



RON SCHLOERB/CAPE COD TIMES

Chaplain Dave Robbins (center) listens while Chris Andrade welcomes Ross Anderson (right) to Discipleship House, a halfway home in Falmouth that helps inmates transition back into the community. The men commit their lives to God, attend church, hold down jobs and depend on each other for support. In the background, house manager, Kevin Lawless (left), chats with another attending the weekly dinner-and-Bible-study meeting.

# CHAPLAIN DAVE

Changing one  
life at a time

BY SARA HOAGLAND HUNTER

Where others see prison walls and hopelessness, Chaplain Dave Robbins has committed his life to seeing opportunity. Robbins, who ministers to staff and inmates as well as overseeing religious programs at the Barnstable County Correctional Facility, spends every day teaching inmates and former inmates that they are worthy of God's love. This is the message that rescued Robbins himself from what looked to be a destiny of bad choices and repeated incarceration.

Robbins' father died when he was 12, leaving him, the third oldest of 11 children, floundering as

he entered his teen years. After a string of armed robberies, he and his brother landed in Charles Street Jail in Boston with a suspended sentence. Upon his release, Robbins removed himself from Massachusetts, hitchhiking to Florida to avoid further trouble. But, as he explains, "Wherever you go, you bring your problems with you." Before long, he was serving a five-year sentence in Florida for the same type of crimes he had perpetrated in Boston. A chaplain and a persistent Christian inmate did for him what he now does for others... saved his life.

"A fellow inmate, a biker from a gang called the Outlaws, pestered me for six months to come

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to church with him," Robbins explains. "Finally, I thought, 'I gotta get this guy off my back,' so I went with him. It was the first time in my life I heard God loved me. That made my wires short-circuit. I thought 'No way!' because I knew me...It set off a spark that maybe life could be different."

That spark was enough to plunge Robbins into studying the Bible for the next six months. "I'd never read it before," he says. He read and attended Christian study groups, until, he says, he "trusted Christ." When he was released, he was accepted to Miami Christian College, at the recommendation of his prison chaplain. During his third year of studies, he was invited to return for an internship to minister to his former fellow inmates. Some were still serving sentences; others had been released and re-incarcerated. Robbins, who has an easy manner and sense of humor, laughs when he describes their reaction: "Their eyes popped and they asked, 'What are you doing here? You're not wearing 'blues' any more!'"

His ability to relate to the inmates' issues proved and still proves to be a powerful missionary tool. "I know what I went through," Robbins says with passion. "I know what's possible... The difference between rehabilitation and regeneration is the difference between putting a new shirt on a man and putting a brand new man in that shirt...That's because we are creatures of habit. Programs are great, but they don't change the heart. When the heart, focus and attitude change, things fall into place."

After college, Robbins spent five years ministering to recovering addicts at a drug rehabilitation mission in Miami. He describes the clientele as similar to a prison population except the residents were free to come and go. He worked with 100 residents at a time in the last phase of their re-integration into society, teaching them life skills, such as handling money. Relying on the conviction that no person is better than another, that all are equal in the eyes of Jesus Christ, Robbins helped set many on the road to redemption. Even his decades of witnessing the backsliding and pitfalls of repeat drug users and prison recidivism has not tainted his view. "My purpose is to share the truth. The only difference between any of us and [prisoners] is the clothes we are wearing and the fact that they made some

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really bad choices. I am trying to show them they don't have to make those choices either. I'm just trying to meet their needs."

One giant step in meeting these needs is the halfway home Robbins has funded and established in East Falmouth through his non-profit Solid Rock Ministries. As anyone familiar with prison release programs knows, the road to recovering an honest life depends upon the ability to find a home and to obtain and hold down a job – not an easy task with a soiled record and scant resources. Robbins sees this recovery as essential not only for former inmates, but for every community, explaining, "95 percent of those who are incarcerated will be released at some point. They will return to our communities. Doesn't it make sense to reach them before they hit the streets so that this time they can be productive in society, rather than destructive?"

