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# HENRICO CITIZEN

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## *Inmates on the Mend*

**By Tom Lappas**

Though the far-off sparkle in his eyes and gentle smile on his face would convince you otherwise, Elijah spends his days in a place that most people would consider hell.

And it's the best thing that ever happened to him.

Elijah is an inmate at Henrico County's Jail East facility in New Kent County, and he's one of about 100 men and women who spend 14 hours a day attempting to regain in life what alcohol and drug abuse took away.

The inmates are part of a unique program instituted at the jail about two years ago under Henrico Sheriff Mike Wade that uses a combination of efforts to address and conquer substance abuse problems.

The price of addiction never seemed higher than it does in the presence of these inmates. Like Elijah, each has a story of the pain and lost freedom that their abuse problems created. But after participating in Alcoholics Anonymous, Back to Basics and Houses of Healing programs at the jail, most also share the hope that is evident in his strong and deliberate voice.

"This is a simple program," he said last month. "It truly is that. The complicated part was my thinking. Our

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Tom Lappas/Henrico Citizen

**STRENGTH IN NUMBERS:** Ninety-six-year-old James Houck discusses his 67 years of sobriety with inmates who are recovering drug and alcohol addicts at Henrico's Jail East during his June 27 visit to the complex.



# Inmates on the Mend

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thinking is what got us in here in the first place, so you've got to be insane to think that you can do the same thing to get yourself out."

## Starting Simple

Some might have argued several years ago that implementation of a comprehensive program to rehabilitate prisoners was equally insane. Public perception of jail life is not flattering, but Wade saw the potential at Jail East – a still sparkling facility that opened in 1996 – to develop something lasting.

He credited volunteer John Mayo, a recovered alcoholic who works regularly with inmates, with helping to give life to the rehabilitation program.

"We started off simple and built to this," Wade said of the program, for which inmates can volunteer. "I don't think we had any idea we'd be at this level when we started two years ago."

But here they are. Visitors who may be skeptical about how genuine these inmates feel about the program need only sit and listen to their stories. A dozen spilled their fears, worries and admissions to a roomful of fellow inmates and guests during a visit from 96-year-old James Houck, the last original member of the Oxford Group, which spawned AA. None seemed ashamed to tell their stories.

"I realize that I'm a very irresponsi-

ble father to my son," one inmate said. "I despise the things I've done in the past. I want to change them. [After participating in the program], I don't read the 12 steps now, I am the 12 steps."

Houck has been sober for 67 years. He travels the country to speak about the Back to Basics program, which seeks to reverse a recent downward trend of success for AA members by using a more broad-based recovery approach. He told inmates that strong faith would allow them to overcome their problems and lead productive lives.

In order to accomplish their own goals – and more importantly, create a far-reaching impact on other lives – they must live according to the four principles of Christ: absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love, he said.

"There are plenty of ways to be a good person," Houck said, "but the problem is that most people end up being good for nothing. You don't change people by telling them how good you are. The good person just ends up sitting in a church pew being a good person. But our program is a multiplying force."

"This thing's about more than staying sober. It gives you a chance to be part of a new world, a new society."

A key component of the rehabilitation efforts at Jail East is group interaction, said Henrico Mental Health official

Morgan Moss, who works with inmates daily. All group sessions are conducted with inmates sitting in circles. That fosters more direct discussion and honesty and helps to resolve conflict, he said. In fact, since the program began, there has not been a reported case of drugs, alcohol or violence.

"That's unheard of," Moss said. "In here, they're in a healing environment."

## 'Experience, Courage, Hope'

Program leaders force inmates to take hard looks at themselves, their problems and what caused them. In time, "things begin to happen," Moss said.

"Experience, courage hope – that's the good you can get from hearing other people's stories," Elijah said. "We are all similar, even though we have taken different roads here. Once I feel that [similarity] in another person, I feel able to talk to someone about myself."

Jail officials have found that inmates patrol their groups internally – encouraging participation from each other and urging out those who aren't taking active steps toward recovery.

"They would say 'It's our group,'" Moss said. "They feel empowered. They like that, and they thrive."

Elijah finds strength in the spiritual message of the program. "The power of God doesn't have to be a particular denomination," he said, "just something

that is greater than me – a tree, nature, anything."

"At night, you have dreams that take you back to your past. [Program leaders] emphasize to us to meditate before we come out of the cells in the morning. When you come out of that room, you have to be ready mentally."

Experience has taught Elijah that the program is an effective means to recovery.

"I tried it my way, and it didn't work," he said. "So I had to do it the way they forced us to. And I have to give them credit."

The Houses of Healing program, for instance, forces participants to examine their lives in new ways.

"I always used to blame my troubles on drugs," Elijah said. "But the first step in Houses of Healing is 'Why did you turn to drugs?' It teaches you to deal with the things that happened before."

## The Path to Sobriety

Houck, like many before and after him, traveled his journey to sobriety grudgingly at first. As a frequent drinker, he stole money from an employer, boosted his expense totals for work to make up for unpaid hours of overtime and damaged a company vehicle while driving drunk (and then convinced an acquaintance to cover the story for him).

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# Inmates

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He didn't regret his actions until he attended a meeting of what would become the Oxford Group in Frederick, Md., on a December day in 1934.

There, he found a spiritual call that convinced him to change. Houck's new outlook on life required him to come clean to all those he had wronged in the past.

So 16 years after stealing money

from the contractor for whom he worked as a young man, Houck returned to describe his theft to the man, who was more shocked by Houck's honesty than by his crime.

Houck's action convinced the man to have an honest discussion with his wife about their failing marriage — one that proved critical in saving the union.

That domino effect is what makes the teachings of AA, Back to Basics and similar programs so crucial, Houck said.

"It's a way of life that we can use, and it gives us the power to change people," he said.

## 'You Can Make It'

The success of the Jail East program might best be measured by the families it has helped. It is not unusual for families who might have bonded their relatives out of jail to let them stay once they've been added to the rehabilitation program, Wade said.

At other jails, "you get a lot of complaints," Wade said. "Here, you walk in and people want to shake your hand."

Elijah thinks frequently about how he will live his life when he is released from jail. He wants to stay clean. He wants to communicate, display a strong work ethic and provide for his family. He

wants to help others be productive in their lives.

These are modest goals for most. But they are monumental goals for Elijah and fellow inmates. They represent a sweeping change not only in the lifestyles of these men and women but also in their psyches. The program cuts them to their most basic human characteristics, then rebuilds them anew. And for most, it is working.

"Some people are a little reluctant [to believe they will succeed outside of jail]," Elijah said. "But you have got to tell yourself that you can make it."