

Where hope grows

Sometimes a bus trip upstate leads to a field, not a cell

By Lenore Skenazy

For 26 years, Harold Rosario battled heroin addiction and homelessness. Then, for nine months, he battled something new: groundhogs and deer. The critters are still winning. But the heroin is a thing of the past, thanks to Renewal Farm. On this upstate farm run by Project Renewal, a nonprofit organization helping homeless New Yorkers who are drug addicted, mentally ill, or both, the most hard-pressed homeless men are learning organic farming.



This may sound about as helpful as teaching hardened criminals to clog dance, but as it turns out, when you teach a man to grow a plant, chances are he will grow, too.

The place where it all occurs is Camp LaGuardia, a 1,000-man homeless shelter in Chester, N.Y. Men eager to escape the concrete jungle can choose it as an alternative to the urban shelters. Buses ferry them an hour and a half up to the camp, which looks like a 1950s motel, at least the part that wasn't formerly a women's prison.

Any LaGuardia resident willing to start drug counseling even as he learns basic weeding is welcome to join Renewal Farm. But even though the program tops out at 25 students, there's no one on the waiting list. Why not? Because farming is hard work and - for most city folk - alien, too.

"I didn't like it at first," admits Rosario. Being upstate reminded him of only one thing: prison.

The last time Renewal student Wendell Jones grew anything, he was in kindergarten, planting beans. As for Larry Rudisel, a former coke addict, upstate was so foreign, "I bought a disposable camera. I wanted my mom to see a skunk and a deer."

But over the course of nine months, the men change. After 12-step meetings in the morning, they toil outside. On winter nights, they take turns getting up every two hours to clear the snow off the plastic protecting their plants. In the summer, they swelter picking string beans. The fruits of their labors are sold in Manhattan green markets. Guys have to earn the privilege of coming down to sell, but in a way, the market is a training ground, too. Anyone who can deal with purslane-crazed yuppies without storming off the job or reaching for a drink is ready for pretty much anything. Even life ahead, starting all over.

"It's a beautiful experience," says Jones, who will graduate this fall.

"You plant the seeds, you water them - it's almost like raising kids," says Rudisel, who will graduate with him.

Rosario, who finished the program two years ago and is now a case manager at the farm, cannot believe there was a time when upstate made him uneasy. He has moved his family there from Spanish Harlem. His son is starting college. As for his wife, who has always stood by him, "I bring her flowers."

Of course, that's pretty easy when you work on a farm. But on this particular plot of land, where a perfect little program brings trampled lives to blossom, no one takes one beautiful thing for granted.

Originally published on August 31, 2005