

Jobs and Training for the Hard-core Unemployed: Project Strive at 25

Interview by Gregory DeFreitas

The economic meltdown that began in 2008 destroyed the economic security and job prospects of many millions. By mid-year 2011, the average national unemployment rate remained above nine percent, but it was 14.3% among adult high school dropouts, nearly 22% among white teenagers and 40% for black teens. With jobs so scarce for the young and less educated, the challenge of making them employable has never been more daunting. This year marks the 25th anniversary of STRIVE, one of the country's best-known nonprofit job training and placement programs for the urban poor and unemployed. Though it launched its first service programs in East Harlem in 1986, STRIVE began drawing national attention a decade later when the 1996 welfare reform law sharply cut the amount and duration of benefits for the poor and unemployed. As millions tried to navigate the welfare-to-work transition, the distinctive STRIVE approach to welfare-to-work was featured in a popular episode of the CBS news program "60 Minutes." It showcased the confrontational style of instructors, demanding that their new students increase their employability by comprehensively overhauling their attitudes and appearance. "Welfare reform isn't as simple as sticking people in a job and declaring victory," said segment host Lesley Stahl. In a follow-up broadcast in October 1999, "Sixty Minutes" concluded that STRIVE was achieving a "consistent track record" of job placement and retention that was far more cost-effective than many publicly funded training programs. [both television broadcasts can be viewed online at www.strivenational.org.]

STRIVE's initial 3-week Core Program aims at developing "soft skills" like punctuality, professional appearance, respectful behavior toward coworkers, employers and customers, and oral and written communication. In the process, one goal is to promote a positive, pro-active spirit and to discourage any self-image of victimization by poverty, racism, drug addiction, etc. Students who successfully complete the Core Program then have the opportunity to take the second, lengthier "hard skills" training component, introduced in 2006. For two years after job placement, STRIVE case managers regularly check back with their graduates to help them cope with on-the-job issues, the better to avoid frequent job quits and workplace conflicts. STRIVE claims an impressive record: from its largely low-income black and Hispanic student population, most with a history of incarceration and/or drug abuse, it graduates about 3,000 students per year. About seven in ten of those who complete the program obtain employment within a year.

From its origins as a small community organization in East Harlem, the organization has grown into an international franchise with sites in 18 U.S. cities, and five more abroad in the British Isles and the Mideast. Robert Carmona is the co-founder and long-time President and CEO of STRIVE International. An East Harlem native, he left an early life of drugs and jail time to complete a BA at the College of New Rochelle and an MSW at Columbia University. Prior to his tenure at STRIVE, Mr. Carmona held a number of senior positions in the New York not-for-profit community: Assistant Director of Agency Relations at the Greater New York Fund/United Way, Senior Planner for the NYC Volunteer Corps, and Director of Marketing for the Wildcat Service Corporation. He is a founding Board member of The National Skills Coalition, and also sits on the Board of several nonprofit agencies.

Greg DeFreitas talked with him at STRIVE's Harlem headquarters on East 123rd St. in late August. As the conversation progressed, they were joined by Senior Advisor Danny Gonzalez and Larry Jackson, the Director of Programs.

Q: Could you first talk a bit about your personal background and how that led to you becoming the President and CEO of STRIVE.

RC: Well, I was born here in East Harlem, on 117th and 5th. When my parents split up, my mother applied for public housing and moved out to Staten Island. In the mid-'60s, I started using drugs and ended up getting strung out on heroin from the ages of 15 to 24. I was in and out of jail during this time. In 1976, I received a five-year sentence for armed robbery and I was held at the Brooklyn House of Detention for about a year. Daytop Village, a drug program, told a bunch of us that if we could get bailed out we could probably get alternative sentences. Opting for this, I went into Daytop Village and did two years there: the first upstate and then a year of reentry in the city. When I went away, my oldest daughter was about eight months old, and I guess it was the notion of what kind of life this kid would lead that really got me to buy into the therapeutic community process and begin to turn my life around.

When I was at the point in the program where I had to get a job, I interviewed at the Court Employment Project. It was run at that time by a woman named Rae Linefsky, who to this day is a good friend of mine. When I interviewed, she saw my background and

said, “I’m going to give you a shot because I like you.” That’s relevant to STRIVE’s training, which I’ll segue back to. The job was working with youth that were on probation and tutoring them for their GED. It was my first real job.

At that same time that I was in Daytop’s re-entry process, the College of New Rochelle started a satellite school for individuals who worked in New York City government and wanted a degree to move up in their particular occupation. I transferred the credits I had from Staten Island Community College into New Rochelle. When I got my bachelor’s degree in 1979, I was 27, and living with my current wife, in an apartment in the Bronx. I remember that when the degree came in the mail, I looked at it and said, “Wow, I’m a college graduate. I don’t have to fall again.” Meaning getting into drugs again. I remember it being a real shot in the arm. I worked at Court Employment for a year or two, and then went to work as a youth counselor at Kings County Hospital. They youth would get counseling and classes towards their high school diploma. I wanted to stay in the social work profession, but wanted to be one step removed from direct client involvement as it was kind of painful on a personal level. I applied to Columbia University’s School of Social Work, and was let in under academic probation. Probation lasted one semester, I did well and ultimately secured my MSSW from Columbia. My first year’s internship was with the New York City Department of Probation, which to me was like sleeping with the enemy. The second year internship was at the Greater New York Fund United Way. Our current city Schools Chancellor, Dennis Walcott, also worked there and in some ways, we started our careers together.

I stayed at United Way a few years, and then went on to become the Senior Planner at the NYC Volunteer Corps. I did that for a year, and was then recruited by the Wildcat Service Corporation. That’s where I got into Workforce niche.

Q: Can you describe how Wildcat tried to help them get jobs?

RC: It’s a nonprofit that hires ex-offenders, puts them on payroll at minimum wage and contracts with HRA to either rehab buildings across the City or to do clerical work in different City agencies. Wildcat is described as a “supported work program.” At Wildcat, I was the Director of Marketing. We wanted to try to emulate the model in the private sector. This sector wasn’t ready to have ex-offenders around in the workplace at that time.

I was happy at Wildcat, but it had an embedded senior leadership making it difficult to move up. One day in 1986, I remember walking down the street, and somebody I knew handed me a flyer advertising an Executive Director position at a place called Project STRIVE, a new training program in East Harlem.

Q: Where did STRIVE come from, and how does its approach differ from Wildcat’s?

