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## A program for change

Making a difference!

### Young inmates work to overcome obstacles

By Maggie FitzRoy  
*Shorelines staff writer*

Seventeen-year-old Casey Stallings has been thinking a lot about the meaning of the word "freedom."

"From the 11 months I've been in here I've seen kids come in and out of jail," he said. "In and out. For them, freedom is a joke. From what I see, I got responsibility to stay out and help my family."

An inmate in the Duval County jail who was serving time for armed robbery, Stallings was one of seven students who graduated July 24 from an eight-week program that could change his ways, his thinking and his life.

Power, Polish and Purpose is a volunteer program for at-risk kids that aims to give them tools to create and achieve positive goals. It was created by Peggy Johnson of Ponte Vedra Beach, Kirk Farber of Atlantic Beach and Almon Gunter of Jacksonville.

During the graduation ceremony in the detention center's recreation area, Stallings and his fellow students reviewed the things they learned during their weekly sessions with the jail's program. The boys, ages 14-18, learned power through martial arts demonstrations by Farber, polish in the form of public speaking skills from Johnson and purpose through lessons in motivation and discipline from Gunter.

"If you are going to change a person's position in life, you have to change their minds," Gunter said. "That's what we do in this program, change their minds. We take 'I can't' and turn it into 'I can.' We show them what they can do. We create little successes. The more we can have them be successful in something, the better their chances are."



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Peggy Johnson reviews public speaking skills last week with graduates of her program Power, Polish and Purpose, which helps young inmates at the Duval County jail.

-- Maggie FitzRoy/Staff

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Almon Gunter (left) congratulates Zack Harwell, 17, for winning an award at a graduation ceremony July 24 as Peggy Johnson looks on. Harwell is an inmate at the Duval County jail in Jacksonville.

-- Maggie FitzRoy/Staff

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Johnson began working with incarcerated youths as a volunteer in 1997, when she co-created The Youth Leadership Program sponsored by Toastmasters International. Her programs, which she ran several times a year, were well received by the inmates. Every week she brought a volunteer guest speaker to inspire the boys in different areas of their lives.

Farber was one of the most popular guests in that program. He broke boards to demonstrate overcoming obstacles and did martial arts moves to show how to focus the mind.

Johnson discovered Gunter, a former U.S. Olympic track trials qualifier, at a

graduation ceremony last spring. She was impressed by his ability to inspire the audience. The three motivational experts decided to team up to create the Power, Polish and Purpose program and to make it available to other kids who are not necessarily in trouble, but could use guidance in their lives.

They plan to work with The Police Athletic League in an after-school program this fall and are seeking grants that will enable them to work with youths full time.

"The key is character development and education," Farber said. "We're now focused on bringing our three strengths together."

Every week Gunter used a different word, such as "freedom," "respect," "responsibility," "sacrifice," or "commitment," to introduce that session's theme. He asked the kids to look for examples in their lives and to write them down in a notebook that served as a journal for their thoughts and goals. During the graduation ceremony, the kids used their public speaking skills to present these ideas to each other and their guests.



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Kirk Farber demonstrates how breaking boards can be the same as overcoming obstacles. His helper, Roderick Morman, 17, is a recent graduate of Farber's program for at-risk youths.

-- Maggie FitzRoy/Staff

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One wanted to be a barber when he got out of jail. One wanted to go into the military. Another said he had the same dreams as many other people: to have a family and get a job, a nice car and a home.

When it was Stallings' turn, he stood up straight, smoothed his brown prison uniform and looked into the small audience.

"I want to be a role model for my little brother," he said. "I'll try to go to college, go back to school."

Gunter challenged him: "You need to change that to I *will* go to college, go back to

school," he said.

After the speeches, Gunter and Farber went up to the boys and slapped their palms.

"Good job, good job, good job," they said. The boys grinned.

Farber reminded them that turning their lives around and achieving their goals would take work. He told them that breaking boards is like overcoming obstacles.

"When you get out of here, there will be obstacles out there," he said.

He reminded them that one of their biggest obstacles would be peer pressure. Like in martial arts moves, sometimes you have to yield, Farber said. Sometimes you have to be forceful.

"You can control your own actions," he said. "Respect your talents when you get out of here; you have a lot to share."

The jail's public affairs officer, deputy Gregory Fields, gave the boys his own pep talk at the end of the ceremony. Fields said he saw a lot of value in the program.

There are 2,100 people in this jail, he told them. The few that are in this program are doing something special.

"You've learned something; use it," he said.

Juvenile security officer James Toomer agreed.

"These people came to install something in your lives: tools," Toomer told them.

"These tools, you need to use them for your future. Use them well."

***For more information on Power, Polish and Purpose please contact Kirk Farber [kfarber@theworkingwarrior.com](mailto:kfarber@theworkingwarrior.com).***