



Turning his life around

Giving dads the gifts of hope, a second chance

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Happy Father's Day, Kevin Robinson. He's 48 and wants to get his general equivalency diploma. Dropping out of school has held him back, and he knows it. He reads okay, but doesn't write well. His math is not up to par, but he's getting help. He can do long division now and somehow help his daughter figure out algebra problems.

Happy Father's Day, Lamar Hunt. He's 25 and didn't give into temptation to sell drugs again when he couldn't find a job. If he had, his 3-year-old son wouldn't know his affectionate side. Hunt probably is hugging him right now.

And Happy Father's Day to you, Jesus Rios. His father named him after Christ, and there's a resurrection occurring within. Rios, 41, has reconnected with his family and three daughters. They have accepted him and the mistakes he's made that took him to prison and out of their lives.

The stories of these three Newark men have one common denominator — The National Comprehensive Center for Fathers in Philadelphia. The self-help program has been replicated in Newark by Newark Now, an organization started by Mayor Cory Booker. It helps men who have lost their jobs, who are re-entering the work force from prison and who want to be better fathers.

Robinson, Hunt and Rios are among 21 men who meet every day in a classroom at Essex County College, where they have shared their failures, their hopes, their dreams. It's where they get parenting and life skills lessons, legal assistance, job preparation training and help with math and reading skills.

A lack of education has been Robinson's Achilles' heel. Nevermind that he's articulate, expressive and held a job over the years. He just couldn't move up to supervisor when the position called for him to read and write.

"I knew I could advance if I could put it down on paper," he said. "But I couldn't. I had to be content with what they had me doing."

Robinson has come to grips with his reality. He's not ashamed anymore, doesn't hide what he doesn't know. The program is helping him, encouraging him to go further and get his GED. In just three weeks, he finally understands long division. Algebra concepts are not bad either. Helping his 14-year-old daughter with homework is the greatest feeling.

"That there does something for your heart," he said.

Hunt has found his emotional center. He's tapped into his heart and doesn't give into his temper as much as he used to. He's the youngest in the program, but the older men are an inspiration, serving as a guide for him that it's not too late to turn his life around. He got out of jail two months ago and couldn't find a job. He was frustrated, restless. He was trying, but it wasn't working.

"I felt like my back was against the wall, and I felt like going back to what I was doing."

The program, recommended to him by his probation officer, squashed that mind-set when he saw the staff was sincere. They taught him that he could still be a father emotionally to his son even though he wasn't employed now.

"I tell him that I love him a lot, and I play with him a whole lot," Hunt said. "I try to spend as much time with him as I can."

Rios wants that kind of time with his daughters, too, but they live in Puerto Rico now. He's been in and out of their lives for 22 years, the total of amount of time he's been in and out of jail.

He was afraid to talk to them about his incarceration, thinking they didn't want to have anything to do with him.

"I felt they were going to look at me differently, like don't touch me."

Staff members in the program encouraged him to call. After 12 years of not speaking to them, he nervously dialed long-distance and they talked.

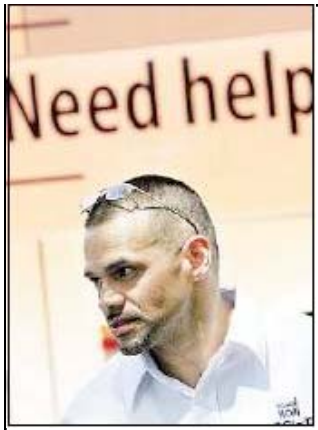
"Once I opened that path and I explained my emotions they just received me," he said.

For Rios, the program was destiny, the divine intervention he needed. He was fresh out of jail when he stepped off the bus at Broad and Market streets a month ago in Newark. He wanted to change his life but didn't know how to go about it. Someone from the program was handing out information and randomly stopped Rios. They started talking, and Rios wasn't lost anymore.

"I thought it was all over for me," he said. "But it's not. The program showed me there's hope."



Kevin Robinson is working on his reading, writing and math so he can earn his GED.



Jesus Rios has reconnected with his family with the encouragement of NCCF staff members.





PHOTOS BY SCOTT LITUCHY/THE STAR-LEDGER Chris Carroll, left, gives Lamar Hunt information on prescriptions for him and his family on the Partnership for Prescription Assistance Bus in Newark. Hunt, a former drug dealer, is changing his life around with the help of the Newark Comprehensive Center for Fathers.