

Incarcerated, Yet Free

BY STEPHANIE BYRD

MARIO GANGI, LIFE SKILLS PARTICIPANT

MARIO GANGI began his involvement with the StepUP program when he came through the Jubilee Jobs Orientation in April 2006. Shortly afterward, Mario secured employment at Yardnique Landscaping in Morrisville. He then became a part of the Life Skills program in June.

WHAT MAKES MARIO just a little more unique than the other Life Skills participants is that Mario is fully involved in StepUP while still serving a prison sentence.

In spite of his distinctive circumstances, "Mario is setting a magnificent example of what a Life Skills participant should be," says Gina Lipscomb. Her sentiments are matched by StepUP staff members and Mario's volunteer co-partner, Jim Kellenberger. They all agree that Mario is an exceptionally hard worker and a great participant. "Dude is on fire!" Jim writes playfully in Mario's budgeting notebook.

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Mario Gangi (left) and his co-partner, Jim Kellenberger, look over Mario's weekly budget.

"POTENTIAL IS NOTHING . . ."

BY STEPHANIE BYRD

PHASE TWO TAKES OFF WITH PERSONAL CHANGE



"Potential is nothing. Performance is everything." This famous quote from Dallas Cowboys coach Bill Parcells has become the motto of the Phase II personal change class lead by Robert Battle, Job Counselor for StepUP's Jubilee Jobs program.

The road to personal change begins on the very first day with a self-assessment. Along with handing out a syllabus for the 5-week course, the class begins answering questions on the first page of a personal change plan handout. As the students start filling in the answers to questions such as "What do I want?" and "What must be done?" it is quickly apparent that these questions are not as easy as previously thought – pensive and even frustrated faces glance up as Robert guides them through the worksheet.

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SELF DISCOVERY THROUGH ART

BY STEPHANIE BYRD AND GRACE EVANS



Art therapy uses the creative process of art-making to improve and enhance the physical, mental and emotional well-being of individuals of all ages. It helps people to resolve conflicts and problems, develop interpersonal skills, manage behavior, reduce stress, increase self-esteem and self-awareness, and achieve insight.

—AMERICAN ART THERAPY ASSOCIATION

WITH THIS CONCEPT IN MIND, ON SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, Grace Evans led a group of 16 Life Skills participants in a workshop based upon art therapy. The goal of the exercise was to allow the individuals to explore their self-image in a way that would help them gain a deeper understanding of themselves. The “canvases” for the activity were large white pizza boxes. The “paint” was a wide variety of collage materials such as magazines, fabric, feathers, silk flowers, ribbon, and bandages.

Participants browsed through several tables of “paint” for their “canvasses.”

The participants were told the exterior of the box was to represent their outer lives: how they believed others perceived them as well as how they physically saw themselves. Conversely, the inside was to serve as a representation of the inner lives: how they felt about their spiritual and emotional lives and/or anything else that they may have rarely expressed.

At first, the participants were baffled (and even apprehensive) by the tables of “junk,” the stack of empty pizza boxes, and the task at hand. However, after a short

meditation to help them to become more self-aware, they slowly began to translate who they were into bits and pieces of what would otherwise be considered trash or everyday objects.

What emerged from the activity was surprising. Most people began gaining clarity about themselves as they searched for the perfect objects to tell their story. For example, sandpaper, representing the rough parts of an individual’s life was adhered to the box using Band-Aids. The Band-Aids represented the healing taking place in that life.

After completing the activity, the participants shared their creations one-on-one with a staff member, with each other, or the group as a whole. This part of the process was an equally important time. By sharing, individuals were able to articulate and confirm how they saw their lives. It was a special time filled with tears, laughter and valuable quiet moments of shared understanding.

“By declaring the journey we are on and sharing the joy or pain through visual art,” Grace Evans explained, “we all gained a deeper understanding of ourselves and others.”



SPOTLIGHT ON:

BY STEPHANIE BYRD

JANE MITCHELL, CHILDREN'S COMMITTEE CHAIR

ORIGINALLY FROM HIGH POINT, NC, JANE MITCHELL graduated from the University of Richmond in 2000 with a major in Spanish and a minor in Art. After spending two years in DC, Jane returned to North Carolina and began working for Meredith College. She became acquainted with StepUP as a member of West Raleigh Presbyterian Church in 2003.

Working with children has always been a calling for Jane. Having volunteered with children through her high school years and teaching ESL during her college years, Jane brings years of experience, compassion and fun to the children of StepUP Ministry. "I get my energy from working with children," she says.

As chairperson of the Children's Committee, Jane sees first hand how important volunteer support is. "The most rewarding thing," Jane says, "is seeing the children make



In addition to her work in Alumnae Relations at Meredith College and volunteering at StepUP, Jane also tutors English for the Spanish speaking workers at Meredith College.

it onto a new team, or seeing their report cards, or just seeing them feel more proud of themselves." By the same token, when the family graduates from the program, she explains that it is bittersweet, "You get really attached sometimes, and you're so happy to see that the family has done well, but at the same time you really are going to miss them when they leave!"

Jane says she's not only thrilled, but honored to be making a difference in the lives of children, and intends to do so with StepUP for the foreseeable future. "One [Tuesday] night, one of the older kids that came to StepUP from a rough place said the prayer, and said 'thank

you so much for these volunteers and for them giving the time.' It's really touching to see some of these kids that have gone through so much be so thankful and to know that you've made a difference; it's moving."

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Mario attributes much of his success to the help he receives from Jim. As they set new goals together for the week, Mario was not shy about turning to Jim and saying "I know how hard you work for me. And I want you to know it's not going unappreciated."

Jim and Mario also work together on Mario's plan for his release from prison: "The last thing I'm going to let you do is [get out of prison] and hang out with some of the same boneheads you were tangled up with before," Jim says. "Don't set yourself up for failure."

In the last six months Mario has found a new sense of self-confidence, pride and strength. "My commitment to this program has been the greatest achievement of my life so far," he says. "It's shown me that I have the ability to follow through and keep a commitment."

Mario continues work at Yardnique Landscaping and is scheduled to be released from prison in February 2007.

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"This class is a reality check. Don't sugarcoat anything. This is an intense class, but it is a fun class; remember this is all about you," he says. "Success means different things to different people, but failure feels the same to everyone. What is success for you?"

"Dag," one participant sighs under her breath, "I've got a whole lot of work to do."

"You and me both!" another participant says encouragingly.

The six week course is intense. It includes the development of a personal change plan, clear and measurable goals, peer assessment, plan of action, and self-evaluation.

As the class prepares to depart, many students are noticeably enlightened by their self-discoveries but a few look frustrated. Robert encourages them all to look forward: "Accept who and where you are right now, and build off of that. Translate your potential into performance."

StepUP Ministry is an interfaith community that prepares people who are ready and willing to make positive changes in their lives to become self-sufficient.

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