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September 14, 2006

Her 5-year-old daughter had been taken away from her; her few remaining clothes too small now that she's eating food instead of ingesting methamphetamines.

But after only two weeks on the outside, she's wearing a crisp white blouse and a sunny smile.

"I want my life back," Pugh says firmly, wiping away the tears that flow when she talks of losing custody and the trust of her child.

This is her Second Chance, literally. The 28-year-old ex-insurance adjuster sits in the front row of a class run by a nonprofit of that name, which helps ex-offenders get back on their feet.

She faces tough odds.

In California, about 70 percent of parolees are back behind bars within two years.

The good news is that she has more than just hope on her side. A new study has found Second Chance's rehabilitation program has had significant success.

The study, made by the Social and Behavioral Research Institute at California State University San Marcos, found that 70 percent of program graduates stayed out of jail.

It also found that about 68 percent of ex-offenders not in the program landed back in jail within the two-year tracking period, according to study leader Chuck Flacks.

Second Chance paid for the study, \$85,000 for the multi-year data analysis and the tracking of 965 parolees from local jails and prisons.

Such evaluations have the advantages by being done under general academic standards, but performed more quickly than traditional academic research, Flacks said.

The problem of combatting recidivism is an urgent one in California, which faces serious prison overcrowding and skyrocketing costs. As Second Chance founder Scott Silverman notes, taxpayers spend about \$34,000 a year to incarcerate an inmate, criminals, while his rehabilitation program costs about \$4,000.

Silverman's own success at beating addiction in the mid-1980s helps him relate to the 9,000 clients who last year came through his program, operated out of offices in Encanto.

He is blunt with them. On white walls he has painted his slogan: "Life ain't fair. It ain't never gonna be fair."

Midway through a recent class, he gathers Pugh and her fellow classmates into a circle and lets them grill him. And they do. They want to know about his family (married, two kids), his astrological sign (Pisces), his motivation.

"What motivates me is watching people turn the corner and say, 'I got that job,' 'I got my children back,' " Silverman said.

He's no genius, he tells them. "I finished high school. Barely. Most of my education was formally in the streets."

The \$2.5 million-a-year nonprofit is funded primarily by private donors. Second Chance owns its own buildings, plus several of the sober-living group homes, offering room for 116 participants. What works, he said, is recruiting inmates while they're still behind bars, and by being there when they walk out.

The program gives them the basics they lack, from things as simple as toothbrushes and shampoo to resume-writing skills and proper business attire. Pugh and her classmates get to "shop" in a storeroom of good quality suits, dress slacks and shoes donated to the program.

The marathon 9-to-5 classes each day give Second Chance participants both job and life skills: how to shake hands like you mean it; how to look people in the eye; how to shake off that "loser" attitude.

When Silverman leads the class through Handshake 101, parolee Neal Chase is one of the only ones who nails the Rotarian-worthy greeting on the first try. He ducks his head with pride.

After just a week and a day into the program, Chase said he has learned so much. At 34, he always had decent jobs, usually in transportation, but always lost them fast because of his meth addiction. But he's facing hard time if he ever gets back in that cycle again, he said, so he's really paying attention in the classroom.

"People can be so busy in life. It's not that they don't want to help you, but they don't have time," Chase said. "These people give me their time. I feel the concern. I feel . . . yes, I feel the love."