RC: The principal founder of STRIVE was Sam Hartwell – a quintessential, old-line, blue-blood out of Pittsburgh. Sam worked at Merrill Lynch for a time, and subsequently became co-owner of Blodgett Ovens, the makers of ovens for Pizza Hut. Sam and Tom Rodman, an investment banker at Alex Brown, were both volunteering at an employment program housed at the Henry Street Settlement. They noticed that though people were trained in some sort of hard skills (typing, maintenance, etc.), and placed on jobs, they would lose their jobs because there was no emphasis on two things: first, what people now characterize as “soft skills: i.e. the abilities to get along with others in the workplace, to take constructive criticism without getting your nose out of joint, to be punctual, properly dressed, etc. The second thing they realized was that, under government-funded programs, after 90 days the responsibility of the agency to the client would end. People ended up recycling from program to program.

Their idea was to start a program with an emphasis on soft skills that would also give individuals a lifetime commitment of service. The first two years of that lifetime commitment, the onus for maintaining contact and providing support to participants was on the part of the agency. After two years it would shift to the client. They incorporated as a 501(c) (3) in 1984. After experimenting for a couple of years, Sam and Tom decided to hire an Executive Director, and ultimately, I was that recruit.

Q: I went back and looked at the statistics, and it turns out that in 1984 in New York City the unemployment rate was 8.7%, which is exactly what it is now! Could you recall what it was like for an ex-offender or somebody without much schooling to try to get a job in the city?

RC: Actually, it was such a different time. I don’t remember it feeling quite as oppressive as it does today. At that time a person who was a high school dropout, could get a job in the mailroom of a bank or a law firm, and then actually get to a living wage. It’s more critical now that somebody have a firmer grasp of math and reading concepts and have some type of credential.

When I interviewed with Sam, they didn’t have a firm idea on how to execute this model emphasizing personal skills over technical skill, because at that time – and I think it’s still true today – most jobs, that are not specific in function, doctor, lawyer, etc., and at the entry level, just require common sense. The ability to get hired boils down to the person that’s interviewing saying, “I like this guy/gal. I’m going to give them a shot.” Also, they envisioned an empowerment model. The concept was the removal of the feelings of victimization. At that time, I was still a very angry young man from the standpoint of racial injustice. It was clear that the larger society didn’t give a shit about poor people in general, or about

poor people of color, in particular. My belief was that, if we could not depend on the larger society to do for us, we had to develop the skills and the fortitude to do for ourselves.

I took the concepts of Daytop Village, (the therapeutic community concept) and applied them to employment. The therapeutic community concept is like the “12 steps”: A person cannot stop being a drug addict or an alcoholic until one first embraces the fact that that’s what they are, without making excuses. Once you embrace the fact – “Yeah, this is what I am” – and you own it, then one can start putting together those pieces of the puzzle that helps to manage one’s life in a much more constructive way. We took the principles and philosophy’s from Daytop and applied them to employment at STRIVE, and it took off.

The irony was that social workers were of annoyed with STRIVE, because the social work perspective was, ostensibly, viewed as supportive. STRIVE was viewed as telling people to, “Stop whining! Own the fact that you made some bad decisions, and keep it moving.” People interpreted what we were doing, as insensitive. I kept telling people, “No, we’re not just saying that and we’re offering to stay with folks for a lifetime. We’re not just saying, ‘Get over it.’ We’re saying that we’re going to help you get over it, and we’ll stay with you until you do.” There was an assumption in our model that a client would lose his or her first job, and we used that action not as a failure, but as a learning moment. Just like relapse is part of treatment, we expected folks to “job relapse” once or twice before they got it.

**Q: And where was the money coming from?
From the founders?**

RC: From the founders and a number of foundations, like the Clark Foundation, New York Community Trust, Wildwings, Underhill and a host of others. Initially, STRIVE was all privately funded. One thing New York City, has is the biggest foundation base in the country, if not the world.

Q: Did you have to spend a lot of your early time going around raising money?

RC: Yeah. Since I had worked at United Way, as a funder, I had relationships with a lot of these other funders. At that time, as Executive Director, I did everything, from payroll, to taxes, to check writing, to office maintenance. We were a bare-bones operation with a staff of five. But the numbers of folks served were just off the charts. People thought, “You must be fudging numbers.” We’d say, “Well, no, we’re not fudging numbers. The difference between us and you is we’re staying in contact with our clientele and bringing them back for replacement services.” There’s no mystery here. We stay with them for two years, and every 90 days we’re calling people up: “You okay? Oh, no? Come back in here.” Whereas, with other programs, after 90 days, they were done.

Q: How did you choose the people that you let into the program?

RC: Anybody that came is accepted, unless they come in high on drugs or alcohol. In that event, we tell them: “You’re not ready to work.” Let’s get you some help first..

Q: Did you check to see if they were below a certain income?

RC: No, income was not a criterion. The preponderance of our clientele back then were women on public assistance. This was pre-welfare reform, so they had some latitude in being able to go to programs that caught their interest. The guys represented 25% of those we served and were, in the main, neighborhood guys. A lot of them had criminal justice histories. Over the years, the criminal justice population has quadrupled. Though it was harder placing ex-offenders, there was not the same level of hostility towards that demographic as there is now. Now, society feels overwhelmed by this cadre of people. We were going after jobs that were entry-level and not particularly relevant to what a person’s criminal history was.

Subsequent to all of this, Sam told some friends in Pittsburgh what he was doing in New York, and they said, “Wow, could you do that here.” Ultimately, we were able to do something in Pittsburgh that we’ve never, ever been able to do again, raise three years of operating capital for a Pittsburgh site in one meeting with a group of business leaders, foundation folks, and industry professionals, all part of a group called the Allegheny Conference. Pittsburgh had to reinvent itself from a mining and steel town to a medical and banking hub. Sam and I went down with a group, made a presentation, and people just put up their hands and put up the money.

Bill Strickland, a Pittsburgh Native started a nonprofit in Pittsburgh called Bidwell Training Center. Bidwell is primarily focused on the culinary arts, and is a state-of-the-art institution. He has since replicated in different cities. Bill could have looked at us as competition, but didn’t. His attitude was that there were enough unemployed folks to go around. He helped us secure space across the street from Bidwell, and we started Three Rivers Employment Service, which to this day is still in operation. The same thing happened in Chicago, Boston and Philadelphia. We went into those cities and we started sites. Philadelphia, though, was the first place that we developed STRIVE as a component of an existing nonprofit called Metropolitan Career Centers. We now had STRIVEs in five major markets.

Q: So you would often go and make a presentation about the New York model?

