

New Program Aims to Take Youths from Crime to College Classrooms

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From Rikers Island to a college classroom is not an easy path for many who end up in jail, but a Brooklyn program is trying to help with that journey. NY1's Dean Meminger filed the following report.

It's an emotional moment as five young people take the next step in changing their lives, continuing to push away from the street and crime.

"I was taking a path for the worst. I was going down a very terrible path," said Rashawn Gregory, who landed in handcuffs and on probation. However, with the help of the Jewish Childcare Association's Arches program, he said that life is behind him.

"I applied for a few colleges. I'm waiting to get their confirmation, confirmation letters to come back," he said. "I'm actually training for a home health aide."

Brownsville has its fair share of crime and gangs, but when young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are on probation enter the Arches Program, they're encouraged to leave their gang affiliations and attitudes at the door. It's not always easy.

"Every mean person or every violent person is a hurt person in disguise, and that's normally what it is," said Khadijah Allen, a lead mentor with the program. "They're hurting. They have things that they haven't shared with anybody."

Here, they get a chance to open up during a six-month program and explore making key decisions during a critical point in their lives.

"To go back to the streets to hustle, or to get up and hustle, as in go and get a job, instead of hustling and selling rocks and dope," said Abdul Nixson, a graduate of the program.

For teens and young adults who get involved in the criminal justice system, their families are usually taken on a horrible ride of pain and disbelief.

"As a mother who loves their child, you want to see the best for them, and when they do go astray, it's heartbreaking, it's hurtful," said Yolanda Holliday, the mother of a member of the program. "But to see what he's becoming, I'm so very proud of him."

The hope is the program's graduates will show others a different way.

"Not only doing something positive for themselves, they're helping their families out," said Ronald Starks, a mentor with the program. "They're inviting their friends that may not be doing stuff as positive to do positive things."

That's helping to better the community they call home.