



A Practical Skill to Pay the Bills (Part 3 of 3)

by Libby Walters

Meet a few of the inmates at Marion Correctional Institution and find out how the Stark Marion program is providing the right opportunity for a fresh start.

at a glance

- ❑ Positions in the Stark program at Marion Correctional Institute (MCI) are coveted among inmates.
- ❑ Inmates that participate in the program are promised the opportunity of a fresh start after they get out of prison.
- ❑ Stark leadership believes that the program addresses a chronic shortage of truss technicians in the industry while providing felons a chance to learn a valuable skill to apply as they reintegrate into society after their release.

In the previous two installments of this series, we looked at the concept of recidivism in the United States and the outside factors most likely to encourage an ex-felon to re-offend. We stepped into the lives of several former inmates, currently employed by two WTCA member companies—Stark Truss Company (Tony, Todd and Mike) and Bluegrass Truss Company (Mike, Larry, Jonathon, Sonny and Greg)—and learned of the mistakes that landed them behind bars. We also learned how employment with these companies helped them beat the recidivism odds. Approximately seven out of every ten felons re-offend and are sent back to prison within three years of their original release, proof that re-integration is a major hurdle for any felon.

In this final installment, we'll explore life within the confines of Marion Correctional Institution (MCI), the facility that has housed Stark Truss's inmate technician program since 1996. As stated in Part 2, the Stark Marion program is known among inmates at MCI as elitist. To say that positions vacated by an inmate who has been released or transferred to a different training program within MCI are coveted is a gross understatement. One reason for this desire to work for the program, as the inmates revealed, is to break up the monotony of reliving the same day over and over again. Another reason for the program's popularity is the promise of a chance to start anew after years in prison. During our interview, Damon articulated a simple but prophetic/perceptive rhyme that has stuck with me since the blustery day in January that I visited MCI: "a practical skill to pay the bill."

Inside MCI

Arriving at Stark Marion, we were met with a highly charged group of men sitting in front of computers, discussing details about this job and that, and a homecoming of sorts. Tony made the trip back to MCI to visit with some of his former prisonmates, a bittersweet time for all who were reunited, knowing he would leave on his own free will.

In concert with Ohio Penal Industries (OPI), Stark Marion employs about a dozen inmates, providing the necessary training and materials to bring the inmates up to speed on truss design. Longtime Stark employee Dave Berrong is now Stark Marion's official fearless leader, training and overseeing the inmates' work. Berrong has worn many hats since joining the Stark family in 1983. From five years in the shop as truss builder and sawyer to truss technician gradually learning blueprint takeoff and truss layout, to his current position as Technical Manager: Commercial/Multi-family Division. In addition to his duties overseeing the program at Marion, Berrong lays out large commercial projects for jobs all over the country.

We sat down with five of the men working at Stark Marion to discuss how the program has helped them and their plans for the future. In many respects, the Stark Marion technicians have formed a brotherhood by virtue of the experiences they've shared while learning truss design and making the most out of each day at MCI. Rick Idle is one of the founding members of Stark Marion (he and others were the

Continued on page 62

Who's Who:

Former MCI inmate/Stark Marion technician:

Tony
Mike
Todd

Current MCI inmate/Stark Marion technician:

Pete
Tim
Squire
Damon

Rick (founding member of Stark Marion design dept.)

Manager of Stark's Sherman, TX location:

Rich Ackley

Manager of Stark's Hearne, TX location:

Tim Willet

Vice President of Stark Truss:

Don Groom

Founder & President of Stark Truss Company:

Abner Yoder

Marion Correctional Institute Warden:

Christine Money

The Road to Re-entry...

Continued from page 60

first to enter the program in 1996), and is the crew's sage jack of all trades. Rick installs all design software updates, knows floor, wall panel, roof and steel truss design, and just about anything else you'd care to know about component design. According to Rick, the Stark Marion group has one thing other Stark design departments don't: "Our advantage is the time we have to read the software manuals and study. We take the reading material back to our cells at night," he said. His drive and motivation to master truss design is evident.

