

Making Their Time Count: Implementing Bridges and Getting Ahead in a Prison Setting

By Elain Ellerbe

For more than a decade, Louisiana has ranked No. 1 in the world for incarcerating its citizens. One in 86 adults in Louisiana is in the prison system. High poverty rates and low educational attainment exacerbate the problem. Twenty-eight percent of our citizens live at or below the poverty level, and another 24% are “asset poor,” which means they would be unable to subsist at poverty level for three months without income. Only 82% of our citizens graduate from high school, making Louisiana No. 47 in graduation rates in the U.S. In order to address the issues of high incarceration rates, the gap in educational attainment, and poverty in the community, Refined By Fire Ministries (RBF) has garnered very promising results with the implementation of [Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World](#) and [The R Rules](#) in Louisiana prisons. RBF’s Reentry Benefiting Families initiative expands the scope of the organization’s work to provide substantive programming that assists offenders and families impacted by the criminal justice system in discovering paths out of poverty for themselves.

This article will detail the work with Getting Ahead. A future article will include information on the use of The R Rules in the prisons.

In 2009, our organization became aware of the Bridges Out of Poverty philosophy and the Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World curriculum. When I shared the information with the RBF board of directors and my husband, Michael, who is employed as director of reentry at Dixon Correctional Institute (DCI), I received unanimous support to immerse the organization in the Bridges philosophy and implement the Getting Ahead program. To that end, Michael, who is also RBF’s corrections liaison, and I, along with RBF’s chairman, Cleve Fontenot, underwent the Bridges and Getting Ahead certification trainings. Knowing that a key piece of this new initiative would be to provide the programs in a prison setting, we began having discussions with the administration at DCI, where RBF was already providing life skills programs, about piloting Getting Ahead at the all-male adult prison. This would be the first time in Louisiana that a Getting Ahead program would be implemented in a state correctional facility.

To assist participants in staying organized with their materials and homework assignments, as well as to begin teaching them time management skills, RBF provided each participant with a [Getting Ahead workbook](#), a 12-month calendar, a calculator, pens, pencils, writing paper, and a portfolio to keep all their materials in. These items, which are not readily available in the prison, were approved by security to be brought into the prison for the participants. The classes were scheduled so that we met with the group once a week for two hours in the evening. This ensured the Getting Ahead class did not conflict with other education programs (which are held during the day) or with work assignments. Additionally, RBF trained six offender peer facilitators in small group facilitation skills and provided them with additional training in Getting Ahead. They served as co-facilitators/investigators for the initial group. The peer facilitators were extremely helpful as the class participants had continual access to them if they wanted to go over concepts they may not have understood in class or get help with homework.

At the same time that we were piloting Getting Ahead, the Louisiana Department of Corrections began allowing for good time (days off of sentences) for life skills programs that had been certified by the department. RBF submitted a program design in which offenders complete both Getting Ahead and FDIC Money Smart, and it was approved by DOC. Since providing a monetary stipend (an important feature of Getting Ahead) is prohibited in the prison setting, the offer of receiving good time for successful completion of both programs gave participants a well-deserved reward for their time commitment.

The tipping point, or our collective “aha moment,” came as we began to receive letters and comments weekly from participants who were still incarcerated, as well as phone calls from released offenders, about how much they enjoyed gaining life-changing knowledge from the programs. The released participants always say how different their lives are now because of what they learned. Follow-up contact with participants who have been released is difficult because it is on a volunteer basis, but we have been able to stay in contact with five prior participants. Here are a couple comments from some of the participants:

Walter (not released yet/served as peer facilitator): “I had never looked at my life like I have now. Learning about the resources I need to take better care of my family and to keep me from coming back has really changed how I look at life. I knew life should be better than I had, but didn’t know what to do. When I go home this time, it will be different because I’m different.”

Valrice (recently released): “What would I have done after being locked up for 20 years had I not learned what I did about the poverty mindset? I had never had a checking account or thought about a budget. I’m living my dream of starting a boxing club, and things are going great for me. I’m using the Getting Ahead concepts with the young men that are training with me, and I’m seeing them change their thinking. I cannot say enough thank-yous to RBF for letting me into the program. It truly has saved my life!”

For the 10 individuals who are still incarcerated at DCI, we can report that all have remained write-up free, three have become members of the Toastmasters Club, and three are now members of the Jaycees. All are pursuing additional education or training in a trade offered at the prison through the Louisiana Vocational Technical College.

The future of our organization is bright in terms of establishing a strong foundation in the area of leadership and effective programming focused on results. (For more information and results, visit our website at www.rbf.la). As an organization, we have embraced the Bridges Out of Poverty philosophy fully and have done our due diligence in receiving training from the experts at aha! Process. Experientially, over the past two years, we have observed that providing offender populations and under-resourced individuals access to financial empowerment education that includes coming alongside individuals to provide the tools they need to move from poverty to prosperity helps them gain a clearer understanding of how poverty impacts their lives and the lives of others, especially their children. Our unique approach helps lower the incidence of family violence and intergenerational criminogenic behavior, ensuring a better quality of life for our clients and the communities in which they will live, work, and raise their children.

Elain Ellerbe is CEO of Refined By Fire Ministries, a nonprofit she and her family founded in 1995. [Refined By Fire Ministries](#), Inc. serves to partner with community organizations and criminal justice agencies to provide life skills to under-resourced families impacted by the criminal justice system thereby improving the quality of life of our clients and their communities.

Elain is a national consultant/trainer with the Nurturing Parenting Program, a Bridges certified trainer and GA facilitator, and has been awarded the Innovative Instructor for Financial Management by Visa International.

This article is excerpted from Elain's chapter in the book *[From Vision to Action: Best Practices to Reduce the Impact of Poverty in Communities, Education, Healthcare, and More](#)*, published by aha! Process.