RC: Sam and I. Yeah, exactly. We would identify a “local champion” and that person would take STRIVE over and run with it. We’d provide technical assistance, and only recoup our carfare cost. Then in 1989–90, the Clark Foundation board decided, because of the unemployment figures cited, to make a heftier commitment to youth and young adult employment. They committed a million dollars per year, and further used the STRIVE philosophical approach as the model for expenditure a million bucks per annum over a 4 year period. They awarded STRIVE a million-dollar two-for-one challenge grant to develop a network of STRIVE sites around the city. A nonprofit that saw employment as the endgame for their clients could either raise two bucks and ask for a buck, or they could creatively deploy some of their government money, for the two-for one match. We approached agencies that worked with discrete clients groups.

For example, in Queens we went to the Queensborough Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children. They were a foster care agency working with kids aging out of the system. They’re now called Safe Space. We went to NADAP, National Association of Drug Abuse Problems, all their clients, by definition, were in recovery. We went to Stanley Isaacs Settlement House here on 93rd Street. Their clients were youth, and it was our first youth-focused STRIVE, started by a gentleman named Howard Knoll.

And the other goal that Clark had attached to the effort was the placing of 10,000 people over four years for the 12 million, right? But it was a two-for-one match. What we didn’t take into account was the ramp-up time it would take for something like that. So in fact, it took us six years to expend it, and we ended up with the placement of 10,400 people at that time.

What then happened is that Clinton signed the welfare reform legislation in ’96. A writer named Kay Haimowitz heard about STRIVE and came at it from the personal responsibility angle. Her articles got picked up by the Wall Street Journal. So our thing appealed to both the right and the left, even though our personal responsibility nomenclature was a bit different than theirs. But they didn’t care.

Then an assistant producer at *60 Minutes* read the articles and told us they’d like to do a story about us. And *60 Minutes* was kind to us. I mean, they gave us two of their three segments, right? And it was the highest-rated *60 Minutes* show in a ten-year history for them. But because of that, *60 Minutes*, a lot of municipalities and



Rob Carmona

other nonprofits around the country saw STRIVE as part of their welfare reform efforts. Now, we got all of these reach-outs from all over the country, the, “Hey, come over here, do STRIVE there,” and all that kind of stuff. We did not have or even want that kind of capacity, where we could run willy-nilly around the country every time somebody said that they wanted to see us. So we developed a vehicle we call STRIVE Academy where, if you’re interested in doing STRIVE and if we get a critical mass of people, you come to New York and we put you through three to four days of deep immersion and STRIVE philosophical approaches. You get an understanding of what we’re trying to do and why.

And there were several reasons for it. One, most of us that started STRIVE were like me, ex-offenders, ex-substance abusers, so we didn’t see ourselves as very different than the clientele other than we had learned to manage our lives better and we had jobs. And it was interesting, because one of the unexpected

byproducts of the Academy is that it taught us who we wanted to do business with and who we didn’t want to do business with, because some people saw *60 Minutes* and just wanted the glory, and often it was, “No, no, no. Do the work, and the glory will come.” At the end of that process, which took probably from ’97 through the early 2000s, we had gotten STRIVEs in 21 cities. Some of them, of course, like anything else, didn’t make it. You know, like Denver never made it.

Q: So, STRIVE Academy was basically training the trainers to set up in other cities?

RC: Right. What would happen is, you would go through the STRIVE Academy. Then the person that was going to be the trainer at that site stayed in New York for three weeks and shadowed our STRIVE trainer. Went back to his or her locale, and when they were getting ready to do their first training session, I would dispatch Frank Horton, who’s the architect of training, to go camp out at that city for three weeks and help them through their first session. And then we would have gatherings twice a year for strategic planning. “Hey, I just tried this experiment in the training. It worked.” You know, that kind of thing. And a different program came out of that, some with an individual emphasis on female clients, and some with individual emphasis on male clients and the unique challenges they face.

Q: Now, this is a lot of work. And meanwhile you’re doing your regular program in New York City. Does STRIVE get a bit of funding out of each of these?

RC: Yeah. By this time we came up with a scheme where, when you signed off, we got \$50,000 a year for three years from you. Right? And so we built out a national line staff here, but a national team that was doing a lot of that work. And I was like the public face guy. You know, my COO at the time was Lorenzo Harrison

[subsequently chief of youth jobs programs in the Clinton Administration]. I've known him since we were in a drug program together. He was an 18-year-old kid, and I was 24, and we met in Daytop. Now, Lorenzo was interesting, because unlike me and a couple of the older guys that were there on alternative prison sentences, he was brought to the program by his father. He grew up in Teaneck, which is where I live now, a very nice neighborhood across the bridge. So he had never hit rock bottom like a lot of us. When he came down from upstate, I brought him into the program as a job developer.

The relevance of that is, we started fatherhood programs, realizing that a lot of the challenges that men of color have is they were being raised by women, you know, in our communities, and we look to the streets for our male role models, and we end up in jail. That's what happened to me. It's a phenomenon that has to be addressed. Actually, the guy that started it was Ron Mincy. He's at Columbia University now. Ron and I go back 25 years. When Ron was at the Ford Foundation, and he started the fatherhood stuff, and we were one of his first sites. It was called Partners of Fragile Families. I think Obama gets that, since he grew up without his dad, you know, so there's a lot of moneys for fatherhood. But, you know, it's become a major thing in the workforce community.

During the Clinton Administration, his Secretary of Labor, Alexis Herman, visited STRIVE. My wife and I were on vacation when I got a call from Lorenzo: "Are you sitting down? Secretary Herman just called me. She wants me to come down to Washington and take over the youth portfolio for the whole country!" So, when Lorenzo went to Labor, he was the Youth Czar and had a \$3 billion budget. And that's just one division of the ETA [Employment Training Administration, part of the US Dept. of Labor]. He started the YOs, the Youth Opportunity Movements, where he worked on Indian reservations, poor communities across the state. And Lorenzo gave us, STRIVE, a sole-source million to do a mini-YO here at STRIVE. But he started the YOs predicated on the STRIVE philosophical approaches.

He's still at Labor, but not in ETA. When the Bush Administration came in, they took Lorenzo out of ETA and they buried the research that was done on the YO. The research came up aces, but the Bush administration wanted to disinvest in youth. The results of the YO were not released until it was either late 2009 or 2010 by the Obama administration, and it was shown that it had worked quite tremendously. But the country was not in the mood for that anymore and started disinvesting.

Q: In the Clinton administration, school-to-work was a big issue. It was a huge project at the Labor Department. And then it just all vanished, with barely a mention on the Bush administration website. Do you regard that as a major mistake, that we don't have that anymore?

RC: Oh, no question. You know, it's funny: I think we're a country that talks a good game about we respect the value of human capital

and blah-blah-blah. Really? That's why we pay teachers like painters? You know, the disinvestment in it has just been tremendous. Now we wonder why these kids are disconnected.