Squire quotes jobs for the Ohio plants; he has worked at Stark Marion for almost seven years. Pete double-checks work before a job is faxed or emailed out of MCI and routes incoming calls or email/fax correspondence from the guards to the right inmate. He's worked in the department for five years. Damon designs commercial and multi-family projects for the two Texas plants, and has worked at Stark Marion for about five years. "It's very challenging. I truly enjoy the work because it keeps me busy!" he said. Tim is very new to the program, having joined the group less than a year ago.

Commercial and multi-family design work is sent to Stark Marion via Stark plants in Sherman and Hearne, TX, managed by Rich Ackley and Tim Willet respectively. They truly function as a team, despite the near 1,200 miles that separate them. Rich Ackley emphasized the staff's amazing work ethic. "They give 100 percent at all times. They have an incredible passion. There is a fine line between us and them. They have been judged and served their time, and I believe they deserve a second chance in this life." He praised the department for their diligence, "I can totally count on them to get the job done. As the manager of a location, I have a peace that they won't be distracted by phone or email; they are there to serve us. That's one thing I can say with pride: they certainly serve passionately," he said.



Rick



Damon



Tim



Squire



Pete

Sam Steward and Rich Ackley have been touched on a personal level through their close work with the Marion technicians. At Tony's wedding reception, his dad toasted Sam and Stark Truss for giving him his son back, a moment that "was the greatest reward for my work. It made it all worthwhile," Sam recalled.

Rich Ackley recounted a personal story about his relationship with the inmates that changed his mind forever about the importance of the program. "I'll never forget about three years ago when my five-year-old daughter was very sick and had to be hospitalized. When I came back to the office, the Marion [inmates] had made a giant get-well poster for my daughter. Through the word of mouth, they found out and prayed. Their gesture of goodwill made me realize they have hearts like everyone else," he said with gratitude.

Serious about Security

The Stark Marion staff plays by some very strict rules. For instance, inmates are prohibited from making outgoing phone calls or accepting incoming calls without first being screened by MCI guards. Along the same lines, no Internet access is permitted, which means inmates cannot send or receive email from their machines. Any email correspondence must pass through a guard's email account, accessed only from a computer in a gated cell. As reported in Part 2 of this series, although Stark Marion operates as an OPI business, MCI requires a state guard to monitor the inmates' activity at all times. That means no work for Stark Marion on state holidays when guards are off duty. Similarly, the department ceases work in the event of a prison lock-down, and sometimes there isn't time to warn the Texas brotherhood.

In addition to security measures that restrict communication, each day's schedule is strictly regimented. There are twice daily "head counts." All work must cease at 3:00. This schedule, in combination with the restrictions on communication, not only shortens the work day but

RENS SENSE-A-PLATE Detect missing nail plates before the truss leaves manufacturing

Control Box

Simple installation, just a few connections; 110/240 VAC; Light tower with siren; PLC output contacts available
Operating indicators are visible in the control box that is mounted on the end of the machine

LACEY-HARMER CO. 4270 NW YEON AVENUE, PORTLAND, OREGON 97210
PH: 503-222-9992, Toll Free: 1-800-367-9992, Fax: 503-222-0073
Email: info@laceyharmer.com, Website: www.laceyharmer.com

For reader service, go to www.sbcmag.info/laceyharmer.htm

forces the Sherman and Hearne staff to be exceedingly flexible. As stated in Part 2, Rich Ackley commented on jumping the communication hurdles. "I learned rather quickly to be mindful of their timeframe. When you account for lunch, breaks and 'count,' they're working for about 6.5 hours per day," he said. Tim Willet said, "Initially, not being able to get in touch with them when it was convenient for me was frustrating. I just had to learn to work around their schedule and be flexible," he noted.

