

COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS

GETTING OUT AND STAYING OUT

Former Inmate Has All The Ingredients for Success

Every week, Newsday Presents another Community Champions organization – groups that reach out to assist fellow Long Islanders.

How To Reach Us:

Getting Out and Staying Out

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The statistics are alarming: About two out of every three people who are released from prison will return. But the numbers are dramatically different for former Riker's Island inmates who participated in Getting Out and Staying Out (GOSO), a program that provides mentoring, counseling, education and job placement services to men ages 18-21 on Long Island and New York. Of the 300 who've graduated from the program, only three have returned to jail.

"The day an inmate gets locked up is the day he should start rehabilitation," says Mark Goldsmith, a retired cosmetics executive and GOSO's founder. "Other programs miss the mark because they start a month before an inmate's release, and they often don't provide the mentoring and other follow-up services that we do."

One of GOSO's success stories involves Jahmees Frias, a 20-year-old former Riker's inmate who got his high school diploma while attending the Horizon Academy, an alternative school on Riker's Island. "When I first saw Mark, I could tell he was a very successful and good man," says Frias. "He asked us if we wanted to work in low paying jobs our whole lives or be successful entrepreneurs. He inspired me to turn my life around."

Frias, who recently was named Horizon's most improved student, credits Goldsmith, Horizon principal Gloria Ortiz and other GOSO



Jahmees Frias, assistant manager at Alonti Café, speaks with his mentor Mark Goldsmith and Roberto Moran, program administrator of GOSO.

mentors and students with his new outlook. "When I first went to prison, I had no goals. I just took it day to day. Now, I set goals and make plans."

Goldsmith continues to mentor Frias; he helped him find work in the restaurant industry and receive a scholarship to the Culinary Academy of New York. "Even though I go from work all day to school at night, the students and teachers boost my energy," says Frias.

Goldsmith is quick to point out that businesses don't employ men like Frias as a favor. "We tell companies, 'Don't hire these guys to give them a break; hire them because they're hard workers.'"

With his friends, family and people

at GOSO behind him, Frias is confident about his future. He's already been named assistant manager at his restaurant. "My customers tell me they can't wait to visit when I open my own business. Going back to prison is no longer an option to me."

Frias summed it up perfectly in a poem written upon his graduation: We cannot change the past, we cannot change the inevitable, But if we change our ways now, the future will be incredible!!!

So do your best and do it with pride. We would all make it one day if only we try.

— Jenna Kern-Rugile