



From left: Jonathan Aitken, a CFEO Trustee; Jane, Lady Williams, Mother of the former Archbishop of Canterbury and Leroy Skeete

The Mentors are coming!

That was the message from a large London audience invited to help recruit mentors willing to befriend and guide offenders as they are released. Jonathan Aitken reports

The evening was organised by the charity Caring for Ex-Offenders (CFEO) founded by Paul Cowley who is both an ex-offender and an ex-SAS soldier. The stars of the evening were former “bad boys” who had been successfully guided into law abiding lives by CFEO mentors. Six of these ex-offenders, who between them clocked up over 50 years behind bars, told their colourful stories. All had been helped to return to the straight and narrow by CFEO.

First up to the microphone was reformed career criminal Leroy Skeete who described how his mentor had taught him how to write a CV, given him job interview training, and introduced him to the charity Blue Sky which

specialises in offering jobs to ex-offenders. Leroy had worked for Blue Sky on landscaping and other council contracts for six months before being promoted to the rank of supervisor. He had then moved on to well-paid work for London Underground on night maintenance. “I’ve been out of prison for six years and I’m not going back” Leroy declared to loud applause.

Michael Emmett had been even longer (17 years) out of prison. He had served 12 years for drug smuggling and fought a long battle to conquer his demons of addiction. “I pay tribute to the patience of my mentors” he said.

Many other voices were heard during the evening, including the Chaplain of HMP Pen-

tonville, Jo Davies, and the Community Chaplain of HMYOI Feltham, Andrew Cooper. “Around 1200 young men between the ages of 15 -21 will pass through Feltham this year and around 750 of them will reoffend” said Andrew. “We are building a strong community mentoring scheme and we desperately need volunteers to become mentors. We are so pleased by this CFEO initiative which will help us recruit volunteers to meet this challenge”.

The most unexpected voice, introduced by the evening’s compère, CFEO Trustee Jonathan Aitken, was a lady who he described as MABC and OSP. “Those acronyms sound as though they might come from the Prison Service Instruction Handbook” he joked “but in fact they stand for the Mother of the Archbishop

of Canterbury and the Oldest Surviving Person who worked at No 10 Downing St as a secretary to Prime Minister Winston Churchill”. Jane, Lady Williams, was warmly cheered as she spoke of her support for the rehabilitation of offenders. She said she was too old to be a mentor but later changed her mind as she signed up to become a new recruit as a CFEO mentor.

Much valuable expertise from both mentors and mentees was displayed in the numerous contributions from the audience. One point of general agreement was that mentoring was a relationship of mutual engagement depending on good personal chemistry. One size fits all was not the right formula.

Another consensus was that the best mentoring is built on a relationship that begins in prison. Mentors who take the trouble to visit an inmate before release start the relationship on a better basis than those who have their first meeting at the gate.

Later speakers included Andrea Farley-Moore who explained the special mentoring needs of women prisoners and Jonathan Robinson author of “Innit?” who argued that in-prison mentoring ought to start on the first day of a custodial sentence.

In a second contribution Leroy Skeete said that ex-offenders could sometimes be the most effective mentors for current offenders. He himself was mentoring a young offender by meeting him once a month. “He’s doing really well, studying and working hard”, said Leroy, “just give him time and he will come good”.

Paul Cowley the Chief Executive and Founder of CFEO wound up the proceedings by thanking everyone for making such a large and warm response to the Action Call for Mentoring. “Please spread the word because we need lots and lots more mentors. Please sign up tonight to come and be trained as mentors. Once our mentors are trained we will send them wherever they are needed. Last time I was in a jail in Texas in a room with 40 prisoners, 40 mentors arrived to come alongside them and befriend them. That’s the sort of response we hope to get here”.

At the end of the evening 39 members of the audience signed on to become mentors and to attend one of CFEO’s next training days which are being held on June 18, 29, July 8 and 10.

CFEO will hold further “Mentoring - A Call to Action” evenings in various parts of the country. It aims to recruit and train at least 150 new mentors in 2015.

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