

THE PROGRAM THAT JUMPSTARTED MY TRANSFORMATION

BY MATTHEW GRANT

MY TALE OF TRANSFORMATION DOES NOT exist without JumpStart.

In 2023, I returned to my dorm after working a 10-hour shift in the Correction Enterprises sewing plant at Columbus Correctional Institution. Walking by the bulletin board, I noticed a flash of color among the black and white backdrop of unit rules and PREA guidelines. Curious, I walked over for a closer look.

The flyer had “JumpStart” in bright text and a figure doing what looked like a flying karate kick. Included was some mumbo-jumbo about changing your life, and a date for an informational meeting two weeks away. *Probably just another gimmicky program*, I thought, before going about my business.

As the meeting’s date approached, the flyer kept catching my eye, so I decided to attend. At least I would get out of the block.

Stepping from the cold January air into the warmer air inside the corrugated-tin shed used for visitation, I saw nearly a dozen non-staff civilians scattered about the room’s perimeter. I sat in the back row and waited.

Eventually, a man stepped to the podium. He introduced himself and the program’s other volunteers. His name was Ed Troha, president of JumpStart USA. Next, he told us the history of JumpStart.

In a South Carolina prison, four men in a Bible study discussed why they saw men repeatedly return to prison. They asked, “What did these men lack? What would equip them for success reentering society?” The answers to those questions inspired the creation of JumpStart in 2008. Since then, the program has spread to 18 facilities across South Carolina, as well as prisons in North Carolina, Georgia, and Ohio.

JumpStart aims to break the cycle of recidivism. The 40-week intensive program is Christian-based but emphasizes a “not church as usual” approach. Instead of relying on feel-good sermons, it focuses on real work and accountability. JumpStart disci-

ples men and women inside and outside of prison, teaching the core values of responsibility, accountability, and submission to authority, values necessary for success on the outside. Since its inception, over 6,000 men and women have graduated, more than 4,500 have been released, and 96% of those released have stayed out of prison.

JumpStart sounded like the program I needed. Serving life without parole, I had grown disheartened watching men repeatedly squander their chance at freedom. I wanted to do something but had no idea how to make an impact.



Left to right: JumpStart USA President Ed Troha, Mission Advancement Director Rob Whitner, Matthew Grant, and JumpStart North Carolina Executive Director George Benner.

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I was enthusiastic about the program but not about the faith-based curriculum. Then, I met Rob Whitner, JumpStart’s director of mission advancement and one of its four creators. While he spoke, I was struck by the sincerity and conviction radiating from him. I don’t remember his exact words, but I remember the first words I spoke to him: “Man, I want to do what you do.”

As one of 22 men selected for JumpStart’s inaugural class at Columbus, I eagerly learned ways to disrupt the recidivism cycle with the men around me. Each participant received a “lifebook” authored by JumpStart CEO Cary Sanders, who served nine years in South Carolina. The lifebook’s weekly

assignments coincide with chapters in *A Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren and are designed to encourage critical self-examination. Discussions are centered around learning and applying principles such as obedience, dependability, and truthfulness. These discussions were instrumental in transforming me into someone who actively pursues responsibility and accountability.

After nearly 30 weeks into JumpStart, I learned my mother had only a week to live. I wasn’t equipped to deal with losing her. Faced with my greatest fear, I prayed to God for the first time in 20 years. Being an introvert, I kept my grief and pain to myself. She passed on a Monday. It was the worst day of my life. By Thursday evening I needed JumpStart. It had become my refuge, a place filled with real love from genuine people.

Opening that night’s meeting, Whitner said God placed a special message on his heart to encourage somebody and shared Psalm 34:18: “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.” The message was for me. I was both broken and crushed, but that message began my healing. Each remaining week took on new meaning for me.

I thank God for giving me the courage to sign up for JumpStart. It helped me begin healing and provided a reason to keep living.

Despite my life sentence, I felt a sense of purpose. I learned God has plans for me, including using me to inspire others to transform their lives. Equipped by JumpStart, I’m committed to doing my part to combat recidivism in North Carolina.

JumpStart volunteer Karen Knight encouraged me to apply to the North Carolina Field Minister Program, where I’m fulfilling the dream of obtaining a college degree.

My transformation is not complete, but thanks to JumpStart and its volunteers, my life is dedicated to doing what Rob Whitner does—serving the incarcerated population and the society they will reenter. *NCPNT*