

barbed

Barbed Design
The Howard League for Penal Reform
High Crossway Industrial
Sewey, Woking
GU24 0EX
Tel: 01483 804200 ext 2
Email: barbed@howardleague.org
www.howardleague.org

Barbed: what happened next?

Follow up story of employees of a prison
social enterprise

barbed
Ever had a
really good
idea?

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Key points

- Work in prison can only be successful if it is provided within a supportive and positive regime. Prisons must ensure that they have systems in place that are appropriate for working with external employers and must include flexibility and a positive attitude among prison staff
- Work in prison must be provided in a realistic work environment that is distinct from prisoners' living space, thereby creating a differential between work and home that other employees experience. Work in prison must also allow the prisoners to experience realistic working conditions, including a proper rate of pay for the work undertaken, a contractual agreement, and paying tax
- The experience of Barbed employees demonstrated that the opportunity to engage in a real work environment supported positive change in both behaviour and attitudes in prison and on release. Not least it instilled a work ethos and demonstrated the possibility for a future without crime
- The experience was equally life changing for those working with the prisoners, providing a greater understanding of life in prison and the obstacles that the regular prison regime poses to leading a crime free life on release
- Developing work in prison allows for greater community involvement and engagement
- Work in prison, delivered following the principles underlying Barbed, can help prepare prisoners for a productive and crime free life on release from prison.

Introduction

I thought that after serving my sentence my options in life would be limited and I was worried about that. Barbed proved to me that it's never too late to discover new talents and that there are people who want to help and nurture that talent. I can see how Barbed has changed the course of my life and that's much, much more than I expected (Terry, July 2009)

In December 2008 a remarkable social enterprise drew to a premature close but the legacy of the prison graphic design studio Barbed is a powerful one. The lessons learned from this path-breaking initiative have transformed individual lives and ways of thinking about prison work. Barbed provided a model for the way in which work in prison could inspire and transform lives.

This short briefing paper charts the impact of the Barbed social enterprise on those who trained, worked and supervised in the graphic design studio in the months following its closure.

Barbed

Barbed was a unique graphic design social enterprise established in Coldingley prison by the Howard League for Penal Reform in 2005. It was a vibrant and pioneering initiative which was forced to close its doors in 2008 because prison ethos and prison rules made securing the profitability of the business ultimately impossible.

The greatest barriers to securing commercial viability related to the vagaries of the prison regime which included the sudden and unanticipated movement of Barbed designers to other prisons, lockdowns, the timing of random urine testing and staff training all of which meant designers were unable to go to work, and a reduction in hours prisoners were allowed to work.

Barbed was the centrepiece of the Howard League's campaign for real and meaningful work in prisons. It represented a radical departure from the uninspired, repetitive and poorly paid version of prison work that characterises modern incarceration.

In establishing Barbed, the Howard League enterprise had three primary aims:

- To provide high quality and professional graphic design services employing a social enterprise business model
- To diversify the Howard League's existing, traditional funding streams for penal reform.
- To provide a model for a new and innovative approach to prisoners' work in prison

Despite the regime-induced problems Barbed was enormously successful in both pioneering a new

form of prison employment, and in providing highly skilled and professional design services. But its legacy, as the testimony of those involved below attest, was far greater.

The follow-up study

During the summer of 2009, the Howard League contacted each of the prisoners and designers that worked in Barbed seeking their agreement to participate in the follow-up study. They were asked to complete a semi-structured questionnaire. A subset of the original sample was contacted to participate in a telephone interview.

The Barbed trainee designers

During Barbed's short life eleven prisoners were employed in the design studio. The Howard League maintained contact with nine of the former employees: seven of whom responded¹. The trainee designers were surveyed for details of their current employment situation and their assessment of the impact that Barbed had made on their lives.

Two of the former Barbed employees who have been released are currently working as graphic designers and we were told that a third, who was returned to Albania following his release, hopes to build a career in design.

Oscar has been employed by the Howard League as an in-house designer and assistant office facilitator, while Leon has established himself as a freelance designer working with someone he met on a Business Link course who has expertise in sales and marketing. Leon is also driven to take the experience of Barbed further and is in the process of establishing a similar social enterprise: "When I heard Barbed was closing I thought, I'll pick up the baton – I'll carry on".