A Practical Skill

Like many of the inmates we talked to, Damon is thankful for the opportunity to learn a new skill while preparing for life outside of jail. "Anybody could end up in here. One moment in time is all it takes to land you in prison. This program teaches you a practical skill to pay the bill. It's what helps you rebuild your life. When you develop the habits every day, you prepare yourself for the next big game. I take this one day at a time—that's all I can do," he said.

Squire remarked that given his four-year degree in business administration, he never would have expected to be learning a building construction trade. "I had no construction skills when I first started with the program. It was very tough when I started. I had no idea what a 2x4 was," he laughed.

Rick pointed out the inmates' work ethic and motivation is stronger than the public may think. "The guy who works hard in here for practically nothing (free) is going to work even harder when they get out. Many people who are sent

to prison are doctors, lawyers or engineers that have training and skills. And they made one mistake—that's all it takes," he commented quietly. Damon concurred, noting that not everyone in prison is a criminal for life: "You go left when you should have gone right. It's not that you led a life of crime, it was a moment in time when you made a bad decision."

The Promise of Life Beyond Bars

Like the others, Squire's attitude and outlook toward the future is refreshingly upbeat: "You can only get out of this job what you put in. I feel that I've proven my abilities and I hope [Stark] places me when I'm released." He noted, "We know this [job] is a means to an end. It's an 'out' for us to get a job on the street and prove to the world that we can be trusted again." In fact, Squire's recent hearing in front of the parole board returned good news for both him-

self and Stark Truss; he is scheduled to be released during the first week in May. Dave Berrong said, "I am certain that he will become a top notch technician for Stark. He has the ability and the desire to do a great job."

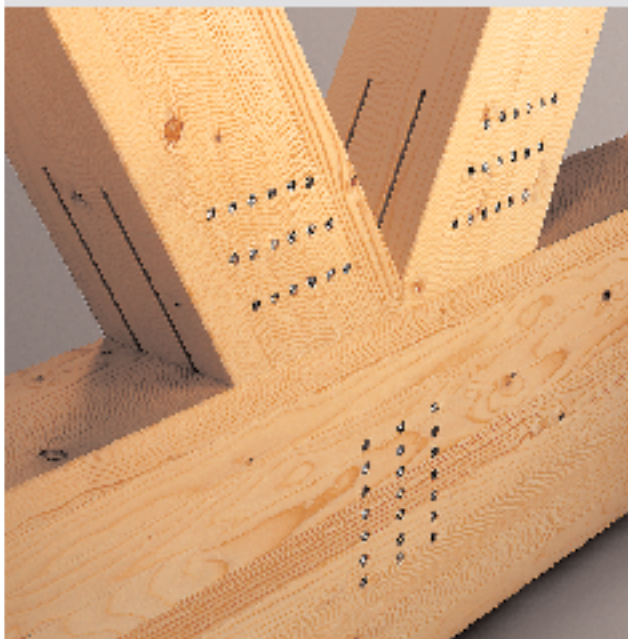
How Can I Get Involved?

Have you always been interested in getting involved with a rehabilitation program that would serve the community and your business at the same time? According to Don Groom, conducting research on the front end is the key. He recommends that you start with your state's department of corrections. Most likely, your the DOC has a division similar to Ohio Penal Industries that integrates skills training into prison rehabilitation programs. Given that nearly seven in ten former convicts wind up back in jail within three years of their release, rehabilitation programs like OPI's Stark Marion department are becoming common state initiatives.

These days, the Internet makes research a snap: visit a few web sites to get a sense for current programs available to your state's prison population. Try a Google search using keywords like department of corrections, rehabilitation, recidivism and prison. Also keep in mind that a program such as Stark's can require a monetary investment up front; you may need to hire staff for training purposes or buy office equipment such as computers or desks.

