

Center offers hope to parolees

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WETUMPKA -- Erasable marker in hand, the teacher instructs her students on the ins and outs of interviewing for a job.

As the pupils furiously scribble notes, fawn Romaine (who doesn't capitalize her first name), stresses the basics: Speak clearly. Don't ramble. Above all, concentrate on what you can do for the potential employer, not vice versa.

Amid advice that easily could be a part of any job preparation course in America comes a suggestion that distinguishes this particular session from most.

"No abbreviations. Believe it or not, most employers don't know what a SAP program is," Romaine says.

The students in the class are intimately aware of that acronym, which stands for Substance Abuse Program, a drug treatment regimen offered by the state prison system. The women gathered here are recent parolees, assigned to the LIFE Tech Transition Center as a bridge from Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women to the free world.

The course Romaine teaches, in fact, is called the Bridge program. It is one component of an intensive effort to get parolees ready for life outside prison walls and -- hopefully -- equip them with the tools they need to avoid returning.

Begun in April, the LIFE Tech Transition Center is the first of its kind in Alabama. It can house up to 200 women, and several months ago began accepting probationers as well. It has graduated around 150 women so far.

"This has not been easy to start. It's been months of preparation and many hard hours," said Sharon Ziglar, the program's director. "But the rewards we get out of the LIFE Tech Transition Center more than pay for it."

For the women here, the payoff is a chance to kick drug and alcohol addictions while getting an education and learning job skills. For the state, officials hope it will help ease chronic overcrowding at Tutwiler by reducing the number of parolees who return.

Alabama's only female prison, Tutwiler was built for 342 inmates and since has been expanded for a designed capacity of 545. By the end of last year, 943 women were crammed into the facility. A federal judge in December 2002 found that the overcrowding -- the total at the time exceeded 1,000 -- was unconstitutional and ordered corrections officials to cut the number to 750. As a stop-gap measure, they sent some female inmates to a private prison in Louisiana beginning in April 2003.

LIFE Tech, which stands for Life-skills Influencing through Freedom and Education, is part of the long-term plan. The program is housed in Wetumpka on 97 mostly wooded acres at a former state mental health facility across from Tutwiler.

Operated by the Board of Pardons and Paroles on a \$2.5 million budget with money provided by the state Legislature, LIFE Tech represents collaboration by several state

agencies. These include the J.F. Ingram State Technology College, which teaches vocational courses in computers, construction, culinary arts and horticulture.

LIFE Tech was the last state-controlled environment for Tameca Cole, who graduated earlier this month. Now, Alabama expects her to keep a job, a place to live on her own and put food on her table. For the previous 13 years, Tutwiler did those things for her.

The 34-year-old Birmingham native drove the getaway car in 1990 during a drug deal gone bad. One of her co-defendants killed a rival. All were charged with murder, and with two prior drug felonies on her record, the judge imposed a life sentence the following year.

Cole acknowledged feeling bitter at the time since she did not fire the gun. But she said she settled down in prison and began dabbling in poetry.

"That's where I discovered my gift for writing. I just really became a driven person," she said.

Cole insisted she is not the same person she was in the early 1990s, and in October, the parole board agreed.

At LIFE Tech, Cole said she has gotten a chance to learn computers in a way she never would have dreamed she would in prison and attain construction skills. She also has concentrated on her writing, working twice a week with an Auburn University student who serves as her editor. She said Sojourn Magazine has published three of her works -- riffs on her childhood, her prison experiences and social issues.

Cole said her plan is to get a construction job until -- she hopes -- her writing career takes off. She said the biggest change in her life since her 1990 crime has been the simple passage of time.

"If you really do mature in the mind, I don't think you think the same things are important as you did at 18, when you're 33," she said.

After so many years behind bars, Ziglar said, Cole may find living without restrictions a foreign experience. Even routine events can be intimidating, she said.

Ziglar recalled one parolee's experience on a trip to Wal-Mart. The woman had been at the LIFE Tech center two or three weeks after serving in prison for about 10 years.

"She just got so overwhelmed with everything in there and she just started to cry. And the parole officer said, 'What's wrong?' And she said, 'I'm just so glad you're here with me. I just can't handle this,'" Ziglar said.

Unlike a halfway house, where parolees must get and keep jobs, LIFE Tech emphasizes addiction treatment, education and skills. The women live in six dormitory-style buildings, or "cottages" as they are called here.

Ziglar said the women stay busy from 8 in the morning to 8 in the evening.

The community chips in, as well. Kate's Closet, a charity run by St. James United Methodist Church in Montgomery, donates clothes for the women to wear. Santuck Baptist Church in Wetumpka provides religious services on Sunday mornings, and Frazer United Methodist Church of Montgomery sponsors Bible study classes on Thursdays.

The center works with municipalities and private organizations in Elmore County. Parolees helped set up for Wetumpka's Frontier Days festival in November and manned the concession stand at youth softball games over the summer.

In addition, the local chapter of the Humane Society has made use of the parolees. Elaine Lewis, a former state prison warden who retired in 2002 and now serves as program coordinator at the LIFE Tech Center, said the community has welcomed the women. And the women have responded by working hard, she said.

"Because of the number of prisons in the county, people are very familiar," said Lewis, who also serves on the Wetumpka City Council.

Heather Walker said she had a spiritual conversion at Tutwiler and has believed in Jesus as her personal savior since arriving at the LIFE Tech Center in September.

"I grew up Methodist, but I didn't have a relationship with the Lord until I went to jail and prison," said Walker, who left the facility last month and will serve the rest of her parole in the community.

Walker was convicted of credit card fraud and possession of marijuana in Etowah County five years ago. She received a six-year suspended sentence, but a judge revoked her probation in August 2003 after she admitted to backing her car into another woman's vehicle.

Walker, 35, said she was introduced to drugs by her husband and has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She said she is working toward her GED and is studying to be an office assistant.

"It's been really good. It's opened up a lot of doors that I wouldn't have opened on my own," she said of LIFE Tech. "I just never had the skills. They teach us how to work." Even women with an education say they benefit from LIFE Tech's programs as a refresher. Laura Wright, 42, said she improved her sixth-grade reading level beyond 12th grade in six weeks at the facility. She said it was far more helpful than any of the programs at Tutwiler.

"To me, it was a big culture shock," said Wright, who was sentenced to two years in prison for a theft that involved allowing a friend to underpay for items when she worked at a Lowe's store. "All I could relate to was what I saw on television, and believe me, it was quite different."

Ziglar and other state officials said they would like to greatly expand the concept. Alabama has four other recently closed state mental health facilities, including one in Daphne. Many well-meaning folks, Ziglar said, are destined to fail if they try to rebuild their lives without extra help after prison.

"I hope this builds a foundation for them," she said. "What I tell them is there's nothing wrong with living a good, simple life."