For years, Robbins dreamed of a transitional home for men released from Barnstable County Correctional who were committed to a Christian life and to beginning anew. The residents would be men he had worked with and screened thoroughly for a period of time. Still, he worried about resistance from neighbors and the authorities. When the ideal rental home surfaced a year and a half ago, Robbins approached the owner cautiously and discovered it was a fellow church member at Cape Cod Church who welcomed the opportunity to help. The first year and a half of Solid Rock Ministry's "Discipleship House," housing up to four residents, has proven successful. One resident was able to move back home with his family after a period of months. His replacement and three other current residents all hold down full-time jobs, attend church and a weekly men's group at Cape Cod Church, as well as hosting Robbins' weekly Bible study men's group at their home.

I was privileged to attend one of these Bible study meetings, during

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which I was welcomed warmly by former inmates, volunteers, fellow church members and Chaplain Dave himself. The tone of the meeting was informal and inclusive, full of comfortable banter, ribbing and plenty of self-deprecating humor from the chaplain and the residents. A delectable feast of seasoned steak, fresh corn salad and the chef's specialty: caprese salad, was prepared by community volunteer Malcolm Frazier, who enjoys helping and participating in the meetings. Robbins then gathered the group of 11 around a picnic table for a brief Bible discussion, encouraging them to support each other and to allow themselves to be supported, warning against isolation. Quoting from the book of Hebrews in the New Testament as he urged the group to "run with patience the race that is set before [them]," he inquired if their race is a 100-yard dash. Familiar with the text, they answered in the negative, that it is, instead, "a marathon."

In a jovial atmosphere of evident comfort and safety, they prayed aloud for those they know who are in trouble, and for each other. A handsome young man, recently released and clasping a dog-eared Bible with pages and pages of underlined passages, asked for prayers from the others to "keep grounded" in his job and in his life. After the meeting ended with a prayer of gratitude for all in attendance, Robbins demonstrated one key to his success by quietly taking the young man aside to invite him for a mid-week sandwich "just to check in." I wondered how he would fit this into his schedule of full-time pastor at the jail, fundraising for Solid Rock, mentoring former inmates and working to educate the community. But Robbins knows how crucial follow-up and connection are to success. He is at the house three days a week at 6:30 in the morning to "get the day started" as well as attending Thursday morning 7 a.m. men's groups at Cape Cod Church.

Robert Daniels, who, years ago, served time in a federal penitentiary, and is a longtime Christian missionary in the jail, assisting Robbins, affirmed the continued need for connection and support. "We are all learning from each other." Marveling at the lives he has seen changed, he pointed to the young man who had requested prayers from the group, shaking his head in amazement. "God changes

lives. You're seeing a life transformed. You should have seen what he was like when we first met him."

In a separate conversation, the young man agreed, crediting mentors Robbins and Daniels for bringing him not "organized religion" while he was behind bars but, instead, bringing to light his "living relationship with Christ." He added somberly, "I wouldn't be alive if it weren't for those guys. And I don't just mean emotionally and spiritually, but physically."

He said it is Robbins' authenticity and genuine care that transforms lives. "He never talks down to you. He doesn't preach...It's not just that he's done time...Dave has not a judgmental bone in his body...Compassion is his religion. He answers your questions. I had so many questions!"

Few realize that the busy chaplain's institutional work is financed not by the state or the county but purely out of the pockets of his own non-profit organization, Solid Rock Ministries. When the national organization, Good News Ministry, which had employed him both at Plymouth County Correctional as well as Barnstable announced they would no longer serve Cape Cod, Robbins approached the sheriff to ask if he could continue the mission he had worked so hard to establish. He would raise the necessary funds. The sheriff agreed immediately.

Robbins overcame the hurdles of establishing a 501(c)(3) and raising initial funding, but his Solid Rock Ministries, now in its third year, is always in need of support. "I go into the community and raise every penny." He is heartened by the fact that "a lot of individuals and churches give every month." He explains, "That is how we survive."

Robbins' schedule would leave little time for family except for the fact that his family is as committed to his mission as he is. His wife, Diane, home-schooled their four children who are all involved in church ministry. Three are active with their parents at Faith Baptist Church in Osterville, playing music and volunteering for the church, while Robbins' oldest daughter and son-in-law attend seminary in Texas.

When I ask what has made the obvious sacrifices of time, money and leisure worth the back-breaking effort, particularly in light of recidivism rates, Robbins holds up his index finger. "One," he asserts. "Just one life changed makes it worth it."

And Chaplain Dave has changed many more lives than just one. ♦



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