

VOICES OF REENTRY

Boot Camp with a Heavy Dose of Education

Voices of Reentry is a series of profiles of people making good on second chances after they return from incarceration. Articles in the series tell individual stories to highlight the impact of programs funded under federal Improved Reentry Education grants.

Introduction

Bryan Catin says that the armed robbery that landed him in Miami-Dade Boot Camp was his first and last crime. From 2016-2017, the 23-year-old Miami resident was a cadet in the 16-month diversion program that combines intense paramilitary training with education, work experience, and counseling. Today, he is a supervisor at Steel Homes, a Miami-based fabricator of light gauge steel structures used in commercial and residential building.

“To be honest, I don’t think I would have this job if it weren’t for Boot Camp,” says Catin, 23. “I needed that push. Without them, I wouldn’t have had the guts to get my Tramcom (Training for Manufactured Construction) certification, get my OSHA 30 certification, or go to the interview at Steel Homes and gotten the job. If I hadn’t gone to Boot Camp, I probably would have kept doing what I got caught for. I’d probably be dead.”



Bryan Catin at the Heroes Reception

Boot Camps had their heyday several decades ago and are no longer popular. Miami-Dade’s version is a very different breed, according to Joel Botner, commander of the Reentry Program Services Bureau of the Miami-Dade County Corrections and Rehabilitation Department. “Most had only a ‘shock and incarceration’ phase, then the cadets were released to the street and the changes didn’t hold,” says Botner. Unlike those earlier models, Miami-Dade’s is a three-phase

program with cadets earning more independence and responsibility — with lots of supervision— as time passes. There is also a heavy emphasis on education and employment after the first two months.

The Improved Reentry Education (IRE) grant made it possible for Miami-Dade to beef up its educational offerings, explains Captain Rose Green, Boot Camp’s commanding officer. She has seen a significant evolution in Miami-Dade’s program since its inception in 1995. Before the grant, staff would seek out low-cost educational opportunities for cadets or request funding from the Miami-Dade Corrections and Rehabilitation Department for a determined young man or woman to attend a semester at Miami Dade College or Lindsey Hopkins Technical College. But nothing was formalized and there was no budget for outside vocational education. Today, close, formal partnerships with Miami Dade College (MDC), Lindsey Hopkins Technical College, and Transitions, Inc., a job training and placement center for reentrants, enable cadets like Catin to leave Boot Camp with skills and work experience that greatly increase their chances of post-release success.

Boot Camp at a Glance

What: Miami-Dade Boot Camp is a 16-month court-offered diversion program for young men (and a few women), ages 14-24, who otherwise would be facing serious prison time. Miami-Dade Corrections and Rehabilitation Department runs the program at the Turner Guilford Knight Correctional Center. It consists of three phases and serves about 180 cadets annually.

Phase I: Four months: Rigorous physical training and drill exercises, hard physical labor, and limited freedom of movement. *After the administration of the Ohio Risk Assessment System, cadets receive a detailed plan for services to meet their needs.* Cadets without a high school diploma or GED take adult basic education classes. *Cadets begin a career readiness course that continues into Phase II.*

Phase II: Two months: Cadets move to less restrictive living quarters on site, with ankle bracelets to track their movements. They begin *vocational training or work jobs outside the facility.*

Phase III: Ten months: Cadets move back home, with ankle bracelets still on, and participate in *education programs, like CompTIA or TramCom certification programs, or work (supported by Boot Camp partners).* Cadets do regular phone check-ins with Boot Camp and Boot Camp staff and state probation officers also visit them at their homes and work.

Italics indicate enhancements to original Boot Camp model.

Improving Assessment and Planning

Before receiving the IRE grant, Miami-Dade Boot Camp leaders implemented a more sophisticated way of evaluating cadets' vulnerabilities, needs, and risk of recidivism, the well-respected Ohio Risk Assessment System. "We weren't doing assessments per se, but rather screenings," explains Joel Botner, commander of the Reentry Program Services Bureau of the Miami-Dade County Corrections and Rehabilitation Department. "By using a validated assessment tool, we have more confidence in our predictive capability. We're now planning to implement it department-wide."

