

Wilmington's LINC Inc., applies the 'law of the farm' to post-prison life

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WILMINGTON — Frankie Roberts has spent nearly 20 years working to help people adjust to life after prison. It's not a demographic many people concern themselves with, Roberts said. In fact, Roberts himself was never concerned with the plight of people who had been incarcerated until he missed the chance to reconcile with his own brother, who spent years incarcerated.

That missed opportunity was how Roberts "got into the work," co-founding [Leading Into New Communities Inc. \(LINC\)](#) with Tracey Ray.

The project started in the back of Roberts' Castle Street barber shop and later expanded to a nearby building and then a much larger residence facility with an urban farm in 2012. Since its inception, Roberts

has seen over 2,000 residents come through LINC's doors; people in a difficult – and rarely discussed – limbo between prison life and the freedom most people take for granted.

To understand why Roberts has dedicated himself to what he calls "the work," you have to go back to the 1960s, when he was still a boy.

The story of Marvin E. Roberts

"How did we get here, how did we get started? I had a brother that went to Vietnam and got addicted to heroin in 1968. He actually volunteered for a second tour, because that was his place, he told me, 'man, you get heroin there like cigarettes from the corner store,'" Roberts said.

Roberts said his brother was honorably discharged but fell into addiction and was eventually incarcerated for seven years.

"I was eight years old at the time, but over time I became cold and unforgiving," Roberts said. "My parents made me go to visitation every weekend. I was young – I'm the baby of the family – and I felt like he was getting all the attention."

Roberts graduated high school and went to barber school; he was working as a barber when his brother got out.



The 'urban farm' at Leading Into New Communities, Inc. (Port City Daily photo / BENJAMIN SCHACHTMAN)

“He’d hang around the barber shop, shining shoes, begging customers for money. He’d fallen into that deep disease of addiction. And I was still cold to him,” Roberts said. “Then, around late 97, early 1998, I went through an awakening. God reached into the cesspool of life and showed me a mirror, showed me that without his grace that could have been me. March the 11th, God put it on my heart to apologize, so I was gonna go apologize.”

Roberts found out his brother had just had a minor medical procedure at New Hanover Regional Medical Center and decided to go and meet him.

“I left the barber shop that morning around 10:30, I was about to get in my car go to the hospital when someone called me to the phone. I said, ‘just have them call me back, I got something I’ve got to go take care of.’ And they said, ‘Frankie, I think you might want to take this call.’ And it was my sister-in-law, telling me he had just passed,” Roberts said.

“Marvin was name. Marvin E. Roberts. This campus is named after him, this is the Marvin E. Roberts Transitional Living Facility,” Frankie Roberts said.

Inside the facility

Roberts’ facility is a nondescript one-story building that houses about 30 men and women in two separate wings. The facility has been operating just over five years, home to a small community that live, cook and work on a small urban farm together as they try to adapt to life on the outside.

If LINC looks like a jail, it’s not a surprise: located just down the road from the New Hanover County Correctional Center, the facility used to be a weekend lock-up facility. But it’s a very different environment inside.

“Prison, jail, correctional facilities, they’re structured by intimidation and punishment,” Roberts said. “In jail you might make 25 decisions. You and I, in our everyday lives, we make 300 — (or) more. We have to get people used to that.”

LINC’s first mission, Roberts



Marvin E. Roberts was a Vietnam veteran who struggled with heroin addiction. His brother, Frankie Roberts, has spent 20 years helping those who – like his brother – are fighting to deal with both substance abuse and life after incarceration. (Port City Daily photo / BENJAMIN SCHACHTMAN)

said, is to help residents “work on their mental muscles,” rebuilding their sense of self and self-worth.

“Part of what we do is try to educate the community. A lot of the people who go in and out of prison, a lot of it is based on a community that is not forgiving — that thinks that a person who has been to prison is now somehow not a person anymore. And we have to do that, first thing, when someone comes to us. Individuals come to us and we have to convince them, ‘you’re still a person, just like everyone else,’” Roberts said. “I don’t believe a person should be judged for their worst mistake. They have to believe that too. Then they can start to work on coping mechanisms and skills for their new life.”

For the majority – about 90 percent of the residents – that includes dealing with substance abuse issues.

Roberts said, “prisons have become the new mental health hospitals. You’re not getting counseling, you’re not getting therapy. You might have been technically ‘clean,’ but only because you didn’t have access to your drug of choice. But you’re not getting help.”