Q: As part of President Obama's ARRA stimulus program in 2009, STRIVE received \$5 million for green construction workers. Are you still using that in your training?

RC: Well, we're at tail end of it. The Labor Dept. announced another thing called the Green Innovation Fund that was an \$8 billion deal. And we applied for it, Of the 4, almost \$5 million we got for green two years ago, that only fed five cities: New York, Hartford, Baltimore, Philly and Flint. What I'm saying to them is, now let us take that, expand it to the other 18 cities: San Diego, Greenville, North Carolina, Bridgeport, Connecticut, and the other sites where we have STRIVEs, and let them get in on the action, but with specific focus on African-American and Latino males that are preponderantly ex-offender, right?

But we have not been awarded that money. I had a conversation with the Labor Secretary, basically asking, "What's up with that?" She sent their head of policy, Bill Spriggs, up to see us. I said, "Look, you guys have got a problem. The view on the ground is you guys are doing jack, right? In fact, two of the grants went to unions in Philly. So they're going to people that are not even unemployed right now. I have an 18-city infrastructure. Why don't we talk about an 18-city demonstration program targeted towards African-American and Latino youth, right, bearing in mind that different cities have different industries that'll achieve livable wages. You have a national grant servicing 18 cities with local flexibility."

Bottom line is, a few weeks later, Mayor Bloomberg announces his new youth jobs initiative. So I send the announcement to Bill. "See? This is what I'm talking about." What Bloomberg's doing on the local scene is what you guys need to be doing on a national scene. He sends me back an e-mail: "Well, you know, there are a number of other national groups. If we did something, there would be a competitive bid."

You know, back in the '90s, Lorenzo had 3 billion that he managed at the Labor Department. That was just youth money. It wasn't for male adults or others. Now the Secretary of Labor, Hilda Solis, is down to, "I've got \$25 million for this for the whole country. I've got \$38 million for that for the whole country." Peanuts. Are you serious?

Q: What kind of relations do you have with unions? Lots of trade unions have training programs.

RC: Well, we are designated a pre-apprentice program. So a guy that comes through here, they say he's doing a pre-apprenticeship. We're very close with the Consortium for Worker Education. You know, Joe McDermott and that bunch. In fact, my wife was one of the founding staff members. She used to work there for years. She was their business manager. So we've been buddies with CWE for 20 years.

Danny Gonzalez: Can I just interject for a minute or two to talk on the other, job creation front? Historically, some employers have been afraid to come into New York State because they don't believe New York State is a very friendly place to do business, with the unions and all the other oversights. Agencies like Empire State Development Agency, who are responsible for the development of business in the state of New York, historically have always been a dumping ground at their managerial positions for political hacks. And those are the people that clog up getting business moving forward, you know?

So this administration, under Cuomo has been really aggressively going out and wooing these companies and bringing them and removing all these oversights and creating just a little better atmosphere. And they've invited nonprofits, like ourselves, and others to sit at the table and say, "All right, what can we do at the government level?" I mean, sometimes government can stand in the way of things. How do we avoid that? How can we make things just a little easier? And they're open to this.

Q: What employers have been most supportive and really do try to find jobs for your trainees?

RC: One big building owner hired one of our guys to be the green maintenance fix-up dude for all these buildings, from East Harlem to the Bronx all the way up to Mount Vernon. He's making about 25 bucks an hour. So there are some employers that have been hiring. We've got like probably a 65% placement rate. Now, it takes longer to get them placed once they complete the training, but when they hit, it's for 5 to \$10 above minimum.

Q: At a time when there's 347,000 unemployed people in the city!

RC: Nationally, people say there's four people to every one opening. But we've been able to get them work in green jobs. Remember, green is very broad, so it could be in construction, where people have to become LEED certified. It could also be in green maintenance, in the kind of soaps you put in to clean the hallways. Are they environmentally friendly?

Larry Jackson: I would say at this time non-union contractors that are doing reconstruction, of course. They've been very open, very receptive to hiring our graduates. We've been working very closely with green maintenance opportunities – cleaning companies that are really focused around the green in terms of environmentally safe products. In addition to our training, they also conduct training on their end to prepare the individuals for cleaning opportunities.

There's been some local opportunities, in particular Columbia University, and their maintenance department opening up, you know, on a number of angles. Again, you know, getting qualified, trained people, but also receptive to folks from the community. And so we've done well on those type of initiatives and opportunities. And union opportunities, as well.

Q: What have the unions been doing?

LJ: Well, we've been recognized through the help of Danny and another staff person to be what we call an approved apprentice program through the Department of Labor. And because of the level of training we offer to our participants, it pretty much puts them right in line for the unions to look at them like first-year apprentices, based on the number of certifications and the type of training that they come to the door with.

As a result, a number of our clients, when there are opportunities within Local 78–79 [*of the laborers' union*], and other unions, were able to make direct referrals. Now, what that represents is no guarantee, but basically an application and an interview. And because they stack up so well with the certification and training, it gives them a little edge over some of the traditional applicants that just kind of respond to the openings that the unions may have. So they come in with quite a few things under their belt.

Now, the other area of success we've been having is because New York City Housing Authority is one of the biggest recipients of construction work at the time, and they want to put a number of their residents to work. Those individuals that we're so fortunate to have come through our program and be trained, we can just refer for placement through NYCHA. But they have to be a NYCHA resident and legally on the lease.

So what that looks like, basically, is an individual that may come from any development around the city that's legitimately on the lease who comes through our training, and then we refer them back to Residential Services for placement assistance. And because they have so many different contracts with different developments, that it would have funneled those individuals directly to the contractors.

And Section 3 represents opportunity for NYCHA residents, and contractors agree to hire a certain percentage of residents. Part of that problem historically has been skills, and most importantly, preparation in terms of individuals being job ready. And because we speak to not only the hard skill regimen of the construction, but we also address this attitudinal, soft skills piece. So before they even go into hard skills, we vet individuals through our Core Program, which is ideally to address some of the basic fundamentals of work attendance, punctuality, attitude, et cetera. We've had quite a bit of success, you know, with that format.

Q: Given your success with Columbia, are you seeking more involvement of other universities?

LJ: The climate right now seems to be extremely robust for construction, for whatever the reason. One of my employment specialists, she just referred 14 individuals for an asbestos opportunity, which tend to get hired at \$21.50 an hour. And then we just had another recent opportunity for 30 of our people for what they call various apartment rehab jobs. Now, what we're waiting on is for the contractor to see if they won the bid. But even

at the point of the bid, he wanted to develop the workforce. So we referred the guys to him, and he pretty much enrolled them into his company. And if he gets that contract, that means 30 more of our guys immediately go to work.