Typically 10-15 days after cadets arrive at Boot Camp, Correctional Counselor Shelnita Jackson takes a detailed history, querying them about things like their past criminal activity, substance use, and family supports. Once the assessments are complete, a comprehensive plan is created for each cadet, which may be revised as time goes on.

For cadets who don't yet have a high school diploma or GED, they are promptly enrolled in an adult basic education program. For those who already have a diploma or GED, the plan can include vocational training. "If we can pinpoint their needs in those areas especially and assist them with what they need, they're less likely to recidivate," says Jackson.

Once the assessments are complete, a comprehensive plan is created for each cadet, which may be revised as time goes on. "There are often family goals, for example if there is a child in the custody of the Department of Children and Families, we'll help the cadet get one-on-one counseling or attend a parenting course or get supervised visits upon release," says Jackson. Cadets also attend several behavioral health-oriented classes and groups, including an anger management class and Thinking for Change, a course that helps them re-structure their thought processes and develop social and problem-solving skills.

Jackson said she has witnessed over and over the transformative power of education and employment. "They build confidence that they can be part of society. I tell the cadets it's not necessary to be who you were before. At Boot Camp, we make a better product, I like to say."

A Different Kind of Discipline

Boot Camp's Phase I is what gives the program its name. Cadets rise at 4 a.m. to begin a challenging physical training regimen. "You've got five officers in your face. One cadet acts up and the whole platoon pays for it with extra [physical training]," says Catin. After breakfast, those cadets who haven't yet earned their high school diploma or a GED— many cadets have only gone as far as ninth or tenth grade —attend adult basic education classes taught by Lindsey Hopkins Technical College teachers, while the rest do jobs around the facility. The entire platoon spends several hours every day cleaning the streets around the facility. Cadets' contact with their families is minimal at this point.

Cadets like Catin develop close relationships with their drill instructors during Phase I. Drill instructor Virgilio Lopez admits the marching drills can be grueling – they occupy up to two hours a day— but the pay-off is important. "It promotes an esprit de corps and unity within the platoon, pride, and team work," says Lopez, a former army drill sergeant. "When they first get here, they hate us. And by the end they love us because they realize it's all about discipline, just not the kind of discipline they're used to."

And what he teaches his cadets outside of marching is arguably even more important. "A lot of these kids come from broken homes," he says. "Their fathers never showed them how to make a tie or shave. I teach them how to do these things and talk about the importance of being a real father, how not to look back in anger but to accept the fact that your father wasn't there, but you're going to be a real father to your children." (These conversations complement the camp's Fatherhood and Anger Management courses.) Lopez says he knows where his charges are coming from. Growing up in New York, he was on a path that could have landed him where the cadets are now. He shares stories from his troubled teenaged past and from his deployments in Iraq. "They realize I've been through a lot of what they've been through. They've seen friends get killed and so have I. If I didn't share my past, they would think I was all talk and no experience."

A Different Future Imagined

When cadets arrive at Boot Camp, staff carefully evaluate their strengths and challenges and create customized plans to guide them during the program. (See sidebar "Improving Assessment and Planning.") Staff also works hard to help cadets imagine a different future. [Transition Inc.](#), a Boot Camp partner organization, plays a critical role helping cadets reset their trajectories and, on a deeper level, transform their self-identity from ex-felon to productive employee. Three nights a week, cadets attend the Career Readiness and Employment course taught by Transition's Re-Entry Director Corinne Webb. Until this course, most cadets have given little thought to their skills, interests, or long-term goals nor learned how to conduct themselves in professional environments.

Webb administers the O*Net Interest Profiler to help match cadets' interests to a career and then discusses results in class. Goal setting comes next— an opportunity for cadets to think about what education or work experience they can gain during Phases II and III to prepare them for careers that match their interests. Then Webb works with her students to create the documents they'll need to secure a job, such as resumes, cover letters, and thank you letters. For many, a resume is completely new territory. She teaches them how to translate what they've done — during a job or just through life experiences— into the skills future employers will look for.

