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## Reading boys trade ankle monitors for a life with possibilities

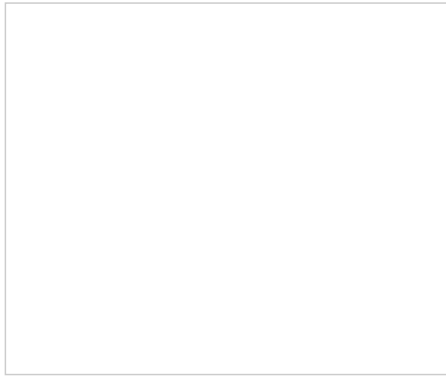
By Ellen Bardash

Wednesday June 21, 2017 12:01 AM

READING, PA — A tennis instructor and five teenage boys wearing ankle monitors walk into the Reading Barber Institute. No, it's not the setup for a bad joke. It's three men's effort to change the boys' lives before they make a decision that could land them behind bars.

The boys were brought to the institute, at Eighth and Oley streets, as part of the Life Skills Crime Prevention Clinic, run through Set Point Tennis. Participants are in the Evening Reporting Center program at the Children's Home of Reading, which serves as an alternative to juvenile detention centers.

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The clinic usually meets weekly at the courts by Wilson High School to practice tennis and hear from a speaker, but Michael Murphy, the owner of Set Point Tennis and the clinic's organizer, decided to go in a different direction this week. The group heard from the Reading Barber Institute's co-owners, Serg Vilaire and Alex Santana, two men who used cutting hair as a way to turn their lives around.

"That's what the purpose of Set Point Tennis Life Skills is - to connect these young men that have electronic monitors on their feet with positive role models like these young men that are creating positive change in the community," Murphy said.

Like the boys attending the clinic, Vilaire and Santana have experience getting into trouble with the law. Both were in prison before they decided to become barbers. Today, the two own both the institute and ATS Barber Shop. But their success isn't just for them: They want to give others in Reading the same opportunity.

At their shop, Santana and Vilaire employ 12 barbers. After running a successful barbershop for a few years, they decided to take things a step further by opening the Reading Barber Institute, where they have been teaching courses to prospective barbers since January.

The institute, which can educate up to 25 students per instructor at a time, uses local and state grants of between \$5,000 and \$10,000 to help ex-felons and low-income people get their barber's licenses. This money goes toward the cost of the classes, textbooks and equipment. In addition to learning how to be a barber, students receive instruction on managing money, a skill Santana said is vital when working in a vocational field.

The reasoning behind giving grants to students is that if ex-felons have jobs, they are less likely to re-enter the prison system, and the career opportunity gives more people a chance to support their families, pay taxes and generally contribute to society, Murphy said.

"You have the electronic monitors on now," Murphy told the boys. "But once you get them off, you can do a lot of bigger and better things with your life."

Once students complete 1,250 hours of training at the institute, which Santana said takes between nine months and a year, they automatically receive a temporary barber's license. From there, they can apply to get a license from the state board.

According to Santana, the idea for the institute came from the need for guidance for young people in the community.

"It's very tough for a young man today to grow up in the City of Reading, and you can see it with these young men," Murphy said. "They're very good boys, but for one reason or another, they strayed off a little bit."

One ideal that Vilaire, Santana and Murphy emphasized to the boys was that of accepting personal responsibility.

"You are in charge of yourself and the decisions that you make," Vilaire said. "Everybody can tell you all the things that you're doing wrong, and this and that, but life has a way of letting you know

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you're screwing up. Sooner or later, life itself is going to let you know that what you're doing is wrong."

Contact Ellen Bardash: 610-371-5019 or [ebardash@readingeagle.com](mailto:ebardash@readingeagle.com).



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