

B-School *of* Hard Knocks

Catherine Rohr's Prison Entrepreneurship Program makes CEOs out of inmates and grateful men out of neglected criminals.

By *Pamela Gwyn Kripke*
Photography by *Elizabeth Lavin*

» THE TAKEAWAY

- 1** Prison is a better learning environment than you might think.
- 2** Drug dealers know about risk management.
- 3** Redemption is more than just profit margins.



ENTRANCE

NO WEAPONS
BEYOND THIS POINT
NO ARMAS PASANDO
DE ESTE PUNTO

ONLY 6 PEOPLE
AT ONE TIME
IN SALLY PORT

Must Show
ID
To Enter

PICK UP PHONE
FOR ACCESS

TOUGH LOVE: Catherine Rohr, at the Hamilton Unit in Bryan, offers inmates a hand, but not a handout, through her Prison Entrepreneurship Program.



IT IS AN IMPROBABLE SCENE FOR ANY SORT OF BUSINESS meeting: a Monday evening at the state penitentiary in Bryan, Texas. Drenched in contradiction and disparate fortune, the ether is charged with promise. The men here all call it "hope," and they are incredulous as they say it.

Help has come from unlikely hearts, and these 200 inmates are desperate to get it. This particular Monday, the fourth of its kind in two years, two dozen entrepreneurial executives from across the country have come to the Hamilton Unit, a 1,200-man, medium-security facility for felons about to be released on parole. In suits and ties, the businessmen have come to the rolling prairie of Brazos County with a genuine and philanthropic purpose.

"I have always believed that there is redemption. Instead of being a backseat driver, or a critic, there's a time in life when you want to stand up and make a difference," says Marc Birnbaum, CEO of Marc A. Birnbaum, Inc., a Dallas-based real estate

LOOKING UP: Once facing up to 20 years in prison for robbing a Wal-Mart, PEP graduate Brent Taylor now looks forward a promising future.

development and management company. "Here, someone, a human being, is offering something good for another human being. And these guys, behind the fence where everybody has an angle, recognize when someone simply doesn't have one."

The "someone" is Catherine Rohr. Her commitment is munificent and complete. While pursuing a lucrative career as a 27-year-old venture capitalist and private equity investor in California and New York, Rohr happened to learn about the prison ministry of Charles W. Colson, the former Watergate conspirator. She visited a facility in Texas with a colleague who was involved in the organization. Then, she went back to Manhattan. Simply put, she had an idea. Less simply, the idea took over.

"It started to consume me," she says, having never been inside a jail before that visit. "I felt called to the work."

Within a month, she had founded the Prison Entrepreneurship Program, a nonprofit operation that offers deserving inmates a rigorous business curriculum within prison walls, an initiative that teaches convicts ground-up practical lessons in starting and running a company less than a year before they are given a bus ticket home. Executives such as Birnbaum visit with inmates, hoping to infuse a positive outlook on life beyond the cell. "We encourage them to overcome fears of failure, to read and learn, which are all good attributes, whether you are an entrepreneur or just a good citizen." Six hundred business leaders have signed on to volunteer in hands-on or advisory roles, a testament to Rohr's fire for the project.

Drawing expertise from corporate and academic arenas, Rohr has developed an intensive, four-month program that capitalizes on the innate self-employment inclinations that many offenders display, aiming, ultimately, to arm the men against future trouble.

"Here are guys who are already seasoned entrepreneurs, who, as drug dealers, for instance, already know about competition, risk management, profitability," says Rohr. "Teaching them passion is not something we have to do. What we do is show them how to make it legit."

Entrepreneurs, by nature, are willing to take chances to get a result, agrees

Pam Gerber, Director of the Entrepreneurs Foundation of North Texas. "They have an incredible ability to find resources and generally, they refuse to fail. These guys have the skill sets. They are some of the best entrepreneurs out there. They are just using their powers for evil instead of good."

Of released prisoners nationwide, approximately 69 percent return to the criminal justice system. With knowledge, tools for earning a living, and continued support on the outside, Rohr's concept claims, the rate of recidivism should plummet. Of PEP's 165 graduates since 2004, the number of those who have returned to the corrections system is in the single digits. Once they are out, graduates attend Entrepreneur School in Houston or Dallas once a week, a classroom format with a weighty dose of support, and they meet with executive mentors enlisted by Rohr. If they are in good standing with their parole officers and mentors, the men are sometimes given access to start-up funds or are set up with prospective employers, also recruited by the charismatic and well-connected director. They are given guidance in finding housing, loans, and health care, too.

