

Prison ministry founder learned from experience

Carl Carlson prepares others like him for life in real world

By SHEILA BURKE

Staff Writer

Abandoned by his parents and shuffled from one foster home to another, Carl Carlson ended up where the statistics said he would: prison.

But the Nashvillian defied the odds by leaving prison and using his experiences, and the faith he gained in the penitentiary, to help others like him.

He is the founder of Men of Valor, a prison ministry organization that helps turn around the lives of inmates through faith, mentoring and discipline.

Since its beginning in 1998, Men of Valor has attracted some unlikely supporters.

“Carl was the one that convinced me that this works,” said Verna Wyatt, of the victims’ rights group You Have the Power. “In my opinion, what Carl is doing is going to reduce victims.”

Carlson was sentenced to 15 years of prison on an armed robbery charge, after serving his country in Vietnam. He found God when he went to the penitentiary. He had nothing when he got out.

“When I got out of prison, I didn’t have a nickel – no support, no help, no anything,” Carlson said.

Carlson, however, was able to get an education, earning a master’s degree in guidance and counseling.

He started Men of Valor with an idea and a skeleton crew. Now he has 100 mentors in the community and offices at the Corrections Corporation of America prison in Nashville.

Men of Valor meets with prisoners at CCA five days a week, preparing them for life on the outside. A mentor meets with the prisoner once a week. Once the men get out of prison, the organization helps to get them money, jobs and teaches life skills and accountability.

Why did you start Men of Valor?

“My idea was to go into the prison and help men grow closer to God, but then the key was to give them the support that they need when they get out. You have no idea what a man faces. No wonder 70 percent of them go back.”

How did you find the mentors?

“We recruit. We have a breakfast once a year. That’s a big deal for us. We recruit them there, at churches, by word of mouth. “

Do you have to raise money?

“I’ve got a staff I’ve got to pay. As committed as they are to the Lord they still have to feed their families. I have to raise the money. We get no government money whatsoever.”

How did you start Men of Valor?

“A bunch of men who believed in me. I just said, ‘Hey, I’m going to do this thing; I need your help.’”

What helps these men change their lives?

“It’s very structured. This isn’t just going into the prison and sitting down and telling them about Jesus. It’s a very highly structured program and obviously Jesus is the foundation of it.”