



Podcast: Changing Prison Culture Through Mentorship

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Inmate: I continued to commit crimes. Robberies. Assaults. All kinds of things. In 1994, I was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole.

Narrator: Storytelling. Sharing stories about learning from mistakes is common in any mentor/mentee relationship.

Inmate: I looked in the mirror and I couldn't stand the person that was there at all.

Narrator: But can it work in a prison? Washington Corrections Center's religious coordinator Malik Shakoor thinks so. Earlier this year he launched a peer-led inmate mentorship program at the Shelton, Washington prison.

Inmates who have been in prison for many years—some even serving life sentences—serve as mentors to people new to prison— also known as the mentees.

Malik Shakoor: These men are here because I'm hoping that they can plant a seed into you all to the point where it'll make you stop and just think about who you are as a man, who you want to become. Understand your past experiences and learn from them.

Narrator: The mentors say they've changed their behavior and outlook on life. The point is to use the mentors to get the mentees to let go of the criminal mindset; thereby making prison a safer environment for everyone. And hopefully

give those who will eventually finish their sentences the tools they need to keep them from coming back.

Malik Shakoor: *After these meetings that happen, these gentlemen come to each other, they talk. Thank you for your story and how much it touched me. And that's where the mentorship begins.*

Narrator: Grady Mitchell is a mentor. He's currently serving a life sentence for murder. He says he gave up the so-called 'convict code' after a prison volunteer helped him realize he could still set a good example for his kids. Even from behind bars.

Grady Mitchell: *I was still involved in drugs and other things. I had to make a transition because there was just so much, there was no hope for the future continuing the life that I was in.*

Narrator: Throughout his incarceration, Grady has co-parented six kids via in-person visits from his wife and teleconferenced parent-teacher meetings. He knows he cannot undo his crime nor ever leave prison. But he finds solace in helping others change their lives.

Grady: *I'm tired of seeing dudes come in, not caring, thinking this is cool and not understanding the ripple effect. How do we stop this mentality? There may be an opportunity here to do something.*

Narrator: Though the mentorship program has been active for just a few months, Shakoor says 10 inmates from the program have already signed up for regular counseling because of it.

Malik Shakoor: *If we can strike change into individuals in such a way that can make them stop and think about who they are, what they went through, the decisions that they made in the past, hopefully they can start reflecting and making changes and become a better human being.*

Narrator: Rachel Friederich, DOC Communications