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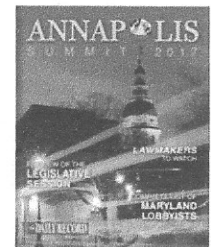
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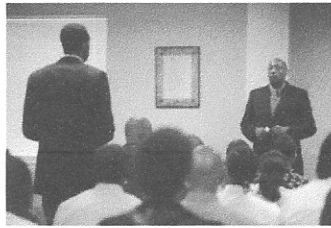
## Strive Baltimore job training program uses formula based on tough love

By: Chelsea Feinstein Daily Record Business Writer July 28, 2011

It was orientation day for the 158th class of the Strive Baltimore employment training program. The 51 people who showed up seeking help finding jobs were reluctant to speak.

Many were forced to move forward from the back row. Several walked out after the teacher singled them out for lateness or improper dress. When asked who in the room was a leader, few stepped forward.

Three weeks later, at the program's cap-and-gown graduation, 24 graduates spoke at a lectern in front of family and friends. The messages they relayed were consistent: They had learned how to present themselves to employers, developed strong bonds with their colleagues, and gained the structure and discipline they needed to succeed.



Joseph Jones (right), founder of the Center for Urban Families.

Strive, run by the Center for Urban Families, provides those who are struggling to get jobs with an intensive three-week workshop, teaching the skills needed to gain employment in a tough economy.

After running the program once a month for 13 years, CFUF founder and President Joseph Jones and Strive Director of Workforce Development Moses Hammett have turned helping people find jobs into an exact science through Strive's own perfected version of tough love.

"We use our collective life experience to say to a young man or young woman, 'This is what it's going to take for you to turn your life around,'" Jones said. "If you can put that life experience into the framework of a business model, you can get people to believe that they can be better than who they've always been."

That life experience has been a defining factor for Jones, 55, who said he spent 17 years shooting heroin and snorting cocaine while drifting in and out of prison and fathering a child he did not help to raise.

"I knew I was better than who I was, and I just couldn't do anything about it," Jones said, citing his addiction as a force that prevented him from turning his life around.

In 1986 a judge offered him an opportunity, and he took it: He could go to a drug treatment facility in exchange for suspension of his pending prison sentence. While in treatment, Jones met Hammett, 58, who was working at the facility as a counselor, and kicked his addiction.

After completing a year of drug rehabilitation, he re-enrolled at Baltimore City Community College, where he made the dean's list his first semester back after being on academic probation before his treatment.

Twelve years later, in 1998, Jones, who had since married and become a father for a second time, founded Strive Baltimore to help others avoid the path he had gone down. He expanded the program into CFUF, then known as the Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development, a year later.

#### Private funding

Strive is funded by private donors and has not accepted federal grants since 2004 because of what Jones calls the "prescriptive" nature of federal funding.

"When you get federal funding, they say, 'We want you to do this,'" Jones said. "It's prohibitive. They can fund you based on how many people you graduate, but each Strive class is different and has to be dealt with differently."

The program's \$700,000 annual budget is financed primarily by the Abell Foundation and the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation. Abell contributes about \$400,000; Weinberg, \$200,000.

Based on a workforce training program originally founded in East Harlem, N.Y., in the 1980s, Strive uses an in-your-face approach as part of a tried-and-true formula that has been in place throughout the program's existence.

"Employers are looking for candidates that can show up on time, follow direction and have a great attitude,"

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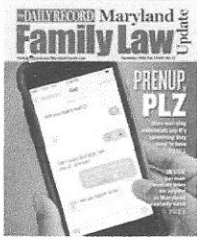
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Hammett said. "That has been pretty much the formula that we have worked with over the last 13 years, and it hasn't changed. Even with the state of the economy, employers are saying the same formula still stands."

Strive teaches the skills necessary to gain employment through a set of strictly enforced rules. From orientation day onward, participants are continually criticized in front of the class for everything from showing up late to putting their hands in their pockets.

"You have to hold people accountable," said Anthony Morgan, 30, one of two trainers who teach the course. "And then once you get those basic things out, you can start working on deeper things — some of the behaviors that actually result in you coming in late and why you're thinking that way. So, call people out at first, and then we go from there."