So, I mean, it doesn't always happen this way. When Columbia roll out their opportunities, sometimes it's like a 30- to 40-man type of hire opportunity. And those kinds of opportunities help us tremendously because it gives us an opportunity to refer people out in bulk. And as such, even if they don't hit get an interview, it gives them some sense of hope that, okay, there's something happening as a result of this training, and it doesn't allow them to go sit back on the couch. What happens is if we get them connected, it just continues to motivate them to kind of look for employment on their own. "Self-directed placement."

Q: Now, in terms of just how it happens, new applicants would come here and you would give them the soft skills training, some computer training, interview skills, et cetera? And then how do they get hard skills training?

LJ: What happens is – I'll roll out the full green construction program for you. So it's a 14- to 15-week program. And what happens is the initial start point is core. Depending on the cycle and the number of individuals that we can move on to hard skills, what we tend to do is recruit much more than we need. So for a 35-person hard skill cohort, we might in fact reach out and touch maybe 100 to 150 individuals, who they must come in and take what we call a TABE test, the Test of Adult Basic Education. For them to start, they must score at least an 8.5 in reading and math, because the curriculum that they're going to be confronted with requires them to have that type of aptitude.

So once they TABE test, individuals that meet that benchmark are invited back to an orientation. And usually the orientation, after we go through the recruitment and the vetting and the testing, we end up probably having somewhere between, say, at any given time 75 to 100 people. In the orientation, you know, we're very honest about the Core process and what it means and the expectation of core, the fact that we understand that a percentage of you are not ready yet, and that's understandable. But our objective and goal is to get you ready, if you can stand up to that Core process. And most importantly, it's competitive.

So, you know, what we're looking for is the 35 top individuals that can meet the criteria guideline, which is attendance, punctuality, attitude, being a team player. And they're given a number of assignments throughout the process to see how timely they are in handing in their assignments and things of that nature. And lastly, we have a little green exam that we provide them the information to study and then take the exam and see how committed they are to this whole process.

Now, that almost seems to work perfectly to give you that 35-person cohort, either by self-termination – people self-terminate a lot before we process – or by us making some hard decisions and terminating folks because of behavior or punctuality, attendance, et cetera. Between the soft skill and the hard skill piece, we may lose 40, 50%. However, on the hard skill side, which is the longer period, nine weeks versus four, we may successfully complete 85 to 90%. And that's what that vetting leads up to.

Q: Do you actually do the hard skills training here?

LJ: The hard skills we actually farm out to the experts, like Ando International in Long Island City. So let me give you exactly what they receive once they get past our Core Program. So the Core Program, again, it's the soft skill piece, and there are no real certifications in that, just the opportunity to further their training. The hard skills program basically offers 35 hours of electrical, 35 hours of plumbing, 35 hours of carpentry. Those are all certificates, right? Weatherization is 40 hours. Then they receive the 40-hour HAZWOPER. That's the certification that is OSHA-regulated to move and handle hazardous material. For example, where we are today, right, I sent some guys out to Jersey to do some cleanup work based on the water and the flooding we just recently experienced in Hurricane Irene. Those guys would have the certification to actually go do the cleanup work. The 10-hour OSHA construction health and safety certification is mandatory to do any construction work here in New York City, whether it's union or nonunion construction. What that means, basically, is if an inspector goes by a worksite and a contractor's working on any development in New York City, they want everybody on that site to present their 10-hour OSHA. If somebody doesn't have an OSHA 10-hour there, they'll be fined, and they'll close the site down. So the 10-hour OSHA is mandatory to work on any construction.

It's not on-the-job training, but it's contextual, and it's hands-on. For example, when you do asbestos, you have to kind of build in those tents and what have you. So they actually go through the hands-on in a simulated experience, to know the dangers and so forth. And then they do the contextual part of it as well.

But it's all regulated by OSHA, okay? So they do the 40-hour, the 10-hour, the 32-hour asbestos, city and state. So when they complete the course for the asbestos, they automatically receive the New York State certification. However, the New York State doesn't allow you to work in the city, so they have to take the city exam offered by the City of New York, and they have to pass it to get their license for the city.

The 85% of those who go to hard skills complete it. So let's walk back a little bit. So between the Core and hard skills we may lose 50% of individuals, because we need, on the hard skills side, 35. Mind you, we may start with 100. Now, let me just kind of give this to you, as well. We try not to leave one person behind. What I mean by that is that though we have this number of 35, if I have 40 good

people, at the end of the four weeks I'm not going to just terminate people. So what we try to do is strategically make an allowance, and also what we try to do is kind of push the envelope a little bit on the hard skills side to see if we could kind of finagle or strategically get the other five individuals in there, too. Of course, all this is driven by cost, right? Because they have to kind of budget this whole thing out. And those certification training courses cost quite a bit of money per person.

Q: When you train in hard skills more people than you need for a particular job, do you have them on a list somewhere. So if you get a new job in from a contractor, you go down your list of people?

RC: Well, in some respects it works that way, but once we get them through, you know, one of the things we do in our messaging is we tell every individual at the point of Core, at the point of orientation, "We're not guaranteeing you a job," number one. And though our employment specialists do a phenomenal job in developing those relationships, we invest in \$7,000–8,000 of training into you. What are you going to do for you?

Because once you receive certification, there's no reason for you not to go out there and kind of wave that banner at different construction sites. You've got to mobilize yourself. So, you know, we also encourage what we call self-directed placement. And then we have other tools that are helpful for employers to connect back to us to kind of identify some resumes, and try to identify some potential candidates in that way. So it's not like we're sitting with a list. It's a hustle on both ends, you know.

Q: So you've got job placement people always calling employers?

LJ: Oh, yeah, hustling up that work every day. And then we also, at the same time, push our participants to kind of do that search on their own. And one of my employment specialists, what they do is they instruct the graduates to bring ten job orders on their own as a means of activity. But beyond the activity, that's a means of reality, because you never know what could come from that. So, you know, we put exercises in place that are helpful to them. And though they may take it as an exercise, some of it has come to fruition, right? Some people have really walked away with jobs. So, you know, you have to put in all kinds of strategies, but you also have to also send a message that: (a) this is still a difficult economy, (b) that, again, let me press the point that there's no guarantee, okay? You know, someone asked me, "How much effort are you going to put into this?" I say, "50%. How much are you putting in? The other 50, right?" So there's 100%.

Q: Throughout this, they're not paying anything, the trainees?

LJ: Absolutely not.

Q: It's covered by you?

RC: And we give them stipends and food money. You can't learn if you're hungry.

Q: Besides green construction, which we've been talking about, on your website you mention other training areas, like medical billing and technician jobs, office operations. Are those at the moment tougher to find, or does it just depend on the graduate?

