

Broome undersheriff teaching life skills course at county jail

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Binghamton Press & Sun Bulletin
USA TODAY NETWORK

It started with a simple question. Gian Paolo Roma, professor and chair of the Business Programs Department at SUNY Broome Community College approached Broome County Undersheriff Sam Davis and asked, "Would you like to talk about a book I just published about self-management?"

Roma handed over the book, "Student Success: Foundations of Self-Management," and the potential impact it held motivated Davis to launch a pilot program for the people at the Broome County jail.

"To me it's priceless," Davis said at a press conference for the program in early 2024. "I think it's something that society in general should be using not only in college, in high school, but clearly it works in life in general, but it also works inside the correctional facility."

Davis volunteers his time to teach a five-week course guided by Roma's book. The class meets for one hour each week inside the jail, and after completing the course, students are presented with a copy of the textbook and a certification of completion from the Broome County Sheriff's Office.

The course and Roma's book identify five pillars of self-management: communication, choice, commitment, coping and caring.

During the class, Davis guides students through simulated situations, drawing from his own personal experiences, to practice how to handle them. The instruction centers on the importance of intentionality of your choices and prioritizing responsibilities.

SUNY Broome professor's textbook inspired jail pilot program

Roma's first idea for the book, stemming from 17 years of corporate experience and research, came after assisting on the curriculum for a course called "The Freshman Experience." Questions came to mind: What are we teaching students? What would be in their best interest?

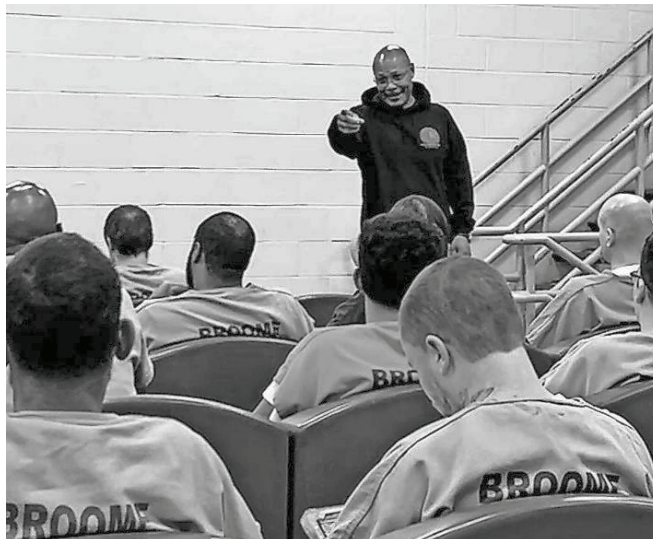
Roma believes there's a flaw in the education system creating a deficiency in reading and understanding behaviors, which goes beyond the classroom.

"People tend to think that individual success and collective success are mutually exclusive but they're not," he said in an April interview. "We need rules around which to conduct ourselves....it's because of other people that you need rules, and I don't think people really realize that."

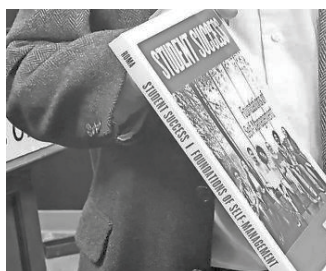
The key to success, Roma said, is launching self-management education early and throughout a student's education, to help them thrive as an individual and function as a contributing member of society.

"If they are unintentionally doing things that is not in their best interest because our education system hasn't taught them that," Roma said, "then I think our education system has failed."

In addition to the jail's pilot program, some local high schools have picked up Roma's course as a transferable college



Broome County Undersheriff Sam Davis teaches a course on self-management at the Broome County jail. PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE BROOME COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE



"Student Success: Foundations of Self-Management" is a book written by Gian Paolo Roma, a SUNY Broome professor. KALYN GRANT / BINGHAMTON PRESS & SUN-BULLETIN

credit class, modeled after the key elements identified in "Student Success."

"They provide a comprehensive framework for people to think about their own behaviors," he said, "so they can more effectively deal with the challenges that they have to confront on a daily basis."

'They don't want to see us here'

In the course at the Broome County jail, a big topic of discussion is trust or the lack of it and its many contributing factors including absent parents, hyper-independence and violated trust.

After spending 23 years between county jail and state prison, 53-year-old William Shaffer, of Binghamton, said this is the first time an opportunity like this has been available to him, providing people the space to learn how to understand their emotions and communicate from a mature perspective.

"I never learned so much while doing time from officers," he said in an interview at the jail in March. "They don't want to see us here."

Shaffer plans to start HVAC courses when he is released.

Jermaine Stanfield, 44, came to Binghamton from the Bronx in 1998. Making up for the time he has spent away from

his children is the driving force for this new chapter of his life.

When the course was first introduced, Stanfield was hesitant, but said Davis' down-to-earth spirit and the position he held as undersheriff sparked enough curiosity in him to join.

"I love to see him succeed," Stanfield said. "Other jails should do the same thing because it will help a lot of people."

Jail pilot program: Here's the impact

Broome County Sheriff Fred Akshar pointed to the pilot program as an example of the sheriff's office's commitment to "meeting people exactly where they were and then giving them the tools that they needed to be successful."

For Davis, the work involved in leading it has made him reflect on his own behaviors, parenting and actions overall.

"I really did this on behalf of my family," he said. "Don't think that the book is just about the participants, it's helping me grow as a man as well, as a father, as law enforcement and as an instructor."

Davis' position as Broome County's first Black undersheriff speaks volumes to the barriers he is breaking. When asked about the pressures of the job, his response is simple: "I feel like I'm up for the task."

He credited Roma, his book, and Akshar with getting the project off the ground.

"I don't want anybody to say that I didn't dedicate my life to this job, this career," he said. There's more people in his position can do, Davis said, and in the case of this program, it starts with a conversation.

"Getting people to realize what they can do to help better themselves" he said, "is more impactful than I think any of us could have ever imagined"