### A 'boot camp'

The tough tactics lead many participants to describe their time at Strive as "boot camp." For three weeks, participants must show up every day at 9 a.m., dressed in strict business attire. Until 5 p.m. they participate in resume and interview training, computer tutorials, leadership and team-building exercises, and public-speaking challenges.

Lateness and improper attire are penalized with 500- or 1,000-word essays. Excuses are not accepted. Using cellphones in class or speaking without standing cost students fines of up to \$5. For those who can't afford to pay those fines, classmates chip in, digging for coins until they collectively come up with the money.

Marcus Pettiford, 25, was on the verge of walking out for being told he had to pay \$10 in fines for inappropriate language. He returned only when a fellow classmate convinced him that his peers would help him get the money.

"Maybe some of the methods that they're using may not suit me too well, but I've got a bigger goal in mind in the long run — to get to the end and graduate," Pettiford said after returning to class. "I can't let these people rattle me. If I can handle being incarcerated and people talking to me any kind of way, and humbling myself and not flaring up and wanting to fight, I can handle these people."

Others weren't as persistent as Pettiford. Thirty-year-old Takeya Brittingham and her 20-year-old brother Terrel Howard insisted that they would finish the program, despite walking out and returning twice on orientation day.

"I'm not a failure or a quitter," Brittingham, who convinced Howard to attend, said at the close of orientation. "We came too far and we've been planning too long to walk away."

But neither Brittingham nor Howard was present for class the following week, along with the 25 others who failed to complete the course.

"We're going to challenge them because we don't want to waste their time, and we don't want them to waste our time," Hammett said.

### Used to challenges

Those who enter Strive are used to facing challenges. According to statistics released by Strive, of the 4,035 who had graduated from the program as of June 30, 63 percent had been convicted of a crime, 40 percent had histories of substance abuse and 53 percent lacked stable housing. Fifty-eight percent had children younger than 18 depending on them.

With Strive's help, the staff said, about 70 percent of the graduates have been placed in jobs.

"Our clients are straddling the fence in some cases," said Lechelle Jones, a career development case manager for Strive. "They're scared of success and they're definitely afraid of failure. You can't hold their hand once they cross over, you can just motivate them while they're here so when they cross over they can just have those things that you taught them very pronounced in their minds."

"To see them come back months from the placement with bank accounts, with their own apartments, with cars, taking family trips — some of the things we take for granted — is the most rewarding part."

Christy Lee-Shockley was one such graduate. After trying to support her 3-year-old daughter while living in a homeless shelter, Lee-Shockley, now 36, needed help getting back on her feet. At 23, Lee-Shockley graduated from the first Strive Baltimore class. She is now married with three children and working as a fiscal administrator for the State of Maryland, making more than \$50,000 a year.

"People have different barriers when they come to Strive," Lee-Shockley said. "For some it's a criminal history, for others it's a lack of the hard or soft skills needed. My barrier was doubt. I just needed a little bit of directional support."

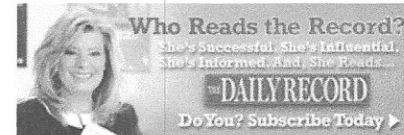
Lee-Shockley said she found that direction in the Strive staff.

"The sense of caring at Strive, although masked behind their in-your-face approach, was ubiquitous," she said. "There were people there who genuinely wanted to see you succeed, and you could feel that."

### Benefits to employers

The benefits of Strive have been felt not only by its graduates, but by Strive's employer partners as well.

Michael Parker, a recruiter for the University of Maryland Medical Center, said UMMC has hired between 75 and 100 Strive graduates over the past year and has never had a problem with a Strive hire.



"The program does wonders not just for the individual, but for the employer as well," Parker said as he prepared to interview about 10 Strive graduates. "They do a great job of pre-screening the candidates, they do a great job of prepping the candidates for interviews, making sure that they're prepared. They really focus on professionalism and those skills that are often missing from candidates coming off the streets or from school."

Morris Gregory, 26, a 2008 Strive graduate, was one of those interviewing with Parker. As he waited for his turn, Gregory said he felt confident in his chances of being hired.

