

BEST – Building Entrepreneurs for Success in Tennessee
A Program of the Nashville Entrepreneur Center (EC)

Contestant Capacity

Organizational Background

Building Entrepreneurs for Success in Tennessee (BEST), founded in 2014, delivers a rigorous curriculum covering business, entrepreneurial, financial literacy and life skills to men and women incarcerated in the Tennessee Department of Corrections who are within 24 months of release. The goal of the program is to both reduce recidivism and better equip individuals for successful reentry into the community after incarceration. BEST is modeled after the highly effective Prison Entrepreneurship Program in Texas (<http://www.pep.org>), which has produced reduced recidivism rates from over 28% to under 7% at 3 years post-release. Without intervention or preventive programs, Tennessee currently has a 3-year post-release recidivism rate of 48%, and a 1-year post-release rate of 27%. To date after completing the BEST Program, six men from Cohort 1 who have been released, have a 1+ year recidivism rate of 0% as of January 2017.

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The need for BEST is compelling. With over 5,600 individuals leaving the TN state prison system each year, and 2,800 returning to prison within 3 years, clearly rehabilitation needs are not being met; recidivism costs exceed \$70 million dollars per year. Research clearly demonstrates that securing employment is critical to post release success, helps to restore lives, families and communities and creates the opportunity for all to live successful, safer lives. However the status of “convicted felon” is a significant barrier to achieving this goal. Although there are a few highly effective re-entry programs for returning citizens, often transportation to and from these programs post-release creates a barrier to both enrollment and successful completion. BEST capitalizes on the pre-release time within the Correctional system to overcome these barriers, and brings hope, caring engagement and new ways of thinking to its students.

BEST has been fortunate to attract a wide variety of supporters – educators, large and small business owners, government employees, successful returning citizens, etc. – to help with the educational process. It has been inspiring to the participants to see so many individuals come to prison to share their time and expertise. That alone has had a great impact and works to convince participants that they CAN succeed.

Cohort 1, the pilot class of the BEST program, started on October 21, 2014 with 22 men. Applicants were sought from all the men’s prisons in the state through an extensive competitive application process. Eighteen men graduated on April 24, 2015, each with his own business plan, and 11 of these men have been released. Eighty-three volunteers donated 1,929 hours during the six-month program. Cohort 2 included 19 women from three Tennessee prisons who met at the Tennessee Prison for Women in Nashville. Eighty-nine volunteers shared their expertise and passion to change lives. They donated 2,059 hours. Seventeen women completed the program with a variety of business plans completed. Cohort 3 commenced October 17, 2016 with a class of 20 women (with 55 children between them), and will conclude April 28, 2017 at the Tennessee Prison for Women.

Background of Management Team

- *Karen Vander Molen* – program director and BEST instructor since 2014; active in prison ministry since 2008. Master’s in Education and Civic Leadership. BEST was her Capstone project of the Civic Leadership program at Lipscomb University, Nashville. Previously taught K – adults in public school setting in Texas.
- *Dr. Rubin Cockrell* – Positive Image & Assoc.; author; professor; BEST volunteer instructor since 2014
- *Mary Brennan* - co-owner of DataMarketing Network, a successful, full service, direct mail and data processing company; community volunteer; volunteer BEST instructor since 2014
- *Dr. Turner Nashe, Jr.* – entrepreneur, inventor, innovator and recognized leader in building technology that facilitates delivery of educational and entertaining content to security sensitive industries such as correctional facilities as President of Innertainment Delivery Systems; BEST speaker since 2014
- *Phylanice Nashe, JD* – CEO of Innertainment Delivery Systems; BEST speaker since 2014

Entrepreneurial Education Delivery Solution

Participant Recruitment Plan – BEST has a competitive application process with basic requirements of

- High School Diploma or GED required
- No Class A disciplinary reports within past year
- Coming up for parole or completing their sentences within 2 years

If a candidate meets the criteria above, they are then asked to complete an 11-page application (including 2 essays) and participate in interviews when possible. Candidates are rigorously evaluated by both Program Leaders and TDOC personnel to produce cohorts of 20-25 candidates. Once accepted into the program, arrangements are made to transport them to the prison site. They are housed in 2 person cells in the same unit which further builds the cohort as a community of like-minded individuals with similar goals. Participants are paid \$.34/hr to be in the class by the TN Department of Correction. BEST becomes their assigned job. So far we are experiencing an 86% graduation rate, which is quite high for a class running in prison, and demonstrates the efficacy of the selection process and commitment to the program by its participants.

