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Cojones

Catherine Rohr

A tip of the hat to risk-taking, barrier-breaking, establishment-tweaking Texans.

by [Katy Vine](#)

THIRTY-YEAR-OLD CATHERINE ROHR has the shiny brown hair and bright smile of a beauty queen, which may be why anyone passing by her at a coffee shop might be puzzled to overhear her discuss her associates. “I have a strong preference for the top gang leaders and drug dealers,” she’ll say. “Not the little followers.”

But two minutes with the founder of the nonprofit Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP, for short) and her ambitions for Texas’s inmates make you forget her youthful good looks. In 2004 Rohr’s life changed dramatically when she accompanied a friend from New York to Texas to volunteer with Chuck Colson’s Prison Fellowship ministry. Struck by the testimonials she heard, in a few weeks Rohr found herself organizing and hosting an educational panel on business for prisoners in Richmond’s Carol Vance Unit. When she later headed home to her gorgeous apartment in Manhattan, where she was working for the private equity firm American Securities Capital Partners, she scrolled through her Rolodex of about four thousand CEOs and recruited volunteers for a new, nonstandard venture: a program that would train prisoners to become entrepreneurs. Within months, she’d quit her job, moved to Houston, and set up her first course.

Here’s how it works. Fifty to sixty inmates in the Hamilton Unit prerelease facility, near College Station, are selected for a four-month-long series of classes with about 150 executives and MBAs, where they learn how to transfer their skills in illicit cash flow and marketing into good-and-legit business smarts. Then, before graduation, they participate in a business-plan competition evaluated by big-name executives. (In March Martin G. Foster, the president of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Texas, and Robert H. Graham, the chairman of AIM Investments, were judges, among others drawn from Rohr’s list of about eight hundred Texas volunteer execs.) Once they leave prison, grads receive reentry services such as job placement. They’re also paired with executive mentors—something few, if any, reentry programs in the country attempt—and students who complete a twenty-week phase-two program, held in Dallas or Houston, can get access to small-business financing.

With prison crowding reaching a breaking point, Rohr's interest in helping streetwise businessmen comes at the perfect time. An estimated 30 percent of Texas's ex-inmates return to prison within three years of release—a number that, if reduced, could offer the system some relief. Since the inception of PEP, the employment rate among its 256 graduates is nearly 100 percent; recidivism, so far, is only 2.8 percent.

As for Rohr, these days she lives in much less impressive digs, but she hardly seems to care. She raised \$40,000 for the program her first week, \$300,000 her first year, and \$680,000 last year; this year she expects to raise \$2 million to help expand it and create a replicable model for other states. In the meantime, she spends her days teaching inmates and recruiting more volunteers. "I'm not asking anyone to put a Band-Aid on this problem," she says. "I'm asking them to give back of their core competency. 'You are a successful businessman,' I say. 'Come and teach a man to fish.'" 🍷