LJ: You know, when you look at office operations, that's an area that actually can overlap into any phase of business, right? Because you're talking about computers. In our office operations, the goal is to get people Microsoft certified. That certification, pretty much connotes a person that's proficient in that area.

Q: So that goes through cycles based on the jobs that are coming through that you're then funding?

LJ: Funding's what drives all this. So, you know, throughout the course of the year you may write a number of proposals. You might want to do X, Y, a number of green construction jobs, a number of office operations. So it's kind of a mixed bag of offerings. And then, of course, what you do is you schedule out throughout the year what programs you're going to offer at what time.

Q: And how would residents of East Harlem find out about this?

LJ: We have recruitment. We flood with flyers. We have a team that goes around and we notify every nonprofit through e-mail. For example, we do have, in our medical billing, that particular program is driven by an age: 18 to 21. So other than that, most of our other programs are 18 and older. You know, it could be 45, 50, whatever. So it's kind of like certain contracts, right? In this particular case, medical billing, is through DYCD, the Department of Youth and Community Development, and they want to focus on disconnected youth. So that particular contract is focused on that particular group of individuals. Before we got the contract, though, we had to propose what it is we're going to do. So we proposed that we would do a medical billing program for that particular population.

Q: With the hard skills and medical billing, you would send them out to a Microsoft program?

LJ: Right. So we have different vendors. You know, we go with the experts that train in that particular area. You know, we're not a hard skill training module component. But, for example, for the Microsoft Office, right, we go to the expert committed to computers to come in and train our folks.

Q: And you pay them?

LJ: Right, we pay them. We subcontract. For IT, we may go to Per Scholas to train individuals in A+. For green construction, we use Ando, Solar One. So, again, for each of those programs we may use different providers.

Q: We keep hearing that tourism is off the charts in New York in recent years. Do you get much in the way of job notices for hotel workers?

RC: Right, That's customer service. Well, with ex-offenders, they'll say, "Oh, no, we don't..." You know? They want a polished person. I mean, only, say, half of our people are formerly incarcerated, but the other ones have - been through some hard times.

LJ: Look, the reality of it is this. We've done hospitality training in the past. We've had some success. All those things are really driven by the climate in the market. And as long as it is an employer's market, they've got the opportunity to choose from people with master's degrees to come in and do customer service versus someone who's a little behind the eight ball. Rob says it eloquently all the time: "The guy you're competing against could have 15 years of experience." So how does that really weigh in for the employer? The employer's going to really look at two things, right, and they use this strategically. If a gentleman like Danny comes in with all this experience and the employer says: "You know, Danny, you've got a lot of experience for this customer service. You really going to stick around? I'll put you to the side because you're overqualified." So when employers want to use that, they're going to use it.

Q: I saw on your bulletin board here you've got a newspaper article saying essentially: "Look, if you've done your time as an ex-offender, you shouldn't have to be punished for that in the job market." Now, would STRIVE ever recommend that people not tell employers, "Yes, I'm an ex-offender?"

RC: Well, they have to, because what happens is, if you fill out "no," you could turn out to be a dynamite employee. But if it comes out two years later, they have to fire you because you lied on your application.

LJ: And in most companies, at the end of your application, they say: "Do you attest to all the information being true and real?" That's a contract. So the first time they find a discrepancy in that information...

RC: Not what the city is thinking of doing. We've been working very closely with the current administration, and what it's thinking of doing is not having that question on the initial application, right, whether you've been convicted or not.

Q: For city jobs?

RC: No, I think they want the private sector to move in this direction, where that's not even there. So then, say, the four of us apply, and none of us put down that we're an ex-offender because they didn't ask. When they whittle down the pool of 50 to us four and they think we're the guys that they want, then they will say, "Do you have a criminal history?" But now they've seen you've got all this other stuff, and we think, and the administration thinks, by that time they'll be more disposed to say, "Okay, I'll give you a shot now because you've been vetted."

LJ: Right, but I think government - whether city government, state, federal, what have you - has a tendency to ask the private sector to do some things that they won't do themselves. So, if I'm in the private sector, I'm saying to you, "Okay, what's your hiring policies?" Government needs to institute some policies so the private sector can follow.

Because it's one thing to encourage and try to push and try to set up other ways for the private sector to do certain things that you won't. When you talk about public-private partnerships, it never comes to fruition. When you talk about the private sector really being open to hiring ex-offenders, they'll use certain language, you know, that "We're an equal-opportunity employer." But when you get down to the nitty-gritty and then you do some analysis to see how many ex-offenders you really hired, then you tell me what that number is, and you tell me if you're really honoring what you say you're honoring. Because I'm sure that there's been some ex-offenders that sat in front of you that surely were impressive, that surely you felt qualified to do the job. But for whatever reason, though you're an equal-opportunity employer, why you may only have 1% of ex-offender hires.

So there's a disconnect, and if we don't start addressing those things, this whole idea around hiring ex-offenders and all those people with issues and barriers is never going to change. So it's good rhetoric, it's good talk, but, you know, until you build out some stats and show me what the real percentage of hires are, we can't really start having those conversations.

Q: You went to the White House Forum on Jobs in 2009. Did you feel that STRIVE's voice was being heard by people there?

RC: It was heard by the Secretary of Labor, Hilda Solis, and the woman that runs the Domestic Policy Council, Melody Barnes. They were the panel leaders in my panel. And I make it a point if I'm in a meeting that you're going to make sure you know that STRIVE was in the house. What's that saying? "The squeaky wheel gets the grease."

Q: Well, that was at the end of 2009, and a lot's been happening since then. You were recently quoted by the Huffington Post about the administration's job policies:

"The unemployed and those struggling to get an economic foothold, particularly black and Latin men, haven't so much lost their love for Obama, but it's waning. People are more concerned with their realities, the day-to-day living. We still want to defend the President, but most people don't care about the politics. They care about how they're surviving. People are very upset about the feeling that we're being asked to sacrifice while the wealthy are being held harmless on this."

Q: Can you expand on that a bit? What should the President have done? What do you think the government should be doing that hasn't been done yet to would help ordinary people?

RC: Okay, let me start with this. Here's where I think he blew it, and it's probably unrelated, but it's germane. Remember when he did his first State of the Union and that guy yelled out, "You lie!" Had I been him, I would have not lost my cool. I would have stopped my speech. I would have looked around the room and said, "Who said that?" And they would say, "That guy right there." And I would have said, "Sergeant at arms, escort him out of here." And then I would have quietly said, "I know I'm new, but you will respect the office," and went on with my speech. That was a different paradigm, right?

