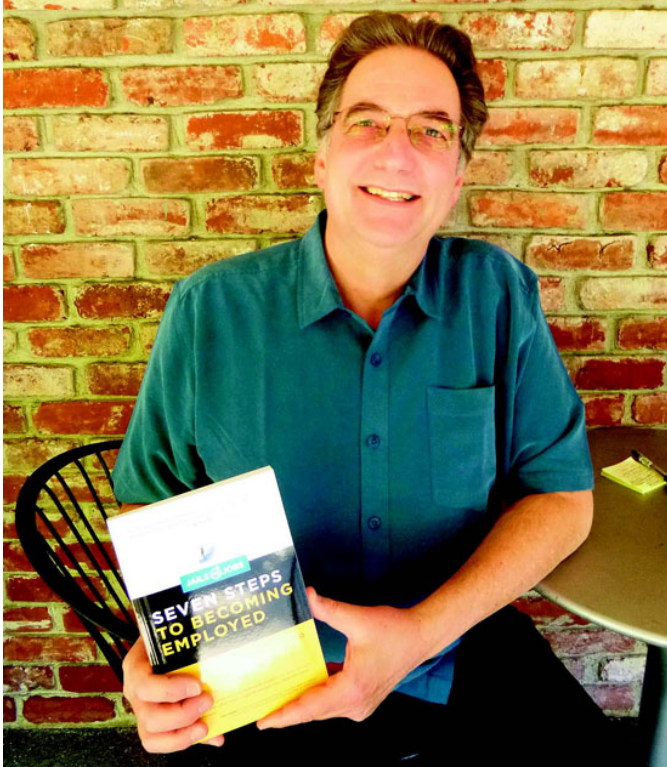


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Jails to Jobs

By Sophie Braccini



Mark Drevno Photo Sophie Braccini

How does someone go from being a successful IT entrepreneur to training inmates about job-searching skills? It's a personal journey Lafayette resident Mark Drevno started 15 years ago when he gave a second chance to a young homeless man who had been incarcerated and was looking for a job. Today Drevno and his foundation, Jails to Jobs, aims at raising the necessary funds to place his eponymous book in the libraries of every prison in America.

"He had been up front about his addiction when I first talked to him on the phone, and I appreciated that," remembers Drevno of the former convict he hired in 2000. "I hired him because there was no reason not to hire him." When the newly-employed man turned out to be an excellent salesperson, Drevno thought he should find others like him. "Good salespeople are hard to come by," he said. "I wondered how many other 'diamonds in the rough' there might be out there." He began to go to rehabilitation centers and homeless centers and started to develop a job search workshop. He then reached out to the prison system. "I was always a do-it-yourself type of person," said

Drevno. "Giving a second chance was new to me."

And something else started to change in Drevno's life. "When I turned 49, I started questioning the meaning and purpose of always wanting to have more. This was bottomless and was not giving me fulfillment," he remembers. "Then I began to meditate with the Infinite Smile Sangha (a group practicing Buddhist spirituality) formed by former Acalanes teacher Michael McAlister. It opened my eyes to spirituality and other possibilities I had been yearning for."

This new dimension soon took a prominent place in Drevno's life, transforming who he was. He studied intensely for four years in a Buddhist chaplaincy program and will soon become a board certified Buddhist interfaith chaplain. Of course, in the meantime his search for the 'diamond in the rough' mutated. "Going to teach in the jails is like a calling to me," he says. "The self-interest faded away. I go there as an offering of hope, with compassionate presence and caring."

"Our organization, Jails to Jobs, has three programs," explains Drevno. "The training I do in prisons, the book that we want to put in every jail, and a tattoo removal referral service in 34 states." Drevno noticed that some inmates had tattoos that were highly visible and would either be the sign of a gang affiliation or be perceived as anti-social - a real job-stopper that can be safely removed.

The book "Jails to Jobs, Seven Steps to Becoming Employed" is based on the extensive research Drevno did and his years of teaching the material. It covers some of the elements you would find in any book, for teens looking for jobs for example, but other elements are very specific to former offenders. For example, some parolees do not have the right to use the Internet, a hurdle Drevno is aware of that leads to offering other, more old-fashioned options for this population. The book presents several tips that ex-offenders will find useful, such as where to find the places where they worked years ago, and may have forgotten. Or top recommendations from companies that hired people with criminal records, the first one being, "Be upfront and honest about the

conviction." He also lists the skills people develop in prison that can be used when presenting oneself, such as the ability to function under pressure or getting along with all kinds of people.

The comprehensive book oozes the enthusiasm and positive energy that characterizes Drevno. He developed an entire chapter about how to fight the enemy within that includes nurturing positive thinking, finding motivation, or trying mindful meditation, which could be used by anyone who's been unsuccessfully looking for a job a little too long. He is confident that if they follow the seven steps, people with criminal records will find employment, even if they face tremendous challenges doing so.

To this day, Drevno has presented his workshop to 3,000 people. "When I teach in prison I cannot give any personal information that would allow me to do a follow-up with the inmates once they are released," says Drevno, "but when I see someone I would find very intimidating outside lining up to shake my hand and thank me, that's reward enough for me."

Since Drevno continues to manage his IT services company, Data Focus, he needs more volunteers to teach in more prisons. The foundation has also launched the campaign to put a book in each of the 5,000 prisons in the United States. Each book sells for \$14.95 and donors can choose which prison or jail to send it. To learn more about the foundation, go to jailstojobs.org.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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