Continued on page 64

Engineered Fastening Systems



The SFS intec WS System:

- Eliminates pilot drilling in timber and steel
- Provides a tighter-fit than pre-drilled applications
- Self-drilling dowel system is engineered for steel-reinforced timber connections
- Will drill up to 1/2" of carbon steel
- Increases fire resistance
- Provides high ductility
- No costly overhead is required

SFS intec
To make you more competitive.

For more information about the SFS intec WS System, call 800-234-4533

SFS intec, Inc.
Spring St. & Van Reed Rd.
P.O. Box 6326
Wyomissing, PA 19610
www.sfsintec-usa.com

For reader service, go to www.sbcmag.info/sfsintec.htm

The Road to Re-entry...

Continued from page 63

Both Rich Ackley and Tim Willet spoke about the joy in following from an inmate learning truss design and about the truss industry to a free man employed at Stark Truss. "We've got men who have worked with us for so many years in Marion and then they get out and they are just filled with joy to be out. They have a huge impact on our company," said Rich Ackley. Tim Willet commented, "To see [the inmates] get out and succeed is an amazing experience. They have embraced the opportunity to stay with Stark; that's a hell of a reward."

During the interview, Don Groom spoke sincerely to the inmates: "[Truss design] is a marketable skill that is very desirable in our industry right now. We didn't just want to hire you in prison and leave you hanging when you were released. It was our goal to teach you a skill to use every day." He explained that it takes (on average) about two years of training for each inmate to be able to work self-sufficiently: not much difference than the time it would take to train

someone off the street. Rich Ackley pointed out that the program addresses the chronic shortage of skilled technicians in the industry. "The bottom line is there are never enough skilled technicians in the industry."

Recidivism Remedy: The Big Picture

MCI Warden Christine Money has spent nearly a quarter century working in prisons, and assumed her current position in June 1996. She spoke about the necessity of programs that focus on re-entry and rehabilitation. "The whole country is focusing on re-entry, it seems. The pendulum is swinging because people have begun to realize that [inmates] are getting out of prison. They could be your neighbor at some point. Which would you prefer: someone who has skills, a job and direction, or someone who is aimless?" she asked. She reflected on her experience working closely with Stark Truss: "Participating with Stark has been one of the most creative partnerships I've seen at

MCI. They trust their people, and most importantly, they don't judge. They live out their faith and keep their word about hiring the guys when they get out. They've brought hope to the people who are incarcerated, some of whom have tremendous skill. What Stark is doing is giving them an outlet for that skill." There's little doubt that Stark set out to do just that: live out their faith, keep their word, give hope and provide an outlet for skill.

Conclusion

It is appropriate to end this series with a quote about the driving force and heart behind this program: Abner Yoder. Don Groom summarized the core beliefs of Stark's leader: "...to offer the incarcerated not only a job to occupy their time while in prison, but a chance to prove themselves and learn a valuable skill to apply upon their release. He believed that human beings weren't born to go to prison; they are here for a specific purpose and it was Abner's mission to find their natural ability and talent and then give them a second chance to be successful in this life," said Groom.

SBC

STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS™

THE FUTURE OF FRAMING

www.sbcmag.info

Dear Reader:

Copyright © 2005 by Truss Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. For permission to reprint materials from SBC Magazine, call 608/310-6706 or email editor@sbcmag.info.

The mission of Structural Building Components Magazine (SBC) is to increase the knowledge of and to promote the common interests of those engaged in manufacturing and distributing of structural building components to ensure growth and continuity, and to be the information conduit by staying abreast of leading-edge issues. SBC will take a leadership role on behalf of the component industry in disseminating technical and marketplace information, and will maintain advisory committees consisting of the most knowledgeable professionals in the industry. The opinions expressed in SBC are those of the authors and those quoted solely, and are not necessarily the opinions of any of the affiliated associations (SBCC, WTCA, SCDA & STCA) .



6300 Enterprise Lane • Suite 200 • Madison, WI 53719
608/310-6706 phone • 608/271-7006 fax
www.sbcmag.info • admgr@sbcmag.info