By having inmates hit the books, Rockview and other correctional facilities are hoping to improve the lives of those inside their walls, and those beyond, as well.

Friends couldn’t believe it when Steve Davy told them he was planning to leave his job teaching life skills to middle school students in Bellefonte so that he could work with prisoners at the State Correctional Institution at Rockview. “Why would you want to do that?” they asked. “Why give up your summer vacations? Why go there?”

Why? Because Davy wanted out of his comfort zone. The students at Bellefonte listened to him when he lectured them about drugs, law, and personal finance. He wanted to work with people who weren’t so receptive, people who had messed up their lives to the point where they were now behind bars. “I tend to feed on challenges,” Davy says. “I felt it was much easier to change a child’s life than to change an adult’s life. An adult has already formulated his value system, his perspective, and his vantage points. To alter something that’s already been cast is very challenging.”

And yet that goal lies at the heart of the correctional-education movement. Prisoners might seem like the hardest of hard cases, but proponents of correctional education believe their work is changing lives and helping bring about a better society for all, even for those who will never set foot inside a prison fence. Their argument is simple. Says Davy, “These inmates are going to get out of jail. They could move into your neighborhood. They could become your next-door neighbor. If you felt that you could have some kind of impact on what kind of person they were...”
“If you felt that you could have some kind of impact on what kind of person they were going to be prior to them becoming your neighbor, wouldn’t you want to make that investment?”
going to be prior to them becoming your neighbor, wouldn’t you want to make that investment?"

Davy’s personal investment has been considerable. Since leaving the public schools, he has gone from teaching inmates to overseeing Rockview’s educational programs as corrections school principal. The classes he supervises are wide ranging. Some help inmates get their high school equivalency degrees. Others teach basic computer skills or provide vocational training so that inmates can start careers as vinyl-siding installers, stone and brick masons, welders, and barbers. Students can learn to speak English if it’s not their native language. They can achieve literacy if they are unable to read or write. They can take courses, which they pay for themselves, from Lehigh Carbon Community College, that enable them to use common business applications such as Microsoft Word and Excel.

And that’s just the start. To augment their GED classes, some prisons and county jails broaden the curriculum even further.

At the Dauphin County Jail, Irene Baird has been using literature and creative writing to help inmates confront their problems. An assistant professor at Penn State Harrisburg, she chooses readings that inmates can relate to, hoping to keep her students from feeling as though they are being lectured. “They read somebody’s story and realize, ‘Gee, I’ve been there, that’s happened to me. How did she solve it?’ It’s a way to get at a

**Rockview school principal Steve Davy (left) has worked at the corrections facility for 23 years after leaving his teaching position at Bellefonte Middle School. He is shown with Adult Basic Education Teacher Ellen Coffman and Rockview superintendent Franklin Tennis.**

**A CentrePeace trainee sands a birdhouse that he made from scrap pieces of wood.**

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**Damian knows . . .**

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problem without the outlet of a counselor," Baird says. “I'm sure there are situations where they read it and do nothing with it. But at least they've been exposed. The authors serve as role models and give them an opportunity to read. I've found that the majority of the people in my groups have become avid readers.”

Baird began teaching her classes to women in 1994. The initial results were so encouraging that in 1999 she began teaching male inmates, too. In addition to her books, she brings written questions from one group to the other and poses them in class. The questions are more confrontational than the stories: Why do you abandon your children? Why do you need so many women in your life? Why can't you be faithful? But the prisoners participate anyway. And in responding to such questions, they often show a willingness to expose their own vulnerabilities. “I've been surprised,” she says, “at how open they are.”

Closer to home, the CentrePeace organization helps rehabilitate prisoners by examining their backgrounds and family histories. Executive director Thom Brewster teaches at Rockview, while inmates from the Centre County Correctional Facility visit CentrePeace headquarters in Bellefonte. The instruction they receive deals with nonviolent conflict resolution.

“They've never been taught how to solve their problems other than by lashing out,” Brewster says. “I have a young fellow coming in who had a court-appointed community-service sentence. He's a 14-year-old who lashed out at someone else and hit him so hard that he broke his own hand. That's how he was taught to defend himself and solve problems, not by backing away and looking at things more creatively.”

Educational initiatives are only part of the CentrePeace mission. It strives to treat prisoners as equals. Brewster and his staff celebrate inmates’ birthdays, find them pen pals in the community, and send them hand-drawn Christmas cards from local children. They call their efforts “restorative justice.”