For those who remain in prison the experience of working with Barbed has translated into a range of transferrable skills, personal development and long-term aspirations. Four were transferred to other prisons and have each used the training and skills acquired to develop projects in their new prisons. While they described the print and sign shops in other prisons as "not up to scratch with Barbed", they have given former Barbed designers the opportunity to deploy and share their expertise.

When Barry was transferred to another prison he worked in its print shop and designed the magazine Black History. This he reported was the print shop's first commission for an outside

¹ One of the non respondents had been deported back to Albania and the other had been released from prison and had chosen not to maintain contact.

customer. However, the lack of training and design support offered in Maidstone prison frustrated and limited him. He chose instead to work in the prison's gym where he is happy.

Another former Barbed designer was transferred to Grendon Underwood prison and also works in the prison gym but has employed his graphic design skills to good effect in designing and managing the prison magazine: "The prison magazine had previously been designed and created using Microsoft publisher. Since coming to Grendon I have shown that we are capable of designing a much better magazine with a little investment. Working with Barbed gave me that knowledge and confidence; off the back of my experience we've bought two Apple Macs and are now using CS3 to produce the magazine" (Terry, July 2009).

Several prisoners have sought to consolidate their design knowledge by enrolling on diplomas in art and design, business enterprise and illustrator courses. Dominic, for example, has completed the first year of a national diploma in art and design.

Oscar, from the comfort and security of his permanent design position with the Howard League reflects wistfully on his experience at Barbed: "It's kind of strange but it would be nice to have the organised people in the studio at Barbed again – nice to go back to that first day. It was a lovely experience, really excellent and I'm really thankful because now I'm in a nice warm office talking to you..." (Oscar, April 2010)

The trainers

David Allen, who managed the Barbed Design Studio and supervised the prison trainees for two years, has established his own graphic design business since Barbed's closure. The experience of managing the prison based studio significantly informed the nature and content of the business David has built: "I thought the closure a great loss but I wanted to continue to do what they were doing". Central to the success of his new Wolf Design company has been access to former Barbed customers, largely charities, who now form the core of the new business.

Prior to working for the Howard League at Barbed, David had little knowledge and no particular sympathy for prisoners or penal reform. He joined because he thought it would be an interesting job in design studio management. It was, however, to be transforming: "What I got was seeing that people inside are actually human beings...for all their

wrongs it highlighted for me the real limitations of life inside...what I tell others now is that while we need punishment, at some point inside, you need to think about release and what will happen when they come out...it was eye-opening to see how little motivation there is inside, even in a Cat C prison." David translated these new insights into practical applications, for instance, he now donates 10 percent of his company profits to prison charities.

There were difficulties. Sometimes the prisoner designers found it hard to accept criticism from the senior design trainers; those trainers, in turn, found it problematic to be classed as prison staff and had to work hard to counter the perception that they were employed by the Prison Service. These difficulties were, however, generally overcome and contributed to both individual and studio growth. But there were facets of the nature of the prison regime which could not be overcome and which impacted harmfully on the enterprise at every level. For David, "If the Howard League hadn't closed the studio who knows how many years I could have coped, maybe two. The negativity of the prison staff, even the gate staff, was so demoralising. The whole system was one of lack of hope and Victorian decay." Little wonder that Barbed shone out as a beacon of hope and possibility for those who were fortunate enough to work within its orbit.

For Nicci Hewett, another design trainer with the enterprise, working at Barbed proved life-enhancing. She highlighted the working friendships and the satisfaction she derived from seeing the novice designers develop into skilled professionals: "I thoroughly enjoyed working with them on the project, teaching the participants was highly rewarding and seeing them develop an enthusiasm and passion for design which has had a lasting effect on their future options and opportunities is very rewarding."

Nicci Hewett and David Allen joined Leon and his business partner, Gavin, for a trip to London in June 2010 to view new Adobe software. For Leon this was especially important, "Gavin and I are working at home so it's great



to celebrate and share with a community of designers". Nicci and David clearly appreciate the community which they helped to build, and their continued relationship with Leon is a testament to the strength of the Barbed experience.

The experience of training designers in the prison enterprise has also aided Nicci's own career: "I find Barbed has opened doors for me. It's a very exciting project to discuss at interviews and it's also led to me taking on some freelance teaching work in graphic design".

Personal Development

While the graphic design and business related skills were the most obvious benefits imparted to Barbed employees there were other less visible but equally important outcomes which those employed rated very highly. They included:

- a new sense of achievement,
- belief in oneself,
- the ability to set realistic goals,
- patience,
- tolerance,
- self-confidence.