"When I came to Strive I wasn't in school, I was heading down the wrong path, and now I'm in college, I've got a job, I'm looking forward to my career and being a better father to my kids," Gregory said.

For Karen Thomas, 54, seeing her daughter, Kimberly Byers, graduate from Strive was a high point after years of watching her struggle with unemployment.

"She now has a marketable skill behind her and an organization that is known worldwide on her side," Thomas said after the graduation ceremony. "She has people here who sincerely want to see her move forward. What she's taken away from this experience is priceless. My daughter hasn't even begun to recognize how rich her life is just from this experience. There's so much more ahead of her."

## Life at Strive

### The ground rules:

- Absence or lateness without notifying the trainers in advance results in automatic dismissal from the program.
- Sleeping, using cellphones, changing out of work clothes and taking unauthorized breaks are punishable with \$5 fines.
- Cursing and challenging staff members are punishable with \$2 fines.
- Eating in class and putting hands in pockets are punishable with \$1 fines.
- Not standing to speak, not stating name before speaking, using slang, sighing and rolling eyes are punishable with 50-cent fines.

### The dress code:

- Men: White or light-blue dress shirts; tie; black, brown, navy or gray slacks; black or brown shoes
- Women: White or light-blue blouse; black, brown, navy or gray skirt or slacks; black, brown or navy pumps

### Week 1: Assessment

- All participants are required to speak to the class for five minutes about their past, present and future.
- Students are tested for basic education and are given introductory computer skills training.

### Week 2: Professional development

- Mock interviews with potential employers test participants' interviewing skills in front of the class.
- Participants are given assistance developing resumes and filling out sample job applications.

### Week 3: Team building and career planning

- Teams of four or five participants create fake companies and are required to give a pitch to the class on how to sell a broken product. The team with the most convincing pitch gets all of the money collected from fines throughout the workshop.
- Participants take career aptitude tests and are given assistance finding the career path that is right for them.
- Each graduate addresses their family, instructors and peers at a cap-and-gown graduation ceremony.

### After Strive:

- The Monday following graduation, students return to meet with career development case managers, who help them to find initial job placements.
- Students are given employment guidance for two years following graduation.

**Note:** An earlier version of the story misstated the percentage of graduates that Strive helps to place in jobs.

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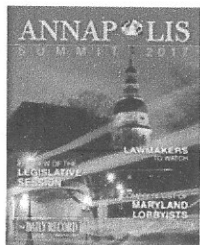
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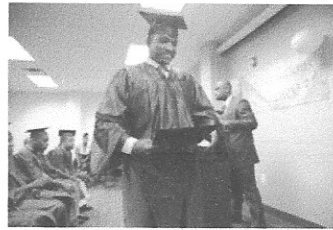
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### FAMILY LAW

## Strive participants often have histories of drug abuse, criminal activity, homelessness

By: Chelsea Feinstein Daily Record Business Writer July 28, 2011

Harold Ghee knew he had to grow up when his 13- and 8-year-old daughters told him they were tired of only seeing him during brief visits to prison.



Harold Ghee

"I've been there for birthdays and holidays. Every time they come to see me, when it's time to leave, they [would] break down crying," said Ghee, 31, who has served 8½ years in prison in three separate stints for drug dealing.

For people like Ghee, who completed his last jail term in January, employment training workshop Strive Baltimore throws out a lifeline, providing those with histories of criminal activity, drug abuse and homelessness with the training needed to find jobs and keep them, even in a struggling economy.

Nearly everyone who enrolls in Strive describes having a tipping point in their lives similar to Ghee's. Deciding to enroll, said workforce development director Moses Hammett, is a point that many come to only after a serious shock.

"That decision may be preceded by, 'One of my boys just got killed,' 'One of my boys' houses just got raided,' or 'I just had a new baby and I want to be there to be a dad for my child,'" said Hammett. "It could be a number of different things, but something hit them."

For 43-year-old Phillip Bennett, the end of a 22-year relationship that took his three children out of his life caused a downward spiral that left him unemployed and living out of his van.