I think that Obama's disposition is one that's, say, non-confrontational, and of community organizing, where you get people around and you empower other people to come up with the ideas, and then you kind of patch them up. That's what community organizers do. That's not the paradigm for leadership that is effective right now.

I also think when they were holding him hostage on the tax cuts, that he should have said, "You know what? I'm going down with it. You want to shut the government down, then do it. But I'm going to the American people and say: 'Did that because he wants to protect millionaires.'" You know? And if you look at it, I mean, to me it's always been the mantra on the right that protects the wealthy. But I don't think I've ever seen it this blatant, you know? It is just blatant, like "We are going out of our way to make sure that the wealthy do not have to sacrifice."

Hell, I live in Jersey, and you heard about the rates going up on the bridges, in fact, this month. So there's another way that people don't realize that not paying taxes. Even as a middle-class person I tell people this, "Would you rather pay taxes or have your taxes raised?" No, I'd say I'd rather have my taxes raised, because if I don't it's going to cost me more by raising the bridges and the tunnels and the this and the that, right? Because these infrastructures need moneys to continue to exist or be rehabbed or whatever.

The notion that giving tax cuts to the wealthy trickles down, develops jobs, is a notion that's been discredited over and over. And those that choose to hold onto it are willfully, willfully just blowing it off. Look, we are all entitled to our own opinions. We are not entitled to our own facts, right? And the challenge, I think, for the President is that he's allowed the right to set the table of discussion. And, you know, one thing about America – and this is my criticism of the left, and I'm a lefty -- but lefties always feel like, "If I can just give enough reasonable facts, people listen." And I'm like, "No, that ain't what gets it." You know? It's hollering and screaming and acting crazy and getting people's attention, and then you explain stuff. If you look at the right, the things that they say are just outrageous. But if you say something outrageous long enough without it being refuted, it takes on the aura of truth, you know? And I think that the President has not been vociferous enough in saying, "You're crazy, and what you're saying absolutely makes no sense."

The other thing that I think is hard for the President to articulate but that other people should, is that most of what he's going through is because he's black. There's still an element in this country that can't wrap their heads around the fact that this young black guy is the CEO of the world. Come on, he even tried to give a tax cut the other day and the right said no. Now, even well-intended white folks say, "Well, no. Look, they beat up on Clinton a little bit." No, this is a whole lot different, and the bottom line here is because he's black. Which is why I think the Administration feels hamstrung in doing an initiative that has "black" on it. Right? You know, because then they'll say, "There he goes. He's doing something for just black folk." But I think he needs to stand up and say, "No, I'm everybody's President. But this particular demographic is in crisis, and here are the numbers."

For those of us, like Larry and I, on the front lines, we see the disinvestments. But we also see the positive changes that the kids and the people we work with do, which belie the rhetoric that one hears in the papers or downtown. Like, for instance, there's a young kid sitting at the front desk right now that's adopted us. This kid came, not a high school diploma, knucklehead, pants down to here. But he's a smart kid, right, and we worked with him. We got him his GED. The next thing we'll do, we're going to make sure he goes to community college. And we have so many stories like that.

And this notion that we as a society can keep disinvesting in education and youth is just so shortsighted. You know? One thing we know, no matter how you slice it, the kids are the future. That's a given, right? If we disinvest in them, we're shortchanging our future.

Here's another thing that I think has happened, and it's very emotional for me. When I was a drug addict as a kid, and this was in the '60s, there was still a notion that I had and my peers had that

society's really okay, and I'm screwing up. But if I straighten up, I can make a road for myself in society. You know, with the Vietnam era, et cetera. If something happened in 'Nam, you heard about it like maybe a week or two later.

Now you have a phenomenon where you have instantaneous information. If something happens in Libya, you hear about it in five minutes. That's the first thing. Secondly, even if you are reading at the third- to fifth-grade level, you can still digest the Post and the Daily News. No matter how poor you may be, you have access -- somebody in your family got cable, right? You're seeing CNN or Fox or whatever?

And I think one of the things that's gone wrong in society is that all those institutions that we used to rely on, to think worked, all of a sudden as a society we're saying: "Uh-oh, that don't work no more." We're just saying society could do the Marshall Plan and rebuild Europe, and we can't rebuild a lousy city in the South? Really? When did that happen? Right? When did we lose the ability to remake Germany on a much smaller scale? Right? And I think what things like Katrina, things like that do, have done, is give the American population in general, white, black, whatever, this sense that institutions no longer work.

Now, where that's particularly devastating for young people is that, when we say, that kids are disconnected, it may in fact be a rational choice on the part of these kids who say: "It's safer for me to stay on my stoop in the tenement with a joint in my mouth, because if I go out there, it's dangerous for me. So I'll just stay away, because the institutions out there that used to maybe could help me no longer work." So this puts more of a burden on organizations in the helping profession, like STRIVE. The kids now have to go to an agency, and all they need to trust is one person. And they trust Larry Jackson or Danny Gonzalez or Rob Carmona, right? They'll trust me long enough to give them the service, the bona fides, the oomph, right, to then do it on their own down the road. But now people can no longer trust in institutions, so what we have left, we've got to get these people to trust in the people that work in these programs more so than ever before.

Q: So it requires you to make more outreach to those kids?

RC: These kids need to see somebody that looks like them running things in their community, so they can say. There's a built-in role modeling function to what we do, right, that's intangible and cannot be replicated.

And this is the other thing I would say. One of the biggest mistakes the helping profession has made -- and I understand why we did it -- is let people from the hedge fund community come into our world of work with their "metrics." Now, I understand why nonprofits did it, because we're struggling for money. They need the money. So you have these hedge funds being lauded by nonprofits, when privately they're saying to themselves, "This guy's really an idiot, but I need his money." That's the biggest

mistake we've made, right? And it's a mistake that I totally understand. But as long as this society equates making money with being smart, right, it's going -- it doesn't necessarily help those individuals we purport to want to serve, because behind those metrics, there's a lot of things about working with human beings that, I'm sorry, can't be measured. They're intangible and they're not subject to being interpreted through metrics.

One other thing that's happened because of this emphasis on metrics, it's forced nonprofits to start creaming and going after clientele that they know that they can be successful with. You know? We had explored a merger here between STRIVE and this nonprofit in the Bronx called Per Scholas, which I happen to be a founding board member of. Per Scholas does training. We use them. They do training in IT, A+ and the like.

What had happened was a random assignment research project was done on Per Scholas by Public-Private Ventures, and some of the cohorts that they looked at were STRIVE cohorts -- you know, people that went through our attitudinal and then were trained up on the IT stuff by Per Scholas. One of these cohorts, Greg, was a cohort of ex-offenders -- people that did five, ten, 15, 20 years in the joint. What the random assignment found with this group is that they did better than less challenged cohorts, one, because they went through the attitudinal and they got it; two, because they were ex-offenders and they had done enough time and they had enough research with the criminal justice system to say, "I ain't going back there." Right? And they were hungry to do something that could possibly get them a living wage. And that cohort actually did very well on the placement side.

