

TEDx Goes To Prison in One of a Kind Event



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Featured Yahoo Contributor

June 6, 2014

Last month, Sir Richard Branson spent time in prison. Branson wasn't locked up for some crime he'd committed - he spent a few hours behind bars voluntarily. The billionaire founder of the Virgin Group was at Ironwood State Prison in Blythe, California, to talk to inmates about second chances.

Branson revealed that as a youth he'd once spent a day in "prison," for failing to pay taxes. His parents were able to bail him out by mortgaging their house, but the experience has clearly stayed with the mogul. He's now an advocate for hiring former offenders, saying that they deserve a chance to stand on their own two feet and the ability to look forward.

Sponsored by the nonprofit Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) and the Ford Foundation, Branson was part of the first ever TEDx conference held inside a state penitentiary, with hundreds in attendance – inmates and regular citizens alike.

Founded in 2013 by Hollywood producer Scott Budnick ("The Hangover" trilogy), the ARC is an organization of very high-achieving, formerly-incarcerated young adults who work to support one another with the ultimate goal of stopping the flow of men and women into the criminal justice system.

Along with Branson, the event featured musicians, activists, community leaders and inmates taking the elaborate stage, complete with video screens and dramatic lighting, built in the prison gymnasium, to talk about the theme of the day: Infinite Possibilities.

Ironwood houses 2,200 inmates, many of whom are serving lengthy sentences garnered under California's three-strikes system in which even low-level felonies, such as writing a bad check, can garner a strike that counts toward the mandatory 25 years-to-life sentence issued once the third strike is earned.

Without prompting, most of the men offered up the current length of their incarceration quickly -- 19 years, 25 years, 37 years. Many of them weren't close to getting out, or were going to remain at Ironwood for the rest of their days. While they were liberal with the information about their length of stay, the majority were not anxious to give details about what led to their time at the prison.

What they most wanted to talk about was what they were learning in prison. Ironwood has the largest prison education program in California in which men are transcribing textbooks and various publications into Braille, learning trade skills and where more than 1200 students have earned college degrees.

Because of these programs, Ironwood has also become a beacon of hope for young offenders incarcerated in an adult prison for the first time. Here, by taking part in the educational programs, they avoid the typical prison experience of drugs and violence.

Joseph, 22, who had entered Ironwood at age 17 and was five years into his 15-year sentence said, "I thought I would just come here and serve out my time, but now I'm focused on getting an education so that when I get out I can make a fresh start. I don't think I would be able to do that if I didn't learn anything during my time here. The key to a new life is education and I know that now."

Eligible for parole in two years, inmate Mark, 43, says he's ready for life on the outside because of the skills he's gathered while serving his sentence. "I've learned how to translate text into braille and there is a definite need for that type of expertise. I never thought I'd be able to say that I was an expert at something like this, but I am and I will use that to make a life for myself. I learned that here. That's pretty amazing if you think about it."

While Ramon, 56, may be incarcerated at Ironwood for life, he's still found what he refers to as his purpose within the prison. "I may not be getting out, but there are plenty of guys who are. I've seen guys leave and come back because they did the same dumb things they did to get here in the first place. But, I'm seeing less of that in the past few years because everyone here is working as a team to help the ones who are getting paroled to start off right and stay right when they get out.

I got my degree and now I help other guys study and stuff like that. I'm part of the team and that's important to me."

Budnick explained that these types of declarations are exactly why the TEDx event was held. "We did this to bring hope and inspiration to the inmates, to highlight the incredible rehabilitative and college programs at Ironwood Prison, and to show the infinite possibilities in the lives of prisoners if both they and caring, moral members of society invest and believe in their success and transformation."

The community leaders who participated in this TEDx event, say that the programs at Ironwood should be held up as a model of success to other institutions, having created a culture centered around education, transformation and personal responsibility. Many hope that this format will lead to a "new normal" within the overall prison structure, one focused on creating an environment that promotes positive growth and that will effectively redefine incarceration and prisoner release.

"The goal is for this to happen all over the country," says Budnick. "What's happening at Ironwood is just a small example of what's possible. Now we have to make it a reality everywhere."