"I just kind of got lost out there, and then when I found out that [my ex-girlfriend] didn't want me to see the kids anymore, I just went into this spiral," Bennett said. "That's all I had left was my children. So I just decided I needed to retrain my head and refocus."

Ivanja Hamilton made the decision after an arrest for drug possession marred an otherwise perfect record.

"I'd never been into that kind of trouble before," said Hamilton, 20. "In high school, it wasn't really too hard for me. Things just came easy. I did my work and then I didn't really have to do too much. So once I got to college I wasn't used to that workload and all the studying I had to do, so I really didn't make that transition well."

Hamilton quickly got mixed up in "the wrong crowd," neglecting her studies, and left Howard University after one semester of poor grades. Her arrest alarmed her mother, who told her about Strive, Hamilton said.

Perry Farrington realized he had to change when he called his daughter from prison on her fifth birthday and she told him that she hated him.

"I'm 31 years old and I've been [dealing drugs] since I was 14," said Farrington. "I thought I would be a millionaire. I'm not. So I'm here just doing it the right way."

Although Farrington was suspended from the class for smoking marijuana during his lunch break, he returned the following session and graduated automatically after two days because he found a job on his own.

But getting in the door at Strive is just the first of many obstacles, as participants face unorthodox teaching techniques used to ensure that those who make it through the class also make it in the workforce.

"We deliver a tough message. I make no qualms about it," said Hammett. "Many of the folks that we work with will probably not have had this type of structure before. But one of the things that we've found out is that many of these folks are looking for structure because they want to do something productive with their lives."

Many don't make it through. Of the 51 people who showed up for last session's orientation on June 24, just

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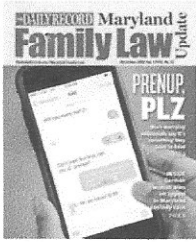
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35 officially enrolled in the class and only 24 made it to graduation on July 15, a rate typical of Strive classes.

"It's zero tolerance," said Derek Torrain, 25, who enrolled in Strive after his time in jail left him unemployed. "You have one shot to prove yourself. If you don't, there's the door."

For those who went on to graduate, the promise of a better opportunity for success helped them persevere through three weeks of constant scrutiny.

"I really didn't think I was going to make it," said Marcus Pettiford, 25, after the graduation ceremony. "Humility is the key term that they taught us, especially me, because in the beginning, I stormed out because my temper and my attitude got in the way. But [the trainers] kept me in line. They said, 'I know you're not a quitter.'"

Throughout the course of the program, changes in participants' attitudes were apparent to friends and family.

"He would come home every day sharing and really excited about the opportunities and the experience," said Tiffany Miller, 31, Bennett's girlfriend of one year. "Instead of seeing the glass as half empty, he sees it as half full. The positivity and the possibility are driving him more than not being able to find a job."

Hamilton said graduating with her mother proudly in attendance was a high point in the three weeks.

"I feel like I'm really accomplishing something good," Hamilton said. "I feel like I have the tools now to go out and do it on my own."

Many others shared their success with family members on graduation day, including 22-year-old William Rowlette, whose cousin, Casey Pulley, 17, cheered loudly when Rowlette's name was called and laughed throughout his speech.

Pulley said that though he and Rowlette had always been close, his cousin's time in jail was hard on their relationship.

"We always talked and stuff, but it wasn't the same because he wasn't there," Pulley said. "Now I really feel like he's trying to change and better his life. This is the first time I've ever seen him do something positive."

Pulley said his cousin was a role model for him.

"I don't need to do what he's done because I've seen the outcome of it," he said.

When the graduates turned the tassels on their royal blue graduation caps, few cheered louder than Pulley.

Before the celebrations were over, graduates were already turning their attention to the next step — returning to Strive the following Monday to meet with a case manager who would help them find an initial job placement.

Darrius Palmer, 25, graduated FROM Strive in his second attempt, after failing to complete the program in 2008. He said having faced the same obstacle twice made it even more gratifying when he finally made it to graduation day.

"I wanted to complete it because I really want a job and I really want to know how to handle myself in the world," Palmer said with a smile. "I'm going to get up early Monday morning, come here and get ready for work."

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