



## NEWARK: BARRY CARTER

A blog about Newark, NJ by Barry Carter

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## Newark program helps men find stability

by [Barry Carter](#)/The Star-Ledger

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It's only been two months, but Jesus Rios is still in disbelief. He has keys in his hands, a signed lease, too.

For the first time in 41 years, Rios is independent. He's not mooching off family and friends, not living on Newark streets in abandoned buildings.

He has his own apartment, a one-bedroom furnished with money he saved from a job, another milestone in his life.

"I can't believe it," he said. "It's like a dream."

This was once an unthinkable reality for Rios, a Newark native who didn't know where to turn after getting out of Northern State Prison in May. But good fortune bumped into him on Broad and Market streets. A volunteer from a fatherhood program was handing out flyers, telling Rios how Newark's version of the National Comprehensive Center for Fathers could transform his life.

The program, based in Philadelphia, was modeled by Newark Now, an organization created by Newark Mayor Cory Booker. It started in June with 21 men who met at Essex County College to reconstruct their lives with parenting and life skills, job preparation, legal assistance and education.

Kevin Robinson, 48, needed the classwork. He couldn't read well and his math was so-so. Not anymore. Soon he'll take the exam for his General Equivalency Diploma. He feels good about himself, confident in his progress to date.

"This was the best thing for me," he said.

Jalissa, his 10th-grade daughter, feels the same way.

"He's doing what a father is supposed to do and that's going back to school," she said.

Robinson remembers how his inability to read and write cost him supervisory jobs. He could never move up, even though he could handle more challenging duties.

Newark Now has given him a chance to improve, hiring him to work with the dress to success component of the program. In his position dealing with clothing stores, Robinson finds himself taking notes, giving updates to his boss, preparing reports.

"This would have been impossible before," he said. "There would have been three of four words you understood and the rest would have been scribble."

While each man had individual needs, the ultimate goal was to find them employment, make them better fathers, better men.

Since June, two classes totaling 40 men have graduated from the program, with 33 landing a variety of jobs, including construction, warehouse and culinary positions, said Lavar Young, the executive director.

"But what's even more important than that is stability," he said. "If you don't give them the tools to keep the job, then it's a waste."

The men were taught they need structure in their lives, that they have to be responsible to their children and in relationships. There was no time for them to be unreliable.

"Once they begin to focus and look at life as 'I'm not living for myself,' their life takes on more meaning," Young said.

Lamar Hunt, 25, got a job as an electrician and he is setting himself up for training in asbestos removal. Opportunity is what this young father of a toddler needed. He's taking things more in stride and doesn't lose his temper, choosing instead to compromise with others. His new found maturity, he admits, is surprising, even to family members who notice the change.



The Star-Ledger

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