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Chicago program offers ex-convicts a sweet chance at a new life

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CHICAGO -- Before heading into the yard to work, Tony Smith pulls over his head a white hooded jacket with stiff veiled netting that protects his face. He tugs yellow leather gloves beyond his wrists and makes sure his pants cover the tops of his tennis shoes.

Not the kind of uniform most people wear to work and certainly nothing like the Illinois Department of Corrections garb the 30-year-old Smith wore nearly half his life.

Three months after he was paroled, Smith is a beekeeper. With Sweet Beginnings, a program focused on providing ex-convicts with work experience and the start of an employment history, Smith tends to hives and, with others in the program, produces upscale beauty and consumer products from the resulting honey.

"Nervous? Yeah, just a little bit," Smith said, recalling his first time this summer among the hives when he forced himself to go out without any protective suit. "I'm used to it now, I'm kinda settled in."

With tattoos on both forearms and diamond hoops in his ears, he talks of the importance of his tools of the trade and how he can recognize when bees are "having a bad day."

"The program is a good experience, because you're learning respect ... You have to get used to the bees' attitudes and adjust to their emotions," he said. "It's like dealing with people -- you have to learn to respect their space."

About as unique as the beekeepers is the spot where the hives are -- a scrubby urban lot surrounded by a chain link fence and with about as much dirt as grass, just blocks from a major expressway.

It's in the North Lawndale neighborhood, on the city's west side, a spot devastated by riots that followed the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the closing of large factories and businesses in the following decade, including International Harvester.

Ever since, the area has wrestled with poverty, unemployment, drugs and crime. The North Lawndale Employment Network -- the nonprofit group behind Sweet Beginnings -

- hopes to change that by providing neighborhood residents with opportunities for jobs and economic advancement.

The group's executive director, Brenda Palms Barber, realized that the neighborhood's high unemployment rate -- triple the Chicago average -- was directly linked to the effects of incarceration.

Fifty-seven percent of the area's adults have been involved with the criminal justice system, according to a report commissioned by the group five years ago.

To Palms Barber, that population often is ignored by other social service agencies because ex-convicts can be hard to fit with jobs. By not finding them productive work, she submits, "you only leave them to go back to their old habits and behaviors."

With that in mind, she brainstormed about how to employ those recently released from prison -- and how to generate income for the network.

She considered a delivery service but figured its target consumers -- senior citizens -- wouldn't want ex-convicts in their homes. Then she lunched with a friend who mentioned her husband's hobby -- beekeeping.

Suddenly, Palms Barber had an "off the wall" project that met her criteria: It was inexpensive, could employ those with little education, and offered transferable skills (landscaping, food processing, retail sales).

There was no shortage of vacant lots in North Lawndale. And she learned that honey produced in cities is valued for its flavor and texture, given that urban honeybees often have access to a wider variety of blossoms than their country cousins.

The first batch of honey, labeled Beeline, came out in 2004. It was a hit at farmer's markets, and a high-end restaurant created an entire menu around it. The employment network generated \$30,000 in sales, though organizers found it hard to make much money in honey.

So for the past two years, Sweet Beginnings has focused on creating and perfecting "value-added products" containing the honey from its hives. Also marketed under the Beeline brand, these include a body scrub, lip balm, lotion and candles.

Palms Barber figures that people will buy the product for the first time to support Sweet Beginning's social mission, only becoming regulars if they love the stuff.

The employees get paid between \$7 and \$9 an hour. Seventeen have completed the program since 2004; none has returned to prison.

This year's harvest begins within weeks, with each of the 18 hives expected to produce about 65 to 70 pounds of honey.

On a recent warm September day, three Sweet Beginnings workers were painting the hives a pleasant light green color -- an upgrade from their dull mix of gray, white and yellow.

Joining Tony Smith -- who was imprisoned on home invasion and armed robbery charges -- was Shelby Gallion, a 22-year-old fresh out of a nine-month prison stint on drug charges, and 49-year-old Gerald Whitehead.

Out of prison now for nearly nine years, he'd spent most of his adult life behind bars for everything from armed robbery, home invasion and assault and battery.

This day, the trio moved among the hives, scattering the bees with smoke. They explained how they encourage sluggish hives with the addition of a queen bee and sugar water.

With six months at Sweet Beginnings under his belt, the longest tenure of the three, Whitehead used a flat-bladed tool to pry loose one of the hives' frames, exposing the butter-colored wax that sealed the honey.

Attributing his teen years spent in gangs to his household with an overworked mom, an absent dad and a dozen siblings, Whitehead said he fared well for several years after prison working housekeeping and maintenance in a nursing home. But he said he got fired when managers of another of the company's homes to which he transferred learned of his criminal past.

Still, he can't read, can hardly write and used to take his wife on interviews with him so she could fill out his job application, hiding in a bathroom or hallway.

But now he's taking classes to learn how to read and hopes to earn a job working with his hands, such as plumbing or landscaping.

As a young man, Whitehead said he didn't expect to live this long. Now he's working with bees in the same neighborhood where he once ran with gangs.

"At one time, I'd see a bee and kill it. Now I've got love for bees," he said. "They got a language of their own, they know when to mate, they know when to feed each other, they know when to be aggressive. They know when someone's invading their territory, so they know how to defend themselves. They're sort of like people in the streets."

On the Net:

Sweet Beginnings: <http://www.nlen.org/sweet.htm>

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