



Mediation teacher John Cohen says he hopes his tactics will help inmates minimize mayhem inside the prison, and eventually outside. 'If they can make them work in here, with all the pressures, they can make them work anywhere,' he says.

RICHARD GRAULICH
Staff Photographer

Mediation-trained convicts will act as referees in spats

► MEDIATION *from 1A*

conflicts blow up," Cohen says. "In prison, a small thing can become a flash point in no time. It can be a conflict over a gambling debt, or who was first to the microwave. Violence is often the outcome."

Cohen, 60, who moved across the Atlantic to be near his retired parents, cannot practice law in Florida. So he puts his judicial training to use in this distinct way.

He hopes the course will help minimize mayhem inside the prison, and eventually outside.

"The more skills you build up while you're here, the more likely you will keep from having to come back," he tells his pupils.

He started the course in October and says a prison "mediation room" should be installed soon. Inmates who have disputes will notify staff and one of the newly trained convicts will be assigned to referee the flare-up.

The future mediators are already anticipating the conflicts, apart from gambling debts.

"Doing something to disrespect another person," says Nicholas Stoumbelis, 41, of Miami, sentenced to 27 years for sexual battery and kidnapping. "I mean cutting

in line for the television, telephone, microwave. People get really mad, really quick."

Or the problem may be decidedly more domestic.

"The one cellmate wants to go to bed early and the other wants to read a book and needs the light on," says David Ray, 38, of Fort Lauderdale, doing 30 years on multiple counts of burglary and assault.

Fabian Logreira, 39, of Colombia, serving 25 years for heroin trafficking, says sometimes bad blood has exterior causes.

"Family issues," he says. "People get bad news from home. It upsets them. They get rough with another inmate."

The convicts say such showdowns happen constantly.

"I've been in quite a few situations like that," says Alfredo Estepa, 49, of North Miami Beach, serving time on cocaine charges. "It's always, 'I'm right, you're wrong.' Then you have to be careful you don't get caught on the softball field by some guy with a bat."

The volunteers say they are ready to sit down with warring sides.

Cervante says isolating inmates in the mediation room will help. "Pulling them away from other

people, from the peer pressure to confront the other guy, will make a difference," he says.

The mediators understand they must be unbiased.

"We have to be non-judgmental and keep our emotions in check," says Oswald Newbold, 36, of Riviera Beach, doing 40 years for first-degree murder. "We may have our own position, but it isn't about us. And you must keep the parties talking. It gives them time to defuse."

And the peacemakers realize they can't dictate terms to feuding inmates.

"We have to make it clear that the resolution will come from them," says Courtney Brown, 54, of Jamaica.

Cohen hopes the inmates will continue to use the mediation tactics after they are released.

"If they can make them work in here, with all the pressures, they can make them work anywhere and hopefully stay out of trouble," he says.

As for convict Kempst Gilles, 30, of Haiti, imprisoned for sexual battery, he wishes he'd met Cohen long ago.

"If I knew before what I have learned here," he says, "I wouldn't be in here."

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