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## Honey helps employment program net \$400K grant

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October 5, 2006

BY [FRANCINE KNOWLES](#) Business Reporter

A year ago, 30-year-old Tony Smith, who had never had a job in his life was serving prison time for armed robbery, while Shelby Gallion was doing time for drug charges.

Today, both are learning to be beekeepers and produce honey in a North Lawndale Employment Network program that helps ex-offenders and other community residents find permanent jobs -- a program that will benefit from a \$400,000 John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation grant being presented to the nonprofit today.

The money will help the nonprofit's Sweet Beginnings program expand from selling honey to selling honey-based products and along the way help it equip program participants with additional marketable skills, says the non-profit's Chief Executive Officer Brenda Palms Barber. The grant will aid the organization in retiring debt and establishing a cash reserve.

The nonprofit is receiving one of nine MacArthur Awards for Creative and Effective Institutions, a new program targeting organizations with budgets under \$2.5 million.

The foundation was impressed with the North Lawndale group's efforts working with a population that includes individuals banned from some professions because of their criminal backgrounds, and people whom many employers are reluctant to hire.

The nonprofit, which has a budget of \$1.2 million, has served more than 1,800 residents in the past six years, and assisted roughly 300 people a year in landing permanent employment, Barber said.

"I'm learning a lot," said 22-year-old Gallion, who described himself as a guy from the streets. He grew up in Rockwell Gardens, where he said it seemed "people got killed everyday."

He entered the program with low expectations. Given his background and the environment he grew up in, he said he didn't think he had the patience to deal with people and learn what he needed to land a job.

"The program is helping me out a lot," he said. "It's helping me turn my life around, to make some type of U-turn."

Smith said he's excited about his future and hopes to teach others the business one day.

"I've made some big mistakes in my life, but I'm definitely making changes," he said.

The beekeeping operation is in the midst of change as well. Volunteers from Boeing Co. and Ben and Jerry's have helped the nonprofit develop a business plan. That plan entails switching from producing and selling honey, which has only a 12 percent profit margin, to focusing on making "indulgent" honey-based products including body scrubs, lip balms, candles and lotions, which can have a profit margin of 60 to 80 percent, Barber said.

"This ain't your grandmother's honey," she said.

The goal is to help create a self-sustaining program that provides more jobs and reduces the nonprofit's reliance on outside funding.

The new focus will enable participants to learn about manufacturing, shipping, quality control, warehousing, all of which are transferrable skills, Barber said.

The urban beekeeping and honey production program was launched two years ago, supported by funding from the Illinois Department of Corrections and the city of Chicago.

Participants work 30 hours a week and receive on-the-job training and mentoring in landscaping, beekeeping, food processing, sales and distribution. They start out earning \$7 an hour and get a 25-cent-an-hour raise after their fourth week on the job. After that, they can earn up to \$9 an hour, based on their performance.

The program sprang up out of necessity, when the nonprofit found participants were having difficulty finding jobs after they completed the group's job readiness program. The group decided to create jobs for them, Barber said.

A conversation with a friend led her to explore the idea of honey production and Sweet Beginnings was born.

The workers are responsible for taking care of the bees, harvesting the honey, planting and taking care of the gardens, processing foods with honey, and selling the products. The honey has been sold at the Lincoln Park and Oak Park farmers markets.

Before landing work in the program, participants must complete the non-profit's U-Turn program. That program provides job readiness, anger management and conflict resolution training, peer group and mentoring support and job placement and follow-up assistance. Participants must pass a drug test, and are booted out if they miss two days. The program is treated as if it were a job, and participants are required to be on time.

The placement rate for those who complete the program is 85 percent, Barber said. Programs to help participants with life skills, including financial literacy are also offered.

"It's not just about how to put a resume together," Barber said. "It's about thoughts and beliefs about work. It's about conflict resolution and understanding the unspoken rules of the workplace."

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