

Excerpt from **Every Day Heroes: 50 Americans Changing the World One Non-Profit at a Time**
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Mark Goldsmith with incarcerated members of Getting Out and Staying Out at Rikers Island in New York City

Mark Goldsmith

President and CEO, Getting Out and Staying Out

Mark Goldsmith enjoyed a long and lucrative career as a business executive. When it came time to retire, he could have just donated his suits to charity, settled back in a deck chair, and enjoyed the rewards of his hard work. He could have done that, but he didn't. That's just not who Goldsmith is. When serendipity land Goldsmith at Rikers Island for a day (as a volunteer, not as an inmate) he saw that some assistance and education for convicts reentering society could change lives and futures. So he called upon his lifetime of profit-making skills to build a robust nonprofit called **Getting Out and Staying Out** in 2004. Through a combination of psychological, educational, and vocational support, Goldsmith's organization has since successfully guided hundreds of men through their transition from the inside to the outside. The numbers speak for themselves: the recidivism rate nationwide for young men is about 60 percent; for members of **Getting Out and Staying Out**, it's 20 percent.

I grew up in the coal-mining town of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. I went to a very small high school—twenty-four kids in my class. Sports really ruled the roost. So I played basketball and enjoyed life as it was, growing up in a small town—I wouldn't give it up for the world. I wasn't a bad kid but a bit of a wise guy. I wasn't much of a student either and I dropped out of Penn State after two years to join the navy. When I got out of service, I met my wife, got my undergraduate from NYU, my MBA from Baruch City College, and embarked on a forty-year career in the cosmetics industry.

I've had conversations with other people from Johnstown, and we've always talked about why we were all relatively successful and we determined it had a lot to do with the work ethic we grew up with. In fact, when my kids came back after their freshman year they sat down to dinner and looked at me and my wife and asked, "How come we're the only kids in high school who worked?" And we said, "Because that's the way it is in our family, you know—you work!"

I had heard about an interesting program in New York called Principal for the Day where professional can go into New York City schools and talk to the principals and the kids to try to get them to appreciate that society really does care about schools and teachers and students. In 2003, I decided to volunteer.

I'm still a bit of a wise guy, so I asked for a tough school thinking they might send me to the South Bronx, but instead they asked me if I would go to jail. And I said, "Excuse me?" They wanted me to go to two high schools on Rikers Island. So off to Rikers I went.

I had an incredible first day there, met the principal, talked to a bunch of the guys, and something clicked. I did an analogy for them that they thought was pretty clever. I set up side-by-side models of a drug cartel and General Motors. I showed them how the chairman of the board of General Motors wasn't much different than the kingpin of a drug cartel. The kingpin has a hierarchy of lieutenants and general all the way down to the punks who hustle drugs on the street, and the GM has executive VPs, VPs, marketing guys, and sales guys who basically hustle cars, and there's no difference between selling cars and selling pot. I told them, "The bottom line is that you don't sell drugs because you're bad guys, you sell drugs because you want to make money—it's the same thing as a car salesman."

The next time I went back, a lawyer also showed up and I wondered why we needed two principals for the day, but then I said to myself, “Wait a minute, he’s talking about them getting out of prison, and I’m talking about them *staying* out.” I went home and trademarked the name Getting Out and Staying Out.

The rest is history. I got my 501c3 in 2004. I couldn’t afford an office yet and it was just me, so I’d work with the guys on the inside, and then when they got out, I’d meet them at the Starbucks on 39th and Madison. I did that for about a year—I drank an awful lot of caffe lattes. Now we have an office, six paid employees, and a board of directors, many of whom serve as mentors and coaches, We’re kind of lean and mean.

There are three parts to the program. At Rikers Island, we start mentoring the minute they get in. Applicants have to write an essay telling me a little bit about themselves and how we can help them when they get out. Then we assist them with their court cases. Rikers is not a turnstile; 14,000 people sleep there every night; 2,000 women we do not work with; 2,000 people who have been sentenced to less than a year for misdemeanors; and another 10,000 awaiting adjudication of their trial. Of those, an awful lot are going Upstate to do time, so I opened an Upstate correspondence program that keeps them in the loop while they’re incarcerated. When they get out they come to my office in East Harlem.

The way it works once they’re out is pretty straightforward. They come to the office on the very first day they’re released. We do intake, they get a psycho/social done by a licensed social worker or a social-work intern, and we start to talk about what they really want to do for the rest of their lives, the types of career they want. Educationally, do they have their GED or high-school diploma? Do they want to go to college? They leave with a brand new résumé that day. That’s part of our tool kit—they get a résumé; and electric alarm clock; as many condoms as they need to keep themselves safe; a pad, pencils, maybe a little briefcase; and then perhaps the most important thing is a monthly MetroCard. If you go to school and work full-time, we give you a card; it costs us \$105 and it’s our pleasure.

We also give them shirts, ties, and pants for interviewing, and a new pair of shoes. Over the first month or so, they embark upon a series of seminars that involve interview skills, how to get a job and

keep a job, financial planning, time and management, etc. We get them interviews. Before the training, they are woefully unprepared—they think they are ready, but they're not. Not by a long shot. We make sure that when we sent them out, they really have a chance at getting a job. Also, with respect to school, we teach them what a bursar is, what a registrar is, what the difference is between college and high school, because they usually don't have a clue. We have thirty to forty guys in college at any given time, and often they are the first generation in their families to ever go to college.

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The unfortunate part is that their families remain dysfunctional. They are still living in lousy neighborhoods; there are still very few male role models for them, which is very sad; and many of the problems that caused them to take the wrong path in the first place are still there. So the objective is for them to move on as quickly as possible, to get a job, be able to afford a house, an apartment, and get on with their lives.

We try to get these guys to understand they they're not totally forgotten, that people do care—but at the same time the overriding principle is that you must pay your dues, you must step up and you must be accountable. If they're screwing up, they have to meet with me, they have to face Goldsmith, and I say. “This is it—we've put up with your antics long enough, you've got to shape up or you just can't be part of the program.” It's all about them, it's not about us. When we talk about our success it's not what we do—it's what *they* do. What we're doing is counseling, mentoring, coaching, giving them every support that they never had. They've been dealt a very bad deck, a *very* bad deck. It's a wonder they can walk and talk, it really is. It's amazing how they have survived up to the point that we get our hands on them... incredible endurance, you just don't know how they do it, you really don't.

And when they come to us, they don't really get it, they don't understand that by going to work early every day, and not taking a

bunch of sick days, and working really hard—you can get ahead; because they've never had a role model who did it. Everybody's been on welfare, everybody's been on SSI, everybody has all these checks coming in for not doing anything. It's horrible.

For all the frustration, there are countless success stories that have really impacted me over the years. We have one guy I met at Rikers; this young man want to be in health care. He got out, he went to Queens College, he got a job at Mount Sinai Hospital as an orderly, saw a job posting for a lab tech, got the job, and he quickly went from making 12 to 14 dollars an hour to 18 to 20 an hour. He's graduating Queens College this year with a three-something average, and he's going to be a professional nurse. He's married now, too, with a child, and living happily ever after.

There's another guy, who wanted to go into physical therapy—went to college, graduated Columbia University with a 3.75, no less. We've put him on our board, and he's very active in the Muslim community, trying to instill peace and civility and understanding between the Muslims and non-Muslims. So a lot of them, they get out, they move on, they succeed, and they have really productive lives.