

The Patriot-News

Publication: Patriot-News, The (Harrisburg, PA)

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Date: December 14, 2007

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Course Gives Men Second Chance at Fathering

When Ken Rankin was drunk or high, he didn't care about anything else --not even his young son. Addiction led to stealing -- merchandise from Wal-Mart, his employer -- and prison. He violated his parole and spent a month on the run from Dauphin County parole officers.

"I was living very selfishly," said Rankin, of Middletown. "I was chasing my selfish lifestyle. The drugs and alcohol had control of my life." He didn't think much about the 1-year-old son he left behind in a divorce. "I didn't have anybody in my life anymore," he said.

One day Rankin had enough -- he called a crisis hotline, was arrested, went to prison for two months and applied to a rehabilitation program at the Salvation Army.

He was living in a Harrisburg house run by the Firm Foundation, a charity that helps men released from prison and rehab programs get back into society, when he learned of a special class the charity offers: It encourages fathers to reconnect with their children.

The "Proud Dads" class brings together kids and fathers who had become estranged because of prison, addiction or because they don't get along with their child's mother. Judges now order some men convicted of crimes to take the course.

In 12 sessions, fathers learn how influential they can be in their child's life, said John Thompson, the charity's services coordinator. The sessions help them deal with some of the problems that separated them from their kids, he said.

Many men who have taken the course in the three years it's been offered by Firm Foundation have passionately wanted to reconnect with their children, but they didn't know how, Thompson said. "I've had men break down and cry in class in front of other men," said Thompson, a longtime counselor. "They need encouragement; they need practical techniques." Men are taught the value of being a dad in their child's life, the effect it can have on a kid's grades and desire to stay out of trouble, Thompson said.

"Proud Dads" gave Rankin a chance to "refocus" on the importance of being a father to his son, now 5. "I want to give my son what he deserves," he said. "The class showed me the role of being a father and extra things to be closer with my son."

After taking the class in March, Rankin grew closer to his son. He calls him each night, has custody each Saturday and takes him to church every Sunday, he said. The boy stays with Rankin's former in-laws on other nights, he said.

"I have feelings now. I'm caring about other people," Rankin said. "With drugs and alcohol, caring is one of the things that goes." The class reawakened his desire to be a father to his son, Rankin said. "It's a blessing that I still have an opportunity to build a relationship with him," he said.

HOW TO HELP

Donations to the Proud Dads program and others offered by Firm Foundation can be mailed to: Firm Foundation, P.O. Box 5524, Harrisburg, PA 17110

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<http://www.firmfoundation.org/Proud-Dads-Patriot-News-2007-12-14.pdf>

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