March 4, 2016

Getting Out by Going In (GOGI)

Submission for the World Interfaith Harmony Week

 Getting Out By Going In or “GOGI” as it is affectionately referred to by its participants is a not-for-profit, NGO organization with headquarters in California, USA. The main focus of GOGI is to create a positive culture shift inside prisons and jails.. The organization’s services help prisoners to develop life skills, positive decision making skills, and accountability. GOGI relies entirely upon peer support for sustainability and viral expansion of a positive culture. The tools were created by and for prisoners and are simple to apply to every day life events, thereby permitting all prisoners to experience a positive outcome when applying these tools. The tools are:

1. BOSS OF MY BRAIN - Control your brain or you will be letting others control you. You can be a good boss or a bad boss, but you are the boss.
2. BELLY BREATHING - Use deep breathing to calm body and mind to counteract impulsive, angry reactions.
3. FIVE-SECOND LIGHTSWITCH - Replace old, automatic thoughts with new, positive actions.
4. POSITIVE THOUGHTS - Replace negative thoughts with positive ones.
5. POSITIVE WORDS - Your positive words tell the world who you are. Use positive words to improve all areas of life.
6. POSITIVE ACTIONS- Choose actions that enhance your life and lead to positive change.
7. LET GO - If you let go of the little stuff, the big stuff often disappears too.
8. FOR GIVE - It’s less about the spiritual concept and more about getting distance from harm or harmful people “for” you to “give” back.
9. CLAIM RESPONSIBILITY - In the GOGI way, this is a tool for making good decisions that create a good future.
10. WHAT IF - It’s a way to see how one positive choice leads to another and imagine a new, different life.
11. REALITY CHECK - Acceptance of imperfection and acknowledgment that change is a process. Backsliding may occur but you are still moving forward.
12. ULTIMATE FREEDOM - You are able to be of service and do good – the only true freedom without any expectation of recognition and regardless of others’ actions.

Although GOGI may be delivered in a familiar “program” format, GOGI is not a program and far more inter-faith in nature and delivery. GOGI is a positive culture and a way of choosing to live one’s life, uniting all cultures, religions and races in the goal of making more positive decisions. GOGI was designed by prisoners for prisoners; what that means is that all of the material that GOGI produces are a result of inmates saying we need to learn this. The tools and their names were decided by prisoners. The tools parallel proven psychological and behavioral theories, but are presented in the prisoners’ own words. This allows them to be accessible and internalized by the prison population. The second unique element of GOGI that makes is stand out, specifically in regards to other programming offered to inmates is GOGI itself does not advocate a certain religion or spiritual belief, but rather GOGI can be used as a companion to any religion that the participant adheres to. Students of various religious sects have commented on how when they study their religious material and GOGI together they find elements of GOGI in their sacred texts. This has been said by adherents of Sunni Islam, Mormonism, Judaism, Evangelical Christianity, Catholicism, and several other sets and religions.

 The event in the video that will be submitted with this report is a video showing the weekly Friday night GOGI event at CTF Soledad in Soledad, CA. As is evident in the video GOGI transcends the racial divides that are so often present in US prisons. The participants of that particular GOGI group include members who are former members of the Aryan Brotherhood, Peckerwoods (White Supremacist Gangs), Black Panthers, Bloods, Crips (African-American Gangs), Bulldogs, Nuestra Familia (Hispanic Gangs). This transcendence of race, religion, and gang affiliation is not unique to the event at CTF Soledad for GOGI, because GOGI has universal truths that participants can relate to regardless of their background. It is not unreachable psychological jargon, but is words and art that are created by their own, by people in similar situations. It is this relatability that makes GOGI so successful in changing individual lives and prison culture.

 The GOGI event inside the prison in Soledad, California, that takes place every Friday night and includes 120 men from all races, creeds, languages, colors and belief systems. These men take two hours of their time each week to meet as a group and hold a GOGI meeting. During their 90 minute sessions, the prisoners discuss the tools and their use of them in their daily lives. The rest of the week the men hold each other accountable to living their GOGI tools in their prison cells and in the community areas such as the dining halls and outside yard areas where all prisoners are sharing the same space, regardless of belief system.

One participant related a story where he was working in the educational department when something didn’t go his way. He started to resort to anger and violence towards the person who had caused him this grievance, as he was beginning to revert back to negative behavior another person and fellow GOGI participant reminded him to BELLY BREATH and to be the BOSS OF HIS BRAIN. These reminders deescalated the situation and an altercation was avoided. He said that it was experiences like this that through GOGI he was able to live to be the man God wanted him to be and allowed his fellow inmate to be in service to his fellow man. It allowed both of them to be closer to their Creator.

 GOGI participants are encouraged to combine GOGI and their religious studies, to use both their religious teachings and GOGI to reach an ULTIMATE FREEDOM that is possible through positive decision making, being of service to their community, and living positive productive lives. GOGI events are held weekly across the country in several different settings, State Penitentiaries, like CTF Soledad in the video and pictures, County Jails, Federal Penitentiaries, and Juvenile Facilities. It is offered to men and women regardless of their affiliations or circumstances.