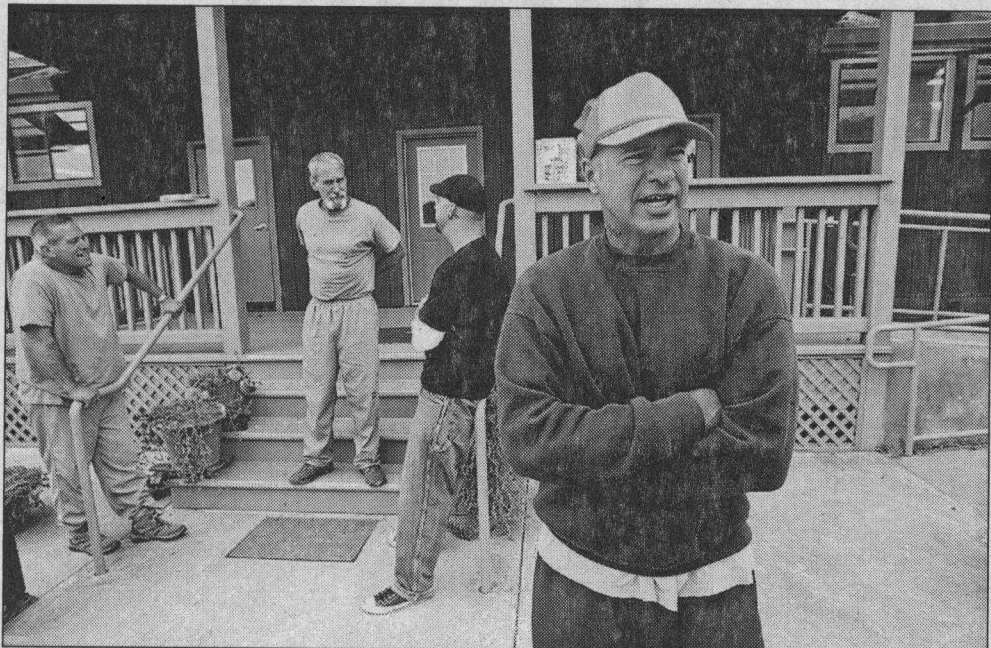
"Allowing the eyes to rest, know that you are breathing in," Murphy tells the group. A correctional officer's radio goes off. He scrambles to turn the volume down.

"Know that you are breathing out," he continues. "Silently say the word 'calm' as you breathe in. Relax as you breathe out."

When they finish, an older inmate asks about the Dalai Lama and reincarnation.

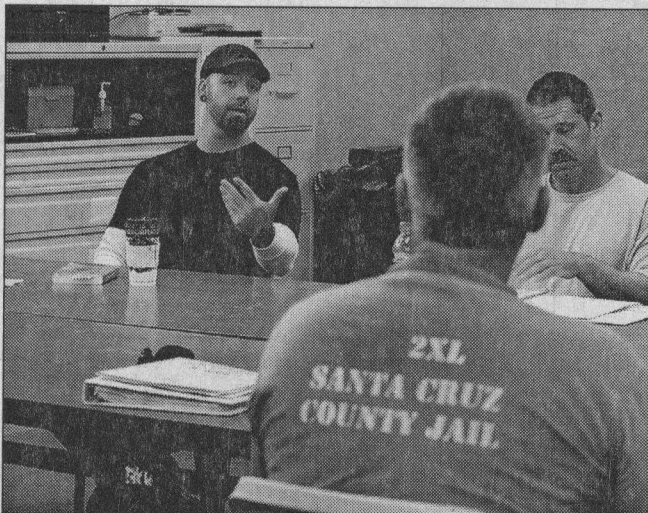
"That's an excellent question," Murphy starts.

Through the 10-week class, guest speakers, such as Chase, have spoken to the group. She



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Santa Cruz surfer Anthony Ruffo is part of the first RISE Program.



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Counselor and RISE Program Coordinator Jason Murphy works with small groups of inmates.

said she was impressed with how open the inmates have been.

Chase said she liked "the way they talk and the willingness to be extremely honest about what's gone wrong."

"They're taking responsibility for their actions and what it will take to do something differently. They absolutely hold each other accountable," she said.

HURDLES TO CHANGE

The first group also has not been without its challenges.

Two of the men tested positive for marijuana use during a random urine test about three weeks ago, correctional officers said.

When Chief Deputy Jim Hart heard about it, he visited the class and had a stern talk with the group. The class was a privilege that the men violated — let alone the expense and chance he was taking on it, officers said.

The state-funded program tied to the prison overhaul law, AB109, costs about \$100,000 a year. It includes all the staff costs and materials such as workbooks, Chase said.

Some of the participants said Hart's "chewing out" was a turning point. Some participants said they took it as motivation to stay on a straight path.

Tristan Pardee, a 31-year-old from Capitola, said he had doubts about the program when he applied.

Convicted of selling meth, Pardee was sentenced to serve seven years in County Jail with an "out date" set for May 2015.

"For me, the last 12 years

have been a downward spiral," Pardee said.

"I was a little skeptical at first because it was so new," he said of the program. "Now I'm pushing for more inmates to do it. The whole thing is working on addictive behavior."

In addition to RISE, Pardee is also taking a substance abuse recovery class and a GED class at Rountree. Inmates who are in the program do tasks such as clean and landscape the jail. They also learn computer skills on a row of machines without Internet access, for instance.

"Mainly the thing for me is staying busy, because idle time has not worked for me," Pardee said.

Participants in RISE also have been given some new responsibilities — even away from the Rountree facility.

Correctional Supervisor Louis Hevia recently took the group to the Watsonville Municipal Airport to clean up the runway with weed trimmers. They behaved themselves, Hevia said, but he was even more impressed by the way they treated him and their fellow inmates during the trip.

"We talk to them and we treat them like people. We respect them and we expect the same in return," Hevia said.

A plan to have the men landscape parks in the county also is now in the works, Hevia said.

Lt. Jim Skillicorn, who also works at Rountree and has been heavily involved in RISE, said he too has seen

changes in the men.

"Everyone has their highs and lows in life. We want them to be successful in custody and out of custody," said Skillicorn.

"If we want to reduce recidivism, they need them to be able to take care of themselves and know who they are."

No stranger to self improvement techniques after his well-publicized Clear Mind Healthy Planet group last year, Santa Cruz surfer Anthony Ruffo is also in RISE.

Ruffo is serving a one-year jail sentence after he pleaded guilty to possession of meth for sale and other charges. He is expected to be in Rountree until February, followed by electronic monitoring.

He joked that he wanted the next RISE trip to be the beach.

"I told them I'd wear a striped wetsuit," Ruffo quipped.

"No, the staff here has been real positive," said Ruffo, wearing a jail-issued orange trucker hat. "If you're going to go to jail, this is the spot."

RIISING ON

After Wednesday's graduation ceremony, all the participants are expected to continue to the second 10-week phase of the program that will start later in July.

Chase, the program director, said participants will be tracked to see whether they re-offend.

Admittedly biased in favor of the program, Chase said, "I am so profoundly encouraged by the engagement and the willingness of this first group."

Lopes, the RISE participant from Watsonville, said he was grateful for the opportunity. When his sentence finishes in May 2013, he said wants to return to school and be a counselor like the ones who have helped him.

"They support change here and that's what it's all about," said Lopes.

"When I leave these gates, I make a commitment to the Santa Cruz County community to continue to rise — so that I may do my part in making this community a better place to live. That's my direction. That's where I'm headed."

Follow Sentinel reporter Stephen Baxter on Twitter @sbaxter_sc