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Voices from “A” Yard Submission
“Convicts Reaching Out To People

Convicts Reaching Out to People (CROP) is a youth mentoring program, which uses cognitive behavioral therapy. The purpose of the program is to share our stories with at-risk youth and help encourage better decision-making. Our program emphasizes past mistakes and how those bad decisions led to our incarceration. CROP, in turn, helps the youth learn how they can avoid making the same decisions and then helps them by positive affirmation of what they can become if they only make the right decisions. We help teach youth that they are not alone in their experiences or pressures and help provide them with the skills to positively resolve difficult life decisions. We give our messages then convey to the youth how we would have done it differently. The positive affirmations, experience, and our compassion for the youth are central themes of the experience.

The program is intense. The training is both physically and mentally exhausting and takes its toll on each member. The members are all directed to write out their life story through a thirteen-question format. This format is geared to elicit the most personal information of past traumas. Where did you go wrong? Was it family or friends? What was your catalyst or wrong decision that put you on this path to prison? This is very emotional and opens old traumas for members so they can not only share their truths but also heal old wounds. Then the members are required to memorize their life testimony. After this testimony is mastered and goes through the process of critique, then the member is allowed the privilege to share their testimony with the youth. All of those who have been involved with the program have exclaimed that this is by far the most sincere program that they have ever witnessed.

This program has changed my life. I thought I have done all the classes but this is not a class; it is a brotherhood of mending. I have been given a new level of transformation with not only my past but also my hope for a future. We were blessed to have Probation Officer White from the Concerned Black Men Program bring some of the youth back that had previously been through the CROP program. Every one of these youth got up and said thank you to us for sharing our stories with them. All of them, in their own ways, expressed gratitude: “you have helped us to make better decisions and have changed the direction of our lives”. This was the single most amazing experience of my life. I cannot put into words what that meant to me and what it has done for me. I have been given a hope for my future and for the future of our youth that has put a drive in my heart to stay actively involved in positive programming. because even us prisoners can make a difference in society and become positive role models for our youth. Imagine if you were only known for the worst thing you ever did! Then you used that ‘worst experience’ to be the positive hope for your future. These youth have not only changed my life but saved it as well, so I want to say thank you to them.