These attributes shine through all the interviews and self-report questionnaires.

Billy highlighted the organisational skills he learned, which included list-making, planning and time management that assisted him with coping with dyslexia. While Terry commented "...the confidence to design has been most useful, but it's a much bigger package than simply being able to be creative. Through the body of work in my portfolio, I've been offered a job at a print and design studio in Surrey, but we also learnt to manage ourselves at Barbed. I can not only design and be successful, I can work at different levels effectively and

discuss, plan and present my ideas."

Most of the former Barbed employees felt that the provision of an outlet for individual and structured creativity had been personally valuable. For Oscar it was something new and exciting: "Being creative hadn't occurred to me but I'd always sprayed cars to make them look better so perhaps it was something I was waiting for..."

Barbed also educated its trainee designers in other skills essential to the world of work. Given

that most had not been in permanent legitimate employment before prison and that many had already served long sentences, the ability to perform consistently, punctually and in an organised fashion in the world of commerce was a challenge. Interestingly a number of Barbed employees referred to newly acquired attributes such as stamina and perseverance with work related tasks.

It's not a single skill but the whole experience that I had that I take with me. Aside from the skills related to design, the other skills are 'resourcefulness and trying to push through boundaries to get jobs done' (Dominic)

Terry despite remaining in prison, commented that, "Barbed has given me some structure. I had a strong work ethic but under pressure it was fragile. I've noticed how that's changed and I'm now able to work to a deadline."

My punctuality was always good but Barbed helped me. It prepared me for the different life of work in an office. My mates dig at me – sitting in front of a computer all day. They say I'm really eager. I've got more energy, too, for my garage work which I do in the evenings – I'm lucky". (Oscar)

For Leon, the training he most valued was that of presenting concepts to clients. At Barbed he gained an appreciation of how to assess the client's needs and learned mechanisms by which to guide clients to the concept most suitable for their requirements. He now uses these skills in building his own design business.

The experience of working in a team was new for some and highly valued; "I learnt that other people's input can improve your design, or mindset. A few times I was doing a job and had a number of concepts, but came to a halt. After talking to a few of the lads I started coming up with more and smoother looking concepts" (Barry, Maidstone prison)

What really stood out for me was the strength of the teamwork at Barbed. It encouraged sharing of duties and group responsibility. The support of all the staff at Head Office was felt very powerfully, and helped to balance all the negative aspects emanating from the prison system. (Mr B, Coldingley)

Financial Management

One of the most valuable lessons from the Barbed experience was that of financial management. The Howard League was very clear, when it established the enterprise, about the importance of personal savings and 'socially responsible deductions' – taxation and national insurance



contributions – for those prisoners earning enhanced wages. The charity provided workshops on financial management, bank accounts, pensions, pay, taxation, national insurance and donations and articulated the nature and purpose of the deductions to all prisoners involved.

Even though the HM Revenue and Customs made the decision that all tax paid by the Barbed employees had to be returned to the Howard League², the very act of engaging with the social contract provided a degree of satisfaction that most of the prisoners had not known in the past. It was also clear that the chosen charities into which all Barbed designers paid 30 percent of their earnings³, prisoner's education and the support of prisoners' families, gave considerable satisfaction.

A number of prisoners referred to the idea of budgeting which previously they had not considered. Working for Barbed and earning a meaningful wage meant calculating deductions, family support, personal needs and so on – so budgeting became a reality. As one prisoner commented "I live within my means. I never used to do that."

For those remaining in prison there was an expression of concern that while they cannot always practice the financial lessons they learnt while in Barbed employment, they hang on to the hope that once free and in full-time employment those skills will still be there to draw upon. None of those remaining in prison contributes to a pension plan and, of those released, only Oscar, employed by the Howard League, makes contributions to a personal pension.

For Leon and Oscar in their post-imprisonment careers as designers, work has brought financial security: "The job anchors me down ...it gives me security to know at the end of the month I'm going to be paid" (Oscar).

Impact on relationships

There are just too many ways to document [how Barbed affected the personal areas of my life] I'll just say that Barbed has been one of the most significant areas of my life and continues to shape it (Terry, July 2009)

While some reported that the experience had no impact on their personal relationships all those who worked for Barbed spoke fondly of each other and of their relationships with the trainers who taught and mentored them.

