

Volunteer Wins with a Powerful Appearance Prepping Prisoners for Post Release

DALLAS, April 24, 2017 -- Two years ago, when Carl and Linda Thomas stepped inside the Sanders “Sandy” Estes Unit in Venus, TX, they found themselves locked behind bars with men convicted of crimes ranging from embezzlement to murder. Those felony crimes, however, were irrelevant to the Thomases. They did not go to the prison to judge the men on their past, but to volunteer their time preparing the prisoners for their future.

That first visit turned into a “calling” for the husband and wife team. Since, the duo has coached, mentored and positively bolstered the lives of nearly 500 imprisoned men as executive volunteers of the Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP), a comprehensive curriculum designed by Baylor University to prepare inmates transitioning from behind bars to a working society.

“The first day I went after my husband had visited the month before, I was concerned since I had no DWIs, had not robbed anyone or even done drugs, that I had nothing in common and would not be able to connect with them,” Linda Thomas reminisces. *“However, when I shared I know what it’s like to start your life over with just \$50, just like they do when they are released, that seemed to make an instant connection I wasn’t expecting. It was invigorating!”*

The connection Linda Thomas makes with the qualified participants as well as with the prison staff and other volunteers recently earned her recognition as the 2017 North Texas PEP Volunteer of the Year. The award was presented last month during a ceremony in Dallas in front of more than 100 attendees, including eSchool (Entrepreneurship School) graduates – former inmates who have completed the prison’s post-release continuing education program.



Linda Thomas shares her story with a PEP participant.

“How wonderful to receive this award and acknowledgement for something I really enjoy doing,” says Linda, a professional speaker, storyteller and author. *“There are not very many women volunteers in PEP; but the skills sets I have in teaching others how to tell their personal stories, dress for success, and getting along with all generations, fit in for the inmates and the PEP staff.”*

PEP, founded in 2004, unites “free world” top executives, entrepreneurs and MBA students with convicted felons – some of whom are serving 20+ year sentences—to empower and reboot their lives by unlocking their human potential through entrepreneurial passion, education and mentoring. Although approximately 10,000 inmates are invited to apply to the rigorous program, only a pool of about 2,000 actually complete the application and the top 450-500 are accepted after completing a series of tests and interviews. Once accepted, the men partake in a three-month, in prison character development program followed by a six-month “mini MBA” program in either the Estes Unit in Venus or the Cleveland Unit Correction Center in Cleveland, TX, just outside of Houston. The business education curriculum is taught by PEP staff, board members and business executives on topics within their expertise. Once all requirements of the program are completed, graduates earn a Certificate of Entrepreneurship from Baylor University Hankamer School of Business, and become eligible for business financing through PEP’s partnerships.

Carl and Linda make the trek to the privately-run Estes Unit, about 40 miles south of Dallas, once a month. *"We consider this a date. We are getting a mini-vacation from our cell phones,"* says Carl Thomas, referring to the "no cell phone" policy inside the prison.

Then once every six months, the two travel to both the Venus and Cleveland institutions so Linda can share her expertise with the more advanced program participants during half-day training sessions on the power of color, how to dress to influence, and get along with all generations in the workplace. These sessions were added last year after five inmates read Linda's book, *"COLOR NATION: The Power of Color in Business and in Leadership,"* which she had donated to the Estes library for PEP. The men saw a need for their future success in learning more about color as they re-entered society and asked the in-prison education coordinator to include her training program.

Linda, who serves on the PEP North Texas Advisory Board, adds, *"Lots of people might think going to a prison would be a rather dark place, but I have found it is a wellspring of hope and gratefulness. These men are so appreciative. Their thankfulness keeps us coming back."*



2017 North Texas award recipients: Linda Thomas (left) – Volunteer of the Year; Kyle Cox (ctr)- Entrepreneur of the Year; and Brent Taylor (rt) – Employer of the Year

About Linda Thomas

Linda Thomas founded Powerful Appearance LLC in 1999 to provide business education and training on how the colors people wear can mean the difference between a promotion, closing a deal, being influential and losing them all. She is a member of the National Speakers Association, the American Federal of Television and Radio Artists AFL-CIO, and is certified through The London Image Institute. In addition, she is a published author and is creator and producer of several storytelling events across the Dallas/Fort Worth, TX area. To learn more about Linda, go to www.PowerfulAppearance.com. Her husband Carl, owns PR Incorporated, an online design firm. www.PRIncorporated.com

About the Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP)

Established in 2004, the Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP) is an independent 501(c)(3) dedicated to delivering the nation's best outcomes in the prison re-entry field. PEP pioneers innovative programs that connect the nation's top executives, entrepreneurs and MBA students with convicted felons. The program provides unparalleled resources and real-world values-based business skills to inmates so that once they are back in society they have the tools, skills and support structure to pursue healthy, fulfilling and productive lives. By 2025, PEP's goal is to serve at least 4,300 men per year. For more information about PEP or to learn about volunteer opportunities or how to donate, go to www.pep.org.

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