

'Don't give up'

David Koch has a message to offenders facing reentry into society

By Robert Fulton

David Koch has a message that can be summed up in two words: work hard.

Koch, an ex-con turned successful businessman, was in the Metro Area recently to talk about the challenges faced when reentering society by those who have served prison time, and what those people can do to be successful.

"It's not dissimilar to somebody who graduated from college," said Koch, 53, over coffee in the Courthouse neighborhood of Arlington, VA. "You have a mountain in front of you. You either choose to climb it, or you don't."

Koch is very familiar with this challenge. As a young adult, he served two years in prison for mail fraud and theft before being released on parole in 1980.

From there, he performed odd jobs, and eventually attended flight school, where he earned his certificate and pursued a career as a pilot. The high-status business people he transported in private jets inspired him to continue to better himself.

In 1996, Koch started Fiber Network Solutions, an Internet service provider, just in time for the big dotcom boom. He eventually sold to Cogent Communications in 2003 and retired.

"I tried retirement," he said. "That was a disaster. I'd rather be in prison than on the golf course. It is the stupidest game I've played in my life."

During this time in 2003, Koch read an article in the Columbus Dispatch about prisoner recidivism

and the challenges felons face when reentering society.

"It was the first time I looked back," said Koch.

The article inspired Koch to take action. He wrote a book "Slaying the Dragon: The Journey from the Dungeon to the Ivory Tower," and travels around the country in his 35-foot trailer, speaking to prisons, jails, juvenile facilities and other groups about recidivism and reentry. He is currently setting up a nonprofit.

"When you get out of prison, you're pretty broken," Koch said. "You're fragile, depressed, angry. I was pissed off at the world. It was difficult. Life is difficult. Life is hard. If you want to move ahead in life, look at yourself. You aspire to be at a certain point in your life, you have to climb that mountain."

Koch points out that one of the biggest challenges ex-cons face is adapting from prison culture to that of mainstream society.

"One of the problems we face as a society is the cultural diversity of people coming out of prison and being expected to enter into the mainstream," said Koch, who is also the primary financier at Green Lab Holdings, Inc. "This culture is foreign to the person, and this person is foreign to the culture."

Koch was recently in town speaking at various facilities and numerous groups, including Offender Aid and Restoration, based in Arlington.

"I think his message is so helpful," said OAR executive director Gail Arnall. "The first challenge (for reentry) is low self esteem. When folks come out, they're broken, fragile and scared."

OAR is a private nonprofit that assists incarcerated individuals in Arlington, Alexandria, Falls Church and D.C. in restoring them to the community. OAR recently opened a D.C. office to work with juveniles who have been assigned community service hours.

"If you show up, we show up," Arnall said regarding OAR's attitude, echoing Koch's message of hard work and commitment.

"There's no rocket science to this," he said. "You just have to work. You have to work, know that it's hard, know that you're going to have challenges, and never quit. Just don't give up."

For more information, visit <http://www.dkoch.net/>. For more info about OAR, visit www.oaronline.org.



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