

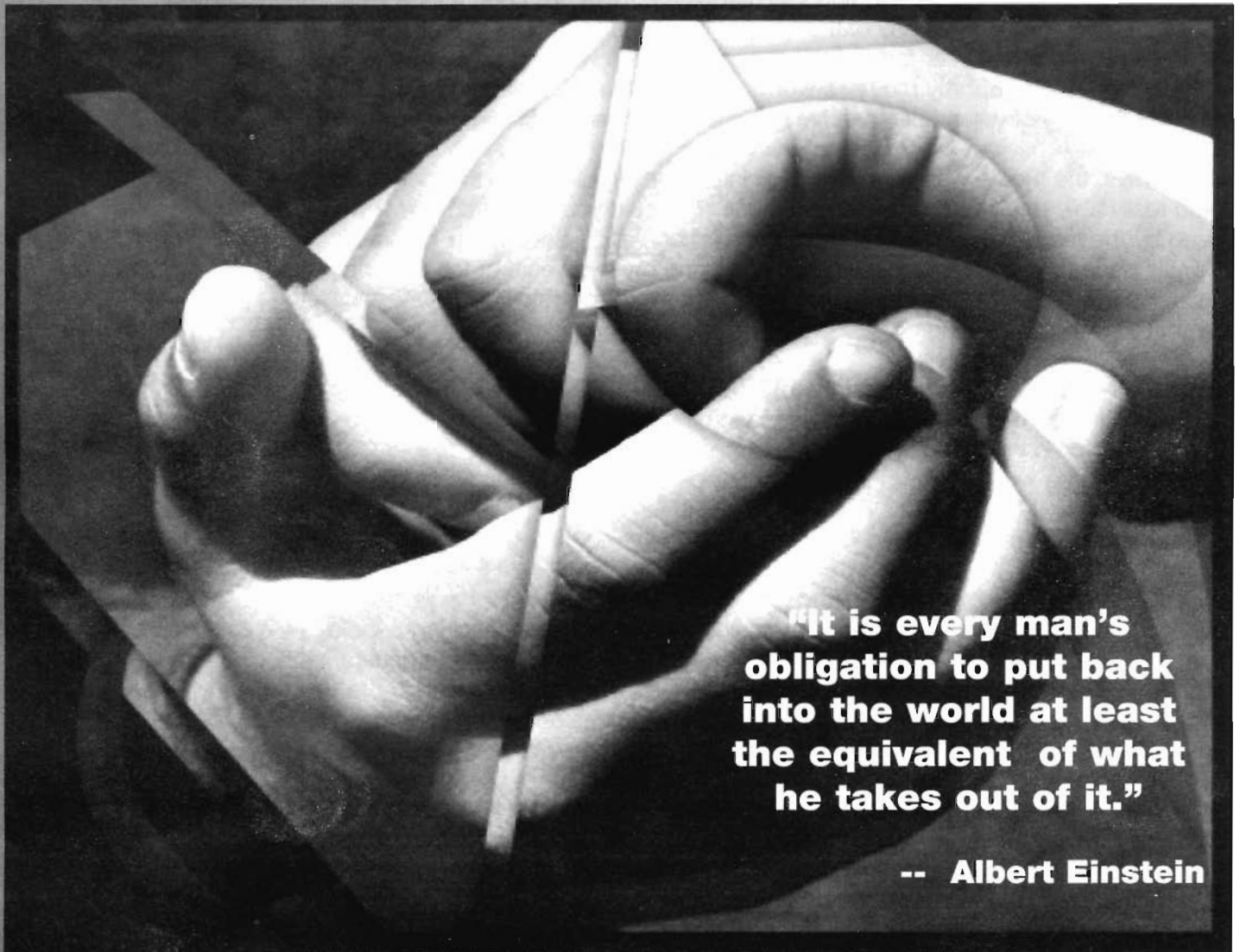
"The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons" ...Dostoevski

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**"It is every man's
obligation to put back
into the world at least
the equivalent of what
he takes out of it."**

-- Albert Einstein

Giving Back

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Pre-Release and Employability Programs Discourage Recidivism

BY JOSEPH CHIAPPETTA, JR.