Like drill instructor Lopez, Webb fills in gaps in cadets' knowledge of the basics: “We go over the critically important soft skills. How do you show confidence and a friendly disposition? How do you maintain attentive eye contact?” explains Webb. “So many of them are absolutely unfamiliar with this body of skills. Job applicants must be able to make a positive first impression and cadets learn the paramount importance of these skills.” Webb coaches the cadets through mock interviews, engaging the other students as peer evaluators.

She recalls Catin as a very attentive student, sitting in the front of the class from day one. “I can tell by where they sit and how they sit whether they're engaged,” says Webb. “He would take out his notebook, turn to a blank page and sit as if he anticipated there was something he should record during class. He was communicative, contributed to the class, and always had his assignments done.”

Perhaps the most important interview skill Webb teaches her students is how to address their criminal record. “Whether or not the potential employer performs a criminal background check, it's best that the cadets are prepared to explain their record, take responsibility for their actions, and discuss their rehabilitation and commitment to re-enter civil life as law abiding individuals,” said Webb. She gives them a copy of their rap sheet and mug shot, which many are seeing for the first time. “It's a wake up call. I say to them that these things tell the story of their arrest, but not of the outcome. I stress that they need to communicate to the interviewer that although they have a criminal record, they have the skills and competencies to do the job.” Webb vividly remembers Catin's attitude toward his crimes: “he evidenced deep regret for what he did and the harm and injury he had caused. He was very sad and embarrassed. He wanted to go to school and learn and soak in anything he could do to better himself. He was very serious about getting out and moving on.”

Former cadet Ricky Canot, 20, who was arrested for the first and only time as a juvenile for car-jacking, said that he learned from Transition how important it is to be honest about his past. His message to future employers has been: “I went to Boot Camp and it changed my life. Now I'm continuing to turn my life around.” Canot is studying to become a medical assistant. Like Canot, Catin says that the job-seeking skills he learned from Webb were invaluable: “Transition was the

best thing in Boot Camp,” he says. “I’ve continued to keep in contact with Ms. Webb after Boot Camp to let her know I’m still working.”

Focus on Job Training and Employment

During phase II, Boot Camp cadets move “upstairs,” trading barracks-style living for pods that accommodate two people. Restrictions on cadets’ movements begin to ease. When they leave camp during the day to work or attend school, they wear a new “uniform” of black pants, button down white shirts, and ties to engender a feeling of professionalism. Ankle bracelets, hidden under their slacks, track their movements.

The emphasis in this phase is on education and employment. Cadets visit Transition to meet with job specialists, explore job options, receive referrals and apply for positions. Transition maintains an active list of ‘friendly employers’ who are willing to interview and hire youthful offenders.

Every cadet now takes OSHA’s 30-hour training course, the construction safety training sponsored by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. It is taught by a Miami Dade College instructor who comes to the boot camp. “OSHA 30 makes them employable right away, and for cadets who have to pay restitution to their victims, this is particularly important,” says Vicki Tomas, program manager for Tramcom at Miami Dade College’s School of Continuing Education. Tramcom, which stands for Training for Manufactured Construction, is a series of certificate-yielding courses, including OSHA 30, that prepares students for jobs in residential construction, pre-fabricated systems, modular construction, and related industries.

Specialized Training for Motivated Cadets

Beyond the basic certifications, cadets can also take advantage of Tramcom and CompTIA courses at Miami Dade College. Catin and Canot earned several additional certifications through Tramcom. Catin said the program was a great introduction to working in the construction industry. “We learned a lot about safety, how to handle tools, how to keep organized, and how to talk to co-workers on construction sites,” comments Catin, who earned his NCCER (National Center for Construction Education & Research) certification through Tramcom. “With the [NCCER certification], the cadets are considered in a different light,” comments Tomas, who teaches Tramcom classes in addition to administering the program. “They know what to do on a construction job and it’s training an employer would otherwise have to pay out of pocket for. They’re more employable.”