Classroom Instruction

Phase One – The cohort meets 6 hours/day, 5 days/week for 3 months. Upon beginning BEST, participants learn that we focus on “Ten BEST Values” in Phase One so that we can be sure hearts and heads are in the right place before we spend time creating a business plan. This helps build a cohort mind-set as well. *Houses of Healing: A Prisoner’s Guide to Inner Power and Freedom* by R. Casarjian guides participants to heal their wounded inner child, an essential part of the process of building inner strength necessary for anyone who seeks to start a business. This book is highly recommended to anyone with any kind of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which is something most inmates have to overcome.

BEST seeks to empower individuals with self-knowledge (ie Myers-Briggs Personality Type Inventory), presentation, conflict management (ie The Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory), negotiation, cooperation, planning, time management, technology (Microsoft Office), goal-setting (*8 Simple Steps to Catch Your Dreams* by D. Robertson), meditation/mindfulness (including J. Kabat-Zinn materials), decision making and life skills (ie *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by S. Covey). Participating in a Toastmasters International Gavel Club equips everyone with speaking, listening, composition and critical evaluation skills. A wide variety of guest entrepreneurs and speakers share their business experiences and are available to answer questions. Life coaches are available to participants who are interested in working one-on-one. Efforts are made to recruit Take One (statewide Tennessee mentoring program) mentors for the participants to assist with decision-making and support as they transition from prison to free world living.

Opportunities to discover and develop leadership skills are created through classroom assignments and responsibilities and studying leadership topics (especially Servant Leadership) as the class progresses. There are leadership roles in Toastmasters meetings that everyone learns how to fulfill as well. Discussions about plans to incorporate what is learned into one’s own business and personal lives are frequent.

Since BEST occurs behind bars, we do not have live Internet access to online materials. However, incorporating the use of electronic tablets has been another way to extend learning by loading it with a variety of TED Talks, meditations, articles, Khan Academy videos, inspirational videos, etc. BEST is the first program in a Tennessee prison to utilize eReader tablets. We believe BEST is the first program in the world to deliver entrepreneurship curriculum and resources to inmates on electronic tablets.

Using *Finding the Business in You!* by I. Tatum and *8 Simple Steps to Catch Your Dream* by D. Robertson helps participants discern their personal gifts, interests and passions to begin to narrow down and clarify the nature of the business they’d like to create. The process of identifying ones dream, skills and passion is routinely revisited since it takes time to fully develop a solid focus for the creation of a new business. Students are also challenged to imagine a speech being given about them 10 years from now citing all their accomplishments. This becomes part of their 10 year goal which then made realistically manageable by breaking it down into what needs to happen by 5 years from now, 1 year from now, within the next 30 days, and finally what can they do today to realize those future goals. Planning for the future is often a new idea and process for the students.

The capstone project for Phase One is an individually written “TIME Magazine Woman/Man of the Year” consisting of articles written over the course of 12 weeks giving them an opportunity to reflect on what they are

learning and analyze how they plan on incorporating knowledge, skills and strategies in their personal and professional life. They received their bound copy at Graduation.

Phase Two – We continue meeting 6 hours/day, 5 days/week for 3 months. Business, financial literacy and entrepreneurial skills are the focus. *Financial Empowerment: A Practical Approach to Getting Your Financial Life in Order* by R. Bobb and *Money Smart (Adults and Small Business versions)* by FDIC/SBA. The EC *PreFlight* curriculum forms the basis for this phase. The *PreFlight* curriculum (text and PowerPoint movies) is provided on electronic tablets. *PreFlight* was created by Dr. Michael Burcham (founding CEO of the EC, Tennessean of the Year 2015 and Vanderbilt MBA professor) and John Murdock of the EC. Ten cohorts have completed the program since 2013 involving over 180 students. It is currently being offered at Vanderbilt University too.

A textbook, *Entrepreneurship: A Real World Approach* by R. Abrams, is utilized because tablets have not been permitted in the cells overnight so far. This gives students a supplemental resource to read further and continue working on homework at night.

Mentoring

Belmont University students come to prison to assist their “EntrePartneurs” weekly as they each develop their own business plan. This is part of their Entrepreneurship 3800 class in the Spring semester. The students act as mentoring consultants, utilizing their business and entrepreneurship education and conducting research on behalf of the BEST students. This allows the BEST students to use authentic data and information to better create viable business plans. EC business advisors come in to offer advice and insights on Launch Plans. Every participant delivers a final version of their Launch Plan and a 5-minute PowerPoint pitch. A Launch Plan competition occurs during the final week with outside judges available to share feedback.

