

Big Man at the Big House

By Rita Christopher
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What can Peter Sage do at Corrigan-Ragdowski Correctional Center that most of the prisoners incarcerated there can't? Leave.

That's because Peter, a Chester resident, is a volunteer who teaches a life-skills course for prisoners. The course is part of the People Empowering People (PEP) program developed by Cheryl Czuba, a University of Connecticut cooperative extension educator.

"The program is designed to help inmates develop insights into themselves and skills to enable them to be more productive members of society when they get out," Peter says.

The course, Peter says, includes communication skills, conflict resolution, planning, and goal setting. There are sections on parenting styles, including parenting from prison, relationships within the family, and problem solving. The class draws hypothetical situations outlined in the course materials, as well as from members' own experiences.

"When we are discussing coping or solving problems, I ask them to recall what our model is: identify the problem,

consider the alternatives, and pick the one most likely to succeed. They're not used to doing that when they face a problem," says Peter.

Inmates volunteer to take the course and must sign a commitment form agreeing to attend regularly and do the homework, which includes reading a book by Don Miguel Ruiz called *The Four Agreements*, a volume designed to give new perspectives and strategies for successful living.

"After reading the book, I have people who come up to me and say it has made a big difference to them," Peter says.

Corrigan-Ragdowski is a medium-security prison with level three and four offenders; level five is the most serious offender classification. Peter explains that the support of Warden John Sieminski and his staff is important to the success of his classes.

"That is absolutely essential," he says. Peter doesn't know of what crimes his students have been convicted—unless they mention them in class discussion. And he says discussions can be very lively, indeed.

"They are street-smart, funny, and they like to discuss things. We have some very spirited classes," Peter says.

On the surface, Peter's life couldn't seem more different from those of the men in his class. He grew up in Greenwich, earned an undergraduate degree in industrial relations, and did graduate work in Europe. He worked for more than 30

years as a human relations executive, many of them for a multinational chemical company.

Still, when he introduces himself to each new class, Peter takes a different tack.

"I tell them that when I was 35 years old I was broke [and] divorced," he says. He also tells the inmates, many of whom are drug offenders, that he had an extended family member who was an addict. In addition, Peter tells the class that he is a cancer survivor, diagnosed a decade ago and given a clean bill of health five years back.

"That way the students can say, 'He's had his own stuff too,'" Peter explains. The course, says Peter, has changed his view of inmates.

"I wonder what I would do if my freedom was taken away. It's a difficult thing to think about.

"A lot of these guys say that coming to prison saved their lives," continues Peter. "It gave them a chance to think about all the stupid things they had done and gave them a chance to start over."

Once a ranked amateur tennis player, Peter still plays regularly. He also loves motorcycles. He had a Harley-Davidson Road King until his cancer treatment made that bike too heavy for him to handle. Now he has a Harley Custom Sportster and he likes to take off for weekend trips, often with his wife Diane Tracy, an author of business books, on the seat behind him.

Peter and Diane learned about the PEP



Chester resident Peter Sage learns as much from the inmates at Corrigan-Ragdowski Correctional Center as he imparts. *Photo by Rita Christopher*

program when they moved to Chester six years ago. PEP volunteers go through a training program before beginning to teach and are provided with the support material they need for each class. In the beginning, both Peter and Diane led a program together at the Women's Prison in Niantic. Then, with the need for a workshop at a men's prison, Peter began to teach at Corrigan-Ragdowski.

He says there is a need for more volunteers in the PEP program and for more rehabilitation programs in general so

that, once released, former prisoners do not return to jail.

Peter admits that for many people the thought of entering a prison even as a teacher can, at first, seem intimidating, but he says his students are eager, well-behaved, and responsive.

"The thing I love about this is that there is a real need for it and I can't imagine a more rewarding experience," he says.

To find out more about the PEP program, call Cheryl Czuba at 860-345-5215.

PERSON
OF THE WEEK