## Helping Inmates Land on Stronger Financial Footing After Prison

By Royce Monk

n Music Row in Nashville,
Tenn., you frequently hear
someone say, "It all begins with
a song." Since financial planners strive for
accuracy, we would say, "It all begins with
the idea for a song." Four years ago, I had an
idea for a song involving financial planners
and—we're talking country music here—
prison inmates.

During a lunch break on Music Row, I read a *Wall Street Journal* article about Martha Stewart's prison stay. It made me wonder how less well-off prisoners manage their transition to post-prison lives. Could their lives be improved by a basic understanding of money management?

Our firm's office manager searched for a place that would see the value of this idea and found the Davidson County Offender Re-Entry Center, which prepares prisoners for release. Three volunteers from our Middle Tennessee chapter fleshed out this idea, identifying the FDIC Money Smart adult financial education curriculum as a solution. Then came the orientation and background checks for volunteers to be allowed into the Re-Entry Center. It took stamina, after a day at the office, to make the weekly trips to the center and be prepared to teach with enthusiasm.

The rewards came quickly as we saw participants respond to their newly found knowledge. They came in the form of a simple thank you, a question about their personal situation or, as one young man asked, "Can't you give me something to show the judge next Tuesday that I am trying to do better?" That's when we started giving computer-printed certificates at the end of each cycle of classes, filling in their names and the number of classes

they have completed.

Additional proof of the classes' worth appeared last year. Since many inmates are released before they complete our eight-week cycle, we began encouraging them to return and complete the courses. One young mother did just that, driving 20 miles round trip for the last two weekly meetings to finish the cycle, receive her certificate, as well as FPA's



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The Encyclopedia of Financial Planning.

Another touching incident occurred while I instructed a group of about 45 male inmates. As they reviewed the material, I noticed one young fellow talking to a much older man as they looked at the

handout together. I walked towards them thinking they were short a copy but soon realized that the young man was reading it because the older gentleman could not.

Our chapter currently has seven volunteers working at the Re-Entry Center. Several hundred inmates have passed through the program attending one or more sessions, and nearly three dozen have completed the eight-week series.

The program has been so successful that the county wants it to expand. Starting this year, volunteers will also work with inmates in prison prior to their transition to the Re-Entry Center. These inmates have at least eight weeks left on their term, guaranteeing they will attend the full series.

Each group taught us something we could use to improve the program. The fallout has been minimal and the rewards are many. While challenging at times, we were able to keep going, helped by the joy of knowing that we have individual gifts that enable us to show the way to financial literacy and change lives.



Royce Monk was pro bono director of the FPA of Middle Tennessee from 2005-2007. She received a Heart of Financial Planning service award last year for her work.

For additional details about this chapter's work with inmates, e-mail FPAprobono@FPAnet.org