“We want to be able to restore a sense of dignity to these folks instead of making them feel like second-class citizens,” Brewster says. “Let's begin to heal what has gone wrong with them.”

At their core, prison education programs look to break the cycle of desperation that turns young offenders into career criminals. Educators believe that prisoners with life skills and vocational training have a better chance of finding work and settling into stable family lives.
There is evidence to support such claims. The Three State Recidivism Study, a compendium of data from Maryland, Minnesota, and Ohio, found that ex-prisoners who attended classes while incarcerated were more likely to find jobs and less likely to be arrested, convicted, and reincarcerated than prisoners who did not participate in such programs. In Ohio, for example, 31 percent of the nonparticipants studied ended up back in prison during the course of the survey, while only 24 percent of the participants were reincarcerated.

Those numbers agree with the anecdotal evidence educators see all around them. Daly likes to talk about the ex-con who earned his certificate in architectural-construction technology at Rockview. “He got out on the street and had a portfolio of things he'd done here and presented it to an architectural firm,” Daly says. “They immediately identified his talent. Last word I received, he was just getting ready to get his architect's license.”

Baird cites a prisoner in his early 20s who taught himself to read using a book of Shakespeare's sonnets. “He realized there was another world,” she says. “It wasn’t magical. He didn’t change overnight, but there was a change over time.”

Despite those successes, correctional education can be a hard sell. Davy encounters plenty of skepticism, even among people he knows. “When I see them on the street, they ask me, ‘Steve, why in the world do we educate inmates when they're in jail? Jail is a place for punishment.’ ”

Much of the disdain stems from the belief that correctional education bestows taxpayer-funded largess on society’s least deserving. Educators say that’s not true. At Rockview, prisoners pay for their testing and vocational certificates from the money they earn performing prison jobs and attending school, anywhere from 19 to 42 cents an hour. At the county level, hardly
any money is spent on prisoner education, mostly because there’s no money to spend for that. Jails can’t afford to pay full-time salaries, so most teachers are volunteers.

“There’s a misconception out there that you go to jail and get a free ride and that’s just a big vacation,” says Jeremiah Gee of Mansfield University’s Center for Lifelong Learning. “That’s not the whole story.” Gee, who teaches a GED class for inmates, has been involved in correctional education for the past three years, ever since an aunt notified him of an opening for an instructor. He has studied education in rural jails and will be a doctoral student in adult education at Penn State this fall.

The inmates with whom Gee works in small jail settings are mostly nonviolent offenders. They’ve committed burglaries, gotten DUIs, or failed to pay child support. “You’re dealing with your friends and neighbors,” he says, “not necessarily rapists and murderers. It’s uncommon to get somebody with a real bad behavioral issue.

“It’s funny, because the first thing people think when you tell them you’re teaching in a jail is that you’re dealing with hardened criminals. Some of them might look that way, but these are people you might see on the street tomorrow” — depending on what happens with their cases.

The likelihood that just about every prisoner will eventually win release helps account for the strong support education programs receive from victims’ rights groups. Advocacy groups favor efforts to turn ex-prisoners into contributing members of society, says Susan Howley, director of public policy for the National Center for Victims of Crime. It’s not a matter of turning the other cheek — it just makes sense.

“Victims are often awarded restitution from the offender,” Howley says. “Any work programs or training that would enable the offender to find employment later will help him or her earn the money to pay restitution.

“Also, they do not want anyone else to suffer a crime as they did. Because getting a GED or vocational training — by making the offender more employable — can help reduce recidivism. Victims support such efforts.”

Rockview is doing its part. The prison school doesn’t break for summer or shut down when it snows. It’s open year-round, five days a week, 12 hours a day. Prisoners who don’t have high school diplomas are required to attend. The higher-level classes are voluntary.

The school doesn’t change everyone who passes through its doors. But it does change some, and there’s satisfaction in that.

Just ask Davy. It’s been 23 years since he left the public schools, and he hasn’t looked back. His experience at Rockview has been as challenging as he expected it would be. But it has been rewarding as well.

“You’ll have an adult who has been a failure all his life come to you after he has tasted success by getting a GED and shake your hand and thank you for helping make him better than he was when he came here,” he says. “There’s no amount of money that can compensate you more than that.”

Matt Herb is a Penn State graduate and a freelance writer based in St. Louis. He is a frequent contributor to Town&Gown’s Penn State Football Annual and Town&Gown’s Basketball & Winter Sports Annual.