

NYer Of The Week

Fortune Society Helps Ex-Cons Get Back On Their Feet

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The latest New Yorker of the Week is a former Broadway press agent that closed shop more than 40 years ago to create an organization that helps ex-prisoners start over. NY1's Roger Clark filed the following report.

Incarcerated for 30 years, Angel Ramos was in desperate need of a new start. Thanks to the help of David Rothenberg, founder of the Fortune Society, Ramos has plotted a new course.

Fortune was founded a little over 40 years ago, when former producer and press agent Rothenberg was inspired to create the organization during a play that he was producing.

"In 1967, I produced an off-Broadway play called 'Fortune and Men's Eyes,'" explained Rothenberg. "It was written by a man who had been in prison, and we started a dialogue on the stage of the theatre afterwards, and I started meeting ex-offenders and they would hang out with me."

Following a series of requests to speak at churches and schools regarding the play and prison life, Rothenberg created the not-for-profit organization to assist men and women looking to turn their lives around after serving time.

"Fortune is two things," said Fortune Society President JoAnne Page. "Fortune is an advocacy organization for men and women coming out of prison and people who are incarcerated, and it's also a service organization. We see perhaps 3,500 people a year."

The Society not only provides counseling and job placement services for ex-cons, but in April of 2002 the organization opened Fortune Academy – a residential recovery center in Harlem nicknamed "The Castle."

"There are single and double rooms with kitchens in it; it's like small apartments," said Rothenberg. "It's a full program. You have to be involved in education or job finding, dealing with the demons that you have, programming, giving back to the community, and also finding about the things that got you in trouble in the first place."

Ramos says that he is forever grateful to Rothenberg and his generosity.

"This, I think, is his greatest legacy that will live: helping the human family, helping people that have been broken to men," said Ramos. "What greater thing can you do for anyone?"

So, for giving a second chance to those who need to make a good first impression, David Rothenberg is the New Yorker of the Week.