Toastmasters meetings continue and finish up during Phase Two. For the final speech Project 10, individuals deliver an 8-10” inspirational speech without notes, utilizing all the elements of speechmaking and delivery they’ve learned since Project 1. It is exciting when they recognize how far they have come in their confidence and ability to create and deliver speeches.

While business plans are being developed, outside business people in those fields are invited to come to prison and share their positive entrepreneurial experiences as well as lessons learned and answer questions. Many offer to be of assistance post-release. In addition, Wisty Pender, Director of Business Enterprise Resource Office of the TN Department of Economic and Community Development comes to share her knowledge and state resources to assist small business development. She is the ultimate resource person and connector for all things related to small businesses in the state.

Phase Three – During post-graduation and pre-release, BEST works to remain engaged with members of the BEST graduate community through book studies and newsletters, and meetings when possible.

Community Connections

Phase Four – Upon release, each returning citizen can tap into the network of BEST partners as they return to the community, ready to be a contributing member of society as an employee or business owner. Two major connections for reentry, jobs and housing support are Project Return (Middle Tennessee) and Tennessee Prison Outreach Ministry (statewide). Housing referrals may also be part of reentry support if needed. Another partner, Family Reconciliation Center, is available to provide guidance for family issues, addiction and mental health support. The Project Nashville (Davidson County) can assist with one-on-one mentoring and providing needed clothing and work gear. Representatives from each of these partners come to BEST and meet the participants in person, thereby establishing a relationship and smoothing the reentry path.

Once released graduates have stabilized their reentry, they may apply for a BEST Microloan from a \$25,000 fund created specifically for BEST graduates to assist with business start up expenses. They also are offered a complimentary 6-month Grow Membership package (valued at \$600) from the EC which permits them to use the Entrepreneur Center’s co-working space, meeting rooms and have unlimited advisor meetings as well as access to all the events at the EC. The 300+ EC advisors come from a wide variety of business backgrounds and skill sets, which BEST graduates may tap into as they prepare and start to build their business, apply for a Microloan, etc. They provide a phenomenally talented and readily available resource.

Access to Capital

Access to Microlending

At the graduation ceremony of Cohort 1 in spring 2015, Dr. and Mrs. Turner Nashe, Jr. announced the creation of a \$25,000 BEST Microfund, specifically targeting the needs of BEST graduates who need a loan to start their businesses once released and stabilized. The released graduate will update their business plan, utilizing the advisors of the EC and other network connections, and complete an application online. It will demonstrate their preparedness to take on the responsibility of starting and running their own business. The terms of the microloan will be manageable with repayments going back into the Microfund to replenish the money available for future BEST graduates. Once the need is established to have more funds available, a campaign to seek additional resources for the BEST Microfund will commence.

With the advent of additional opportunities such as the SBA Microloan now available to individuals on probation or parole, support will be available to help them navigate that application process. They will be informed of educational opportunities in the community offered by partners such as Pathways Lending, Tennessee Prison Outreach Ministry, and Corner to Corner who are all seeking to work with returning citizens in need of further education or support with financial literacy and business plan development topics to reinforce and refresh what was learned in BEST.

Connection to Capital and Funding Opportunities

Although there is a Pitch Day that happens at the end of the BEST program while still incarcerated no funds are being sought at that time. A post-release Pitch Night will be arranged when there are at least five released BEST graduates who are ready to activate their updated and vetted business plans. They will consult with EC advisors to refresh and update the business plan they created while in BEST. Possible interested funders will be contacted and invited to the event. We will work with the Social Enterprise Alliance and our BEST partners (see Annex) to create interest in participating in the Pitch Night.

As part of BEST, we submit the form to get credit reports, but have mixed results as to responsiveness to submitting a paper version of the form. Often credit reporting agencies do not recognize the address of a prison as being connected to the individual, which is understandable since inmates often move between prisons after incarceration. Upon reentry, opportunities to obtain credit reports and address any issues revealed will be offered. Resources such as Pathways Lending and Tennessee Prison Outreach Ministry will be available to assist with developing individual credit building strategies.

Final Statement

BEST graduates are obtaining jobs within a month of release and have a greater understanding of what being a valuable employee really requires. We know that spending time creating business plans during pre-release is highly impactful, and we have eliminated many of the barriers to successful completion of the program post-release (transportation, demands of family, holding down a job, paying rent, etc.)

BEST is ready to expand and offer the program in the men's prison system again as well as the women's. Receiving this competitive prize will allow BEST to further develop and impact more cohorts of 20-25 participants (depending on what the prison system allows). This could mean that 40-50 individuals' futures are made brighter over the next year, impacting their families and communities as well.