

Reprinted from:

The Post and Courier

YOUR LOWCOUNTRY

Thursday, December 21, 2006

Special to readers in North Charleston and Berkeley County

Model rehabilitation program taking first steps

BY JASIIR WHIPPER

The Post and Courier

For years, John Glemser lived his life perilously close to death. From 1969 to 1991, the recovering drug addict never spent more than two years on the street before he was back behind bars for another drug or burglary charge.

At 55 and sober, Glemser says his life is very different today. He sits in a chair in an open field at Rivers Avenue and Gumwood Road selling Christmas trees to support the organization that he has helped establish, SC STRONG: South Carolina Sustaining, Teaching and Rebuilding Our New Generation. Glemser serves as program director.

Started in June, SC STRONG is modeled after the Delancey Street Foundation treatment and training program, of which Glemser is a May 2006 graduate. The Delancey Street Foundation program, which was founded in San Francisco in 1971, aims to restructure the lives of released offenders by giving them the skills they need to rebuild their lives. SC STRONG tries to do the same.

Aside from private donations, the Eisenhower Foundation and Delancey Street Foundation are SC STRONG's two main benefactors. Glemser's vision is that SC STRONG one day will be self-sustaining with small businesses generated from the work of the residents.

The SC STRONG program operates on the old Naval Base. Residents are helping to renovate three existing houses on the base where they live and work. Glemser hopes to have the most of the renovations in the former officers' quarters leased from the Noisette Co. completed by spring. SC STRONG is still in its infancy and has only two residents. (The Delancey Street Foundation asked that they not be interviewed for this story.)

The released offenders participate in seminars geared toward teaching better communication skills. There are formal debates where they discuss current events. Residents who do not have a high school diploma participate in GED courses, all taught from within the program. When tensions are high in the house, they come together for "encounter sessions," where they learn to talk about their problems in a constructive and safe setting.

"Everything is on hold right now while we do the tree lot," Glemser said.

"But once that's done, we're back to what we do."

Since he is a carpenter by trade, Glemser has committed to teaching carpentry.

"Day to day, we're teaching life skills and changing the way they think," he said. "Our concept is each one teach one. For the most part, we teach the classes."

Shortly after Glemser graduated from the Delancey Street program in New York, where he had risen to facilities manager, he received a call from Delancey Street founder and CEO Mimi Silbert, who offered him the program director position of the SC STRONG program. Glemser was honored by the offer.

"I get to do something I love, renovating buildings and teaching residents how to transform their lives," he said.

Carol Kizziah, director of the SC STRONG project, says Glemser is the right man to spearhead the program and not only because of his background in construction.

"He is the example of what we try to do in having people to come to Delancey Street and spend a significant amount of time, change their lives and turn around to help someone else," she said.

Most of Glemser's referrals come word of mouth. He is the only staff member and interviews and accepts prospective residents. The residents' attorney, a judge and solicitor also must give their approval. All residents must commit to two years with the program.

Because of permit issues for the lot, Glemser is disappointed that he wasn't able to set up Christmas trees earlier. But he is happy to sell what he can in the days that remain before Dec. 25. The words "buy a tree save a life" are painted in red and green letters on the sign in front of the lot welcoming passers-by to stop in.

From his perch at the tree lot, Glemser remains optimistic about his new position and the future of this young program.

"This is a great opportunity," he said. "To have graduated from Delancey Street, and now I can give others the chance to put their lives together."



John Glemser