Q: I was looking at the board members on STRIVE's website. It seems pretty heavy on corporate and legal, with no labor on there, no academia. Or am I wrong?

RC: No, not totally. We used to have labor and academia on the board represented by this guy named Fred Dunn who teaches at CUNY. He was one of the founders of CWE and director of a union education. We're in the process of revamping our board here. I think our bylaws call for up to 20 or 25, and we're at 11 now. So we're trying to reconstitute, bring in some new blood on the board. Now, the challenge is that we brought in a couple of individuals that were very well-heeled, right? And we're hoping that they will bring in some of their well-heeled brethren to the board, because the challenge for all nonprofits right now is funding. My belief is that things are so bad that good relief for nonprofits in the short to medium term, now, is going to be wealthy individuals, and those that can attract them to the board will survive this.

The right has this stupid notion, "Charity should really be private." Yeah, well, give me a break. When we're talking about the levels of challenge in this country, those are challenges that represent billions that are needed to relieve it. I don't care how generous an individual or a foundation wants to be, they're still talking millions. These problems are billion-dollar problems.

I mean, you look at guys like Bloomberg, right, and you say he's committed to giving this money away and there's a few of them like that. And I could look at him and say at least the guy's got a company and a product, right? So I ain't mad at him. But what are these Wall Street guys doing besides moving money around? What's the value added? I wasn't pissed off when they bailed out the car industry. Why? Because at the end of their process there was something I could touch. America's challenge is not a financial challenge. There's plenty of money in this country to go around. Our challenge is a moral one: we've got to figure out what kind of society we want to be. All those people on the right that profess to be Christian, really? I'm sorry, but the Jesus Christ I grew up with, if he came down to earth now, he'd be living in -- maybe not even Harlem because it's gentrified. He'd be living in Flint, Michigan. You judge a society by how it treats its poor and its weak, not on how it protects its wealthy

Q: At a time like this when the needs of the disadvantaged are even greater, do you have more people coming to STRIVE who want to take your courses?

RC: Yeah, yeah. At the same time, that you're getting cut financially, our services -- and this is not just STRIVE -- are even more relevant. And the services have gotten more experience, because to get people to living-wage jobs, we have to give them that skill training piece, which is more expensive for us, because we've got to give them stipends and car fare and the like. We have a clothing closet to dress people up if they don't have the clothes. We have a food pantry for them if they're hungry. You know, here's a cup of soup, that kind of thing.

And then there's another challenge, particularly for women. We did a training with Per Scholas, and this one was going to be all women. A lot of them lived in shelters. They had been battered, this and that, all the challenges that come with that. They were doing great. In the meanwhile, there was a subsidiary of Dell that had to hire lots of techs. It just so happened they had hired quite a few young adults between 18 and 24 that were a product of STRIVE and they loved them. So they said to us on the women's cohort, "Wow, these are great. Whatever woman passes muster, we'll hire her, \$35K plus benefits." So we're like, "Wow, this is great." There were 28 women. But what we started seeing is towards the end of the course, the women started sabotaging themselves, because the fear they had was, "Wow, if I get this job, I'll leave the shelter system. I'll be on my own with my children. What if I get fired?"

So as tough as living in a shelter is or being on public assistance, at least you know it's consistent and that you always got Medicaid. One of the programs that we have here (whenever we get money for it) is called For Women Only. It's a program discretely designed for women and the challenges that they face going into the world of work. We have a female social worker meet with the women clients one on one and in a group fashion, doing that supportive stuff they

need. These fears would have been addressed during the cycle had we had For Women Only active at that time.

About 15, 20 years ago, NYU's Graduate School of Public Policy did a research piece on STRIVE, and that's when we were preponderantly serving women. This is when we just were doing solely attitudinal training. At the end of the training, men had a much faster rate of placement for a couple of reasons. One of the obvious ones, men didn't have childcare issues. That was the biggie. The second one, though, was more insidious. Men did not face the esteem issues that women face. The analogy they used is, if you give a man on the ball, spot-on criticism, and he doesn't want to hear it, he blows you off. He doesn't even think about it. A woman, on the other hand, you could give a criticism that's off the wall, she'll actually take a moment to think about it and say, "Is that really true?" It attacks their self-esteem. You've heard the old adage: a man could lay in the gutter for ten years, wake up, take a shower and shave, put on a new suit and demand respect. Women can't do that.

And that was actually the advent of us developing a full social service department here, because when they saw that men were being placed quicker and women had these issues, they said, "We need to hire a female MSW to work with the women one on one and in groups to deal with those esteem issues that women face." And we saw, when we did that, our placement and rotation rates for the women rise.

Q: About when did the For Women Only program start?

RC: They did their thing, I think, between '91 and '93, and whenever we could raise money to engage as a consultant a female social worker to come in and work with this four-cycle, you know. And we eventually just developed a social service case management approach, where you have case managers that develop relationships with counseling programs, and they'll send Brandy over there to get counseling and this or that, you know, to really deal with those challenges that women face.

Q: So it's not part of the Core Program here?

RC: It is. It is in that at some point in the four weeks we take the women out and have discrete groups, which then left us with a room full of men, which segued into the fatherhood programs and all that stuff. I will tell you, some of it was organic, you know, that we weren't thinking, but when we did one thing we saw we had this and said, "Well, what the hell?" Like that.

Q: At the moment, with all this increased need, you have a smaller staff than years back, so about how many students can you put through the New York program each year?

RC: Over a thousand. Sometimes it's more, because sometimes we'll have two cycles operating at the same time. You might have a green in one room and a medical billing in another. But we shoot for about 350 graduates, or skill training, a year.

Q: And this is the only site in New York City?

RC: This is the only STRIVE site here, but there are a lot of agencies in the city that still use the STRIVE model from before, when they were part of STRIVE employment groups, like St. Nick in Brooklyn, Stanley Isaacs down in 93rd Street. They still do the four-week -- a lot of them still do the four-week attitudinal. And then you've got a lot of knockoffs around town where people that have been using the STRIVE approach. You know, you hear people come up from prison, "Yeah, we did this." Or people from all over the country say, "Yeah, we use the STRIVE approach." Like we're a case study at the DeVry School and Harvard and Duke. And we're the go-to guys for media. We'll be on BBC tomorrow

morning, last week CBS was here. And my thing is, yeah, we're the go-to guys with the media. I just wish we could also be the go-to guys for the money!

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