To garner a spot in the program, which is held solely at Hamilton right now (though Rohr intends to expand to San Antonio and Austin in the next year and nationwide eventually), inmates must endure an intensive application package, including completion of a 23-page questionnaire. Inmates must demonstrate ambition as well as a certain sense of soul, an intangible quality smacking of transformation and remorse. "They are not screened for intelligence," says Rohr, "but for work ethic and a commitment to personal transformation." Half of the participants have been convicted of violent crimes. Of these latest 200 aspirants, 84 were selected.

It costs about \$3,700 for one inmate to finish the PEP program, compared to \$22,000 a year to keep him locked up. Last year, Rohr raised \$342,000 in donations. This year, she is hoping for \$1.5 million.

Rohr, who moved to Houston with her husband after the organization was launched, teaches the evening classes, which are held following a 6 a.m.-6 p.m. day of prison requirements. The curriculum covers all areas found in a typical MBA program and culminates in the presentation of individual business plans for specific ideas that are feasible to pursue once the prisoners are free. The inmates conceive the ideas, many of them based on former work experience such as landscape companies or car wash detailing, and MBA candidates at universities like Harvard, Stanford, University of Texas, and Texas A&M provide research materials that are unavailable inside, supplying data and statistics they might not find in the prison library. Rohr brings business leaders to Hamilton to evaluate these plans. The day is charged with energy and nervousness, as a mock trial for law students might be.

"The biggest surprise for me, as a judge," says Doug Harrison, COO of Trinity Inspection in Dallas, "was how genuine these men were. This is the biggest deal some of them have ever had in their lives, and their thankfulness was most stunning. I expected a lot of tough guys, I guess. They just never had the motivation before."

In addition to studying core business subjects, the inmates are exposed to training in basic life skills that were either never learned or certainly forgotten during sentences that have stretched over as many as 30 years.

"I tell them, 'There will be a napkin on a plate. Take it off the plate and put it on your lap,'" says Rohr. "To the business community, they are 'Former Inmates' or 'Former Offenders.' We call them 'Participants.' Or, 'People' or 'Aspiring Entrepreneurs.' It is hard to get anywhere in life when everyone calls you an 'Ex-con.'"

BRENT TAYLOR IS AN EX-CON. BUT HE IS ALSO A LEAD TRADE desk analyst who manages a team of 18 and could earn over \$100,000 this year.

Incarcerated for 17 months for shoplifting from a Wal-Mart

"Teaching them passion is not something we have to do. What we do is show them how to make it legit," says Catherine Rohr.

store in Dallas, Taylor, now 23, was on probation "for some other things" prior to his sentencing at 21. "In high school, my grades were good when I tried, but I was only there half the time. I lived with my father, but then he moved to Tennessee, and I stayed alone my senior year," he remembers. "That's when I started getting in trouble."

Like many felons, Taylor lacked parental supervision at a critical stone in the path. Daniel Harrison, a PEP participant who has plans to start a roofing company in Houston, watched his adoptive father beat his mother until she lost sight in one eye. Kirk Smith, who intends to launch a mobile food vendor service, left home at 17 and soon got involved with a theft ring that shipped stolen goods to Mexico. Tony Holman, who has written a comprehensive outline for a pressure washing company, was left at home alone with his siblings all night by his father, the only parent in charge after his mother took off.

"It is so important to have male role models. So many of the men were lacking a father or were abused in some or every capacity," Rohr says, adding that 98 percent of her volunteers are male. "They come crying to me, because they know that I will kick them out of the program if I have to. It's tough love."

Born in Montreal, Rohr moved with her family to the Bay Area of Northern California at age seven. In high school, she



PRIDE AND JOY: (Left) Rohr's program has given participants Samuel Runnels (back) and Shane Edmonson reason to smile.

