

# MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

## Offenders and others tell stories During event by corrections department

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A Virginia Department of Corrections (VDOC) event Tuesday gave criminal offenders, ex-offenders and others an opportunity to tell their stories.

The event, which took place at Patrick Henry Community College's (PHCC) Frith Building, was sponsored by VDOC representatives from Patrick Henry Correctional, Martinsville, Henry County and Danville. More than 100 members of area law enforcement, probation and parole and community organizations attended the event.

It was led by Peter Garrett and Jane Ball, the founding directors of international consulting company Dialogue Associates.

"Our business is dialogue," Garrett said, or creating meaningful conversations between different parties. Their non-profit organization Prison Dialogue is aimed at creating conversations between members of law enforcement, people who pass through the jail and prison system, as well as others, in what Garrett and Ball refer to as an "offender resettlement journey."

"An offender resettlement journey means we trace a journey in someone's life from when their story breaks," Garrett said. "For some reason, they get into a bit of difficulty, get arrested and come into the system. ... How can we follow that journey through until they're successfully resettled in the community?"

A successful offender resettlement journey, Garrett said, would end with the offenders leaving the prison system with the ability to reconnect with their families, earn their own incomes and afford their own accommodations. An unsuccessful resettlement journey, he said, ends with the offenders back in the same situation they were in that initially led to their incarceration.

By hearing the stories of offenders and ex-offenders and suspending judgment, Garrett said, law enforcement can learn a great deal about what systems work to help people and what systems do not.

Garrett and Ball opened the floor to a number of offenders and ex-offenders who had volunteered to speak at the event. Due to privacy concerns, the Bulletin is not using the actual names of the speakers.

As they told their stories, several common threads began to emerge.

"Mary" said that she was arrested in 2009 for possession of cocaine after using drugs for several years. She entered a first offenders program in which she had to do community service and have weekly drug testing.



Jane Ball (standing at right) of international consulting company Dialogue Associates addresses a gathered crowd of area representatives from law enforcement, probation and parole and community organizations at a Virginia Department of Corrections event at Patrick Henry Community College on Tuesday. (Bulletin photo by Ben R. Williams)

"I was still in the same situation I had been in before, so I was still living in the same environment with the same people," she said, including a boyfriend who also was her cocaine dealer.

Mary did not pass the program, because she did not complete her community service. She received a three-year suspended sentence, and continued using drugs.

On a trip to Baltimore, she was arrested for possession of a handgun and spent five months in a Baltimore jail.

"I felt very alone and scared and very ashamed," an emotional Mary said.

After five months in Baltimore, she was transferred back to Virginia and sentenced to 45 days in jail for violating her parole.

"Jail was one of the most horrible things I've ever been through," she said. "And I've been through a lot in my life. ... You're just surrounded by a bunch of other addicts and criminals. ... Probably 60 percent of people that are in there ... they try to glorify their criminal lives, and the rest of us just want to get better and go home. You're in a very small area surrounded by all these people that you really would never associate with."

Another ex-offender, "Joe", agreed with Mary's assessment. While he was a young man in jail for dealing drugs, he said, he learned from the older inmates how to take his criminal career to the next level once he was back on the outside and "become a better criminal."

After leaving jail, Mary said, she was alone. Her boyfriend had died and she moved into his apartment. Because the landlord knew she had nowhere to go, he let her stay there for 30 days.

However, she said, she had no food, money, water or electricity. She sometimes went days without eating unless neighbors brought her food, and she used candles for lighting.

"I was just all by myself," she said.

A recurring theme that emerged in several stories was that the offender had a good upbringing. Joe said his father was a preacher and raised him according to the Bible.

"Michael" and "Bill" said that they also were brought up in the church, and "Jennifer" — who spoke about her daughters, both of whom spent time in jail — said that her daughters assured her that their upbringing had nothing to do with their criminal behavior.

Jennifer's daughters fell in with the wrong crowd at a young age, she said, while others said that they started doing drugs at a young age or after dropping out of college, kicking off a cycle of crime.

Another speaker, "Jane", said that after being molested as a child, she turned eventually to alcohol, cocaine and finally crack to mask the pain.

"(Drugs) help you bury the pain that's inside of you. You do drugs and alcohol so you can escape this," Jane said, pointing to her head. "This is the most painful thing that you can ever have. It will torture you."

Ironically, Jane said, her run-in with the law occurred while she was sober when she was involved in a car accident in North Carolina.

However, Jane said, her time in prison was “a gift” because it allowed her to get away from crack cocaine.

It also introduced her to Kairos Prison Ministry, through which she learned acceptance.

“They didn’t shy away from me,” she said. “Instead they hugged me, and they showed me unconditional love. They didn’t judge me. And that meant more to me, I think, than just about anything else, because I judged myself the worst of all.”

However, Jane said, while in prison, she often ran into issues with consistency among the officers. One officer might like to be called “ma’am,” for instance, while another would think she was being sarcastic and punish her, she said.

“Consistency is so, so important,” Jane said. “I didn’t know from one day to the next, from one officer to the next, how to act. I just wanted to know what the rules were, because I just wanted to do them so I wouldn’t get in trouble. But it changed from moment to moment.”

Most of the speakers said that they have gotten their lives back together since their time in prison. Jane now is a nurse; Mary reconciled with her husband, got her children back and got her GED; Bill is employed and back in school; Joe is a licensed barber and associate pastor at his father’s church; Michael received his associate degree; and Jennifer’s daughters are on the road to recovery.

“Every person’s story in life is different,” Garrett said. “Each story is unique. ... The storyline changes for a number of reasons. It may change through treatment, it may change through relationships, it may change through support, but something has to come in to change it.”