The commute to MDC is not an easy one — Canot recalls the trip taking one to two hours each way, including a bus transfer —, and those cadets who enroll in Tramcom are highly motivated, confirmed Tomas. “They’re thirsty for knowledge and very respectful. The other students in the Tramcom program are underemployed or unemployed and they tend to be older folks who might have kids or family members the same age as the cadets. They understand the cadets' circumstances and take them under their wing. I’ve never had one complaint about any of the cadets,” comments Tomas.

The Goal: A Job with Growth Potential

Tomas is always on the lookout for potential employers for Tramcom students and she identified Miami-based Steel Homes as potentially a good fit. She reached out to Steel Homes' co-founder and Project Management Director Yuri Ynigo to see if she would host her students for a visit to the company so they could see the real-world applications of the skills they were learning. Ynigo agreed and the relationship grew from there.

Transition established an on-the-job training contract with Steel Homes whereby Transition would pay 75 percent of a cadet’s wages during the two-month training period with the understanding that Steel Homes would retain the cadet at full salary after that. As a company introducing a new product to the Florida market—light gauge steel structures—it fit with Steel Homes’ ethos to give the cadets a chance, according to Ynigo. She concedes that not every cadet has worked out, so the training subsidies are very helpful. Sometimes, the cadets stop working through no fault of their own, adds Ynigo, for example they can't find affordable housing near the company.

“When you get a good one like Bryan, it pays off tremendously,” continues Ynigo. **“They're loyal workers because you backed them up in a moment of need.** We try to treat them like family — throw them birthday parties — so they can feel human again.” She says that Catin, who began working at Steel Homes as a general laborer and is now a supervisor in the framing department, has grown personally and professionally. “He's an excellent worker and he runs a tight crew,” says Ynigo. “And he's not a sit-back supervisor. He's totally hands-on, doing the work with his guys. We want Bryan and others like him to grow with this company.”

Home Again

In Phase III, cadets move back home and are required to check in with Boot Camp by phone several times a day. Boot Camp case managers visit the cadets at home, work, or school twice a week —and this “after care” differentiates the Miami-Dade Boot Camp from the more old-school types, according to Commanding Officer Captain Green. “There are still cadets from years ago

that I call 'beyond Boot Campers' who I'm still in touch with," she says. "I've helped some of them pick out their college courses."

Before phase III begins, Correctional Counselor Shelnita Jackson visits the homes where the cadets will be staying in order to determine if they are appropriate. She'll query family members, friends, or significant others about themselves as well as the cadet, including questions about the cadets' employment, substance use, and abuse histories. "I'll also ask them what they think the cadets' strengths and limitations are and why they think they got in trouble," says Jackson. She often gets to know these members of the cadets' support system quite well. "I'm their primary liaison from early on and they call a lot to ask questions and see how the cadets are doing."

In the beginning of the 10-month phase III, Catin lived with the mother of his three children, but that didn't work out, so he moved back home with his parents. Catin began working at Steel Homes in October 2016, about 10 days after he returned home. In the beginning of phase III, he was working at Steel Homes from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and attending Tramcom course at Miami Dade College from 6 to 10 p.m. But that schedule became unworkable after about a month, so he stopped attending school.

He sees a bright future with Steel Homes.

"I love what I do, I get along with everyone at work, and everyone knows me," he says. "I'm the youngest guy in the company and I have older people coming up to me, asking 'Bryan, what do we next?' That's a good feeling. I'm sticking to this job for quite some time. There's a lot more to learn."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Vicki Ritterband is the author of this profile. She is deeply grateful to Bryan Catin and Ricky Canot who shared their Boot Camp experiences with her.

Special thanks to the staff and leadership of the Miami Dade Boot Camp, Transitions Inc. Steel Homes, and Tramcom. They demonstrated pride in the students' achievements and a commitment to their ongoing success.

Lucretia Murphy, senior director at JFF, helped to shape this profile and provided insightful feedback on multiple drafts.

This resource was prepared with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, under contract no. ED-ESE-15-A-0011/0001. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. This document is in the public domain and may be reproduced without permission.