LINC partners with Coastal Horizons for the residents – about 90 percent – who need help with substance abuse. They receive treatment — eventually. But the wait can be stressful.

“With what’s going on in New Hanover County with opioids, it’s taking longer and longer to get help, as much as six weeks. We’ve spoken with Trillium (the region’s funding authority for mental health and substance abuse) and told them, ‘hey, we’ve got to get these people in treatment faster.’”

For now, wait times for treatment remain long. That’s a problem when former prisoners face one of the most difficult times in their lives, Roberts said, a period of stress when they are likely to turn to using.

And that’s where LINC’s urban farm comes in.

The ‘law of the farm’

Residents aren’t allowed to seek employment for the first 60 days.

“That might sound like a weird thing to tell people, but believe me, people are often itching to get to work, make money, get back to their life. But they’re not ready,” Roberts said. “First they need to relax, and know that they have a roof over their head.”

Instead, residents have to spend the first two weeks working at LINC’s farm.



Housing in the former detention center may resemble prison, but it comes with much more freedom – and responsibility. (Port City Daily photo / BENJAMIN SCHACHTMAN)

“It comes back to the ‘law of the farm,’” Roberts said. “It’s sowing and reaping. If you take care of things, they grow. If you neglect them, they don’t. It teaches you patience, it teaches you discipline.”

The farm doesn’t use pesticides or herbicides, which means a lot of weeding, Roberts said.

“That’s part of the metaphor, pulling the weeds takes time, and you have to keep at it, and for us that’s tending the garden, which is keeping the negative thoughts from your head,” Roberts said.

In addition to its rotating schedule of crops, the farm also includes hens and the farm’s most popular product, honey. According to Roberts, LINC’s farm sells out of honey as soon as it [announces its availability on Facebook](#). Several local restaurants – including The Basics, which buys all the farm’s collard greens – also purchase vegetables.

After the farm

Resident life at LINC is communal, with new residents bunking six or eight to a room. Residents stay on average about six months, but can stay as long as 18 months.



Frankie Roberts at the southern end of the urban farm. (Port City Daily photo / BENJAMIN SCHACHTMAN)

Once residents start working, they pay “program fees,” a rent not to exceed 30 percent of their income or \$95 per week. They can also advance through increasing levels of independence and privacy.

“We say seniority, but it’s really about your level of initiative and leadership,” Roberts said. “It might be organizing meetings, or leading the kitchen crew.”

When residents are deemed ready, LINC will facilitate job training, secondary education and employment. One of their most successful programs has been getting residents employment at New Hanover County’s landfill.

“Now that may not sound like the best job,” Roberts said. “It starts around \$8.75 or something, but if you are a good worker, you can become a full time county employee, that means a good salary, and benefits. That can be the beginning of a real life.”

But employment, training and education are all just part of having residents “find their mental footing,” Roberts said. Residents are also asked to think about long term goals.

It can be a tough conversation – a criminal record, especially a felony, can make even thinking about pursuing a career difficult.

“We have to have a real conversation,” Roberts said. “If you want to be a doctor, we say, OK, will your charges allow you to do that? We have to be realistic. But, we look at it another way too – your life isn’t over. I know several

attorneys who have done five, six years in prison, now they're lawyers. That's an experience I don't have, so we bring them in. Our people can hear it better from someone who has been there.

"They can tell them, 'yes, you can do it. No, it won't be easy. You will get some doors shut in your face. They will deny your application, you will have to appeal, that appeal might not go smoothly.' They can say, 'here's what you'll have to face, here's who you're going to need on your side along the way,'" Roberts said.

"It comes back to the farm," Roberts said. "Patience. Persistence. Keeping the weeds at bay."



A single hive set-up provides the farm with a great deal of very popular honey. (Port City Daily photo / BENJAMIN SCHACHTMAN)



There is always something new being sowed – and reaped – from LINC's urban farm. (Port City Daily photo / BENJAMIN SCHACHTMAN)



Frankie Roberts in one of the more private rooms at LINC's residence facility. (Port City Daily photo / BENJAMIN SCHACHTMAN)



Residents cook together in a humble but serviceable kitchen, Frankie Roberts said. (Port City Daily photo / BENJAMIN SCHACHTMAN)

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