“Why do they keep coming back?” It’s a question that drives me in my daily work. During the five years that I’ve served, I continue to see people come back to prison or hear that they’re on their way.

At first I never really thought about it at all. I was 2 ½ years into a 35-year sentence for white-collar theft. I had my own priorities to worry about, mainly how to win my appeals and reduce my sentence.

In early 2004 I was asked to come into an Employability Class as a guest speaker to discuss small business ownership, real estate, and credit repair. My family has been involved in these activities for years so I had a lot of material to offer. When I got up and started talking to the twenty or so students, I noticed something that really shocked me: they were all taking notes and listening. I never thought that this kind of information would be received so well in such a negative environment. It honestly inspired me! The class was two hours long and after a 45-minute lecture I answered questions for another hour and continued to answer them all the way back to my housing unit. The teacher asked me back again and I eventually became one of the facilitators of the class.

During the next two months I noticed a lot of room for improvement. The course itself was dated and missing many important elements. I spent hours discussing these observations with the teacher. She, of course, was already aware of the issues. Under her supervision, we revamped the entire course and wrote a

detailed outline for future classes.

After several groups and many classes, a revelation came to me: the students/inmates really didn’t want to come back to prison once they were released. These students really wanted to change their lives; they just needed a little encouragement and some good information. Most of them weren’t “hardened criminals” - they had committed their crimes out of desperation, peer pressure or substance abuse issues.

When we showed them a real and viable alternative they put a genuine effort into the program. Granted, there is no “magic wand” to cure recidivism. It’s a process with many facets. The most important one is an individual’s desire to change and

his/her own willingness to act on that decision. As we are fond of telling our students: you can’t wait for a helping hand, you have to help yourself. All we do is give them the tools, they daily make the decision to use them.

What I didn’t notice during the many months of classes and working with my fellow inmates was what was happening to me. The teaching experience changed my entire outlook on life because I had found a new purpose. Helping others achieve their goals has become a full-time calling. Another revelation: I

don’t know all the answers! I find myself doing a lot of research to answer all of the questions the students ask of me. I have become an eager student of many subjects.

Perhaps the most gratifying work I’ve done was in my GED Teacher’s Aide position. When I wasn’t facilitating the Employability Class, I held a math study group, tutored, and gave weekly lectures on history and current events. I am always amazed at how well these presentations go over in such a diverse class,

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made up of all ages and ethnic backgrounds. I think that the fact that I am not a figure of authority helps. Being “just one of the guys” greatly aids me in my work. The spirit of comradeship breaks through many barriers and stimulates a positive atmosphere in the classes.

Eventually the Employability Class was removed from the Education Department and placed in Unit Programs. This shift allowed general population inmates to sign up, not just those select few enrolled in school. The Unit Deputy

Warden assigned me the task of merging the pre-release materials with the Employability Program. This task was completed in September 2005. To date, the unit’s “Pre-release and Employability Class” has graduated over 150 inmates.

Many of those inmates are approaching release or are already out. I believe that they are better equipped to succeed by having taken this course. Some may come back to prison, but I’m betting that most won’t.

Knowing that some will use the knowledge I passed on to them to succeed makes all of the work well worth the effort.

For most of my life, I’ve been an opportunist. I was out for myself only. In truth, this attitude was my downfall. When you go through life with the “blindness of selfishness” on, you never truly see reality or yourself. Now I help myself by giving rather than taking. I

feel genuine remorse for my crimes and I’m confident that this part of my life is permanently in the past. This is a decision that I made. It’s that first step to truly change one’s life. Nobody has to come back. We all have the power to change.

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