

N.J. correctional administrators inspire workforce, inmates

At the **New Jersey Department of Corrections**, educators, corrections officers and administrators have been asked to focus on one process when dealing with inmates: Habilitation.

Rehabilitation isn't really appropriate for many inmates because many of them have never been exposed to a structured environment or asked to evaluate their own character or values, said **Deidre Fedkenheuer**, NJDOC spokesperson. You can't restructure what was never there.

Many inmates fashion their lives after older family members, fictitious television characters or sports figures who don't always play by the rules. Mistakenly, they confuse celebrities for heroes, she said.

To remedy that situation, NJDOC **Commissioner Devon Brown** invited **The Raoul Wallenberg Committee** to offer two, one-day training sessions. Called *A Study of Heroes*, the program was inspired by, Wallenberg, a Swede who rescued Jews during World War II.

At the height of the war, Wallenberg ingeniously redesigned Sweden's safe pass, *Shutzpass*, and liberally distributed the document to thousands of Jews. With funds provided by the United States, Wallenberg purchased numerous buildings in Budapest, Hungary, which were designated safe houses under the protection of Sweden.

He worked tirelessly from July 9, 1944, until January 17, 1945. Wallenberg is officially credited with saving about 100,000 individuals from almost certain death. He is marked as the person who rescued more people using peaceful means than any other person in history.

Fedkenheuer said the NJDOC chose the program from about 35 others because they were looking for one that would help corrections workers and inmates embrace their differences, get along and help each other.

"Most of our inmates will see the light of day again," said Fedkenheuer. "Some will get out and live next door to me, next door to you. It's in everyone's best interest for us to take this opportunity and try to turn lives around and help inmates to find positive ways to impact the lives of others."

About the program

Wallenberg Committee founder **Rachel Oestreicher Bernheim**, an authority on heroism, led the program. She said the committee's mission is to promote the study of heroism. It created an award-winning curriculum that draws a distinction between heroism and celebrity.

"With student audiences, there is silence when I tell the story of Raoul Wallenberg. Before the program, they can not distinguish between the concept of hero and celebrity," Bernheim said. "But it's so clear real heroes are needed in our lives."

More than 20 heroes have been identified and profiled through the program, including **Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, Cesar Chavez, Arthur Ashe, Roberto Clemente** and the student protestors at **Tianamen Square**.

“We know by using only 22 heroes we won’t reach everyone in our sessions. So we show them how to identify true acts of heroism, and they in turn discover the true heroes in their own lives,” Bernheim said.

The program has biographical units for all different levels of reading and comprehension. The open curriculum emphasizes vocabulary, career choices, geography and art, among other things.

The program helps students:

- Identify nonviolent and safe strategies to resolve conflicts.
- Make a positive difference in the world.
- Develop a heightened awareness of heroic acts within an inmate’s own culture, community and family.
- Understand that the concept of hero means different things to different people.
- Recognize that people are not born heroes.
- Know that heroes come in all shapes, sizes, ages, religions, races and ethnicities, and are not always famous or wealthy.

The program at the NJDOC was made possible through a \$4,000 Character Education Grant from the **New Jersey Department of Education**.