QUICK SUCCESS

Arguably, if the Prison Entrepreneurship Program rehabilitated just one inmate, it could be considered a success. Since Rohr started PEP in 2004, more and more inmates have benefited from the rigorous program. Here, a look at the numbers:



	2004	2005	2006*	CUMULATIVE*
Inmates completing the in-prison Business Plan Competition	55	51	160	266
Business Plan Competition inmates released from prison	8	84	120	212
Participants gainfully employed upon release	6	80	110	196
Active participants	4	36	70	110
Participant/Mentor pairings	6	26	55	87
Entrepreneurship School graduates	n/a	11	30	41
Participant-owned businesses	3	6	10	19
Active participants who recidivate	0	0	2	2
Removed participants who recidivate	1	1	6	8

SOURCE: PEPWEB.ORG

*PROJECTED

was the lone girl on the boys wrestling team. At the University of California at Berkeley, she played rugby. Now, she has a Blue Belt in Brazilian ju jitsu and was coached by the reknowned Renzo Gracie.

"I was the only girl at work," she says of her three years at Summitt Partners, a venture capital firm in Palo Alto. "I never thought, 'I'm a girl, so I can't.'"

Rohr's can-do attitude is infectious. "I was in shock when I got there, but I somehow realized I needed to do anything I could to help myself make parole," Taylor says. "I remember, still, seeing the flyer for the program. When I read it, I said, 'This is why I needed to be here.'"

Taylor immersed himself in the curriculum, drawing up plans for a power washing business and reading, mainly about the stock market, finance, and retirement planning. "There are mostly novels in the library, so my wife sent in the books for me."

When Taylor wasn't studying, he was projecting, calibrating time, because in prison, that's what you've got. "I kept going over in my head what it will be like, what I was going to do. I wrote down goals for the first three months, then six months," he says. "I've got goals written down for the next 10 years, from buying a house to taking a walk with my dad and apologizing."

While the notion of forgiveness is apparent, there is no coddling or excusing. These men have committed crimes, sometimes horrible ones, and this is clear. The work now is to try to foster change.

"Catherine is not preaching God to these guys, she is preaching hope," Birnbaum says. "It is hope through the ability to economically survive in the capitalist system, not through religious salvation. She stands up there addressing these inmates, and she is strong. If you cuss, you're out. If you are inappropriate in any way, you are out. If you are doing this to fill up your time, you're out. This is not a bleeding heart kind of deal."

Because of his diligence following his release, Taylor got a job lead from Rohr. Within three months, Taylor was promoted. "I did not know why this lady was coming to prison. She is not the usual volunteer. She doesn't belong here. I questioned why," he says. "There were skeptics, but I needed to find out. Without the program, I'd be totally different. I am Catherine's success story."

To her credit, she can boast of many.

Christopher Quadri was bumped around the Texas corrections system for seven years, serving time in maximum security facilities on down for three counts of aggravated robbery and one for aggravated assault. Finally, he made parole and was shipped to Hamilton.

"Most prison programs are very mediocre," he says. "Catherine came into that unit and challenged me to live by a new set of standards. If you have made a transformation, this is the way to live it out."

Atypically, Quadri was raised in a successful, intact, North Dallas family, and had numerous job opportunities once he returned home at age 27. He took a position at a law firm, despite an offer from Rohr to work for PEP after she noticed his writing ability. All five of her employees are graduates of the program, including a former gang leader and a former armed robber. ("I hired one person who wasn't imprisoned, and he didn't work out," she says with a laugh.) After four months at the firm, Quadri agreed to sign on with PEP as a grant writer, and with Rohr, he pitches the program to potential contributors, including CEO clubs, charitable foundations, and universities.

"The first time I ever spoke in public was at Harvard," says Quadri, who dropped out of high school in ninth grade.

He has had the chance to trade his position for more lucrative posts elsewhere, but feels a devotion to the course that saved him. "It's where I come from. Some people I know who are so proud of me now, tell me, 'Stay out of the prison, leave that alone.' But I can't. I see the problem. I feel the problem. And I feel like I'm making a difference."

THE GRADUATES WALK IN SINGLE FILE, ROYAL BLUE ROBES catching wind on a stretch of East Texas grass. They walk alone, unaccompanied by guards, pride and determination swelling with each step. For many, this ceremony is the singular rite of passage they have celebrated, at least in honorable circles. They wear mortarboards, with tassels, even, and expressions of emotion outsiders cannot ever know.

White badges are pinned on their chests, each inscribed with a full name and fitting descriptor. Not "Offender" or "Inmate," and no ID number this day. "Founder and CEO," the print reads. Pomp, certainly. And circumstance, with an entirely fresh twist. **D**