²Prisoners, in employment legislation, lack the status to pay tax.

³A Howard League requirement in lieu of rent/utilities/transport and food costs. This charitable fund was managed jointly by representatives from the Barbed workforce, the Howard League and Coldingley prison.

For Oscar the training at Barbed and his subsequent employment by the Howard league has been transformative in terms of his relationship with his young son, his sense of self worth and planning for his future: "It feels good when my son comes around to show him what I'm doing. I have all my Howard League design work lying around on the table at home. The opportunities that have come from Barbed have made me realise how much I'd like my son to do well.... I didn't ever really plan but I've got to now in relation to holidays and so on. I'd like to take my son on safari and skiing."

Barbed gave me a way to provide for my family and contribute in their lives positively. I was able to help pay bills, provide in new ways and support myself. I felt I was less of a burden to my family financially and this had a great impact on all our relationships (Terry, July 2009).

Aspirations

Barbed appears to have also widened the ambitions and aspirations of its employees. All have built, or for those still incarcerated, are planning to build on the foundations laid by Barbed.

I've got offers of work and I hope to be in open conditions within the next 6-9 months. I'm really hoping that I can take my experience into the world of work outside prison and be successful. I keep working at new designs and finding out where I can gain new knowledge and training when I move on. I hope to go to college part-time, but I'm also keen to train in other areas too...more strings to my bow and all that! (Terry, July 2009).

Working in a 'real work' environment, being trained in a profession by experienced professionals, treated as serious designers and paid meaningful wages all contributed to sense of expanded horizons and while most saw their futures in design others felt confident to look beyond. While acknowledging the enormous benefits Barbed had afforded him Terry was inspired to take those lessons into fields other than graphic design:

Long term I want to work with kids; I've gained a teaching qualification and this experience (Barbed/prison) can be passed on in a positive way. I've got big plans around that, but essentially I need to get back to my life and contribute. (Terry, July 2009)

Each of the former Barbed employees reflected that the skills they had acquired through their training and experience at Barbed would assist with future patterns of non-offending. Billy's hope is that he "will be less stressed with life and that combined with being able to organise myself will help me never to offend".

Conclusion

The number who passed through Barbed is small but the evidence from those few is unequivocal. Barbed transformed peoples' lives. The studio and its success demonstrated the fundamental worth of social enterprise in prison and provided a blueprint of best practice for work in the prison establishment. Oscar and Leon are both in productive full-time employment, enthused by their daily work in the profession for which they were trained at Barbed. They are the great successes of the Barbed story. But so too are those other Barbed-trained designers who remain in prison. As their comments suggest, they continue to employ the knowledge, skills and personal development derived during their time with Barbed. Sometimes this is in the context of design-related work (for example, in sign shops and on prison magazines), at other times the skills Barbed encouraged find outlet in wholly unrelated arenas (such as gym or library work). For all it has shaped the future or at least the way in which the future is envisaged. More than that it has provided the tools, both professional and personal, to enable futures in which legitimate work will be a priority. All those who worked for Barbed attest to the value that meaningful employment gave them.

Barbed gave its prison designers the experience of real work and all that accrues from it. It provided prisoners with the opportunity to work productively and collectively to establish camaraderie based on mutual goals and end products. It gave them a sense of professionalism and personal skills that will, forever, enhance their lives. It also provided the prisoners involved with valuable financial management skills and a meaningful sense of the social contract.

Barbed was also to open the eyes of the graphic designers who ran the studio to the nature of prison regimes and the misery and frustrations

that prisoners can endure. The experience of Barbed has furthered the careers of the design trainers and encouraged enduring personal and professional relationships with those they taught and supervised in the Barbed studio in Coldingley prison.

That Barbed was unable to overcome the institutional barriers to its commercial viability does not, in any sense, amount to its failure. Barbed was an inspired approach to prison work and its impact was enormous. Barbed demonstrated the possibility of exciting and life enhancing work inside prison walls and, as the testimony of those who worked within its studio suggests, its value was transformational.

I was grateful and proud to be part of what we achieved at Barbed. It was an amazing experience - there were difficult times but that's what made it real...I think about the value this experience brought to my life. Thank you for that. (Terry, July 2009)

Howard League publications

Rehabilitating Work: What are prison workshops for? (2000)

Prison work and social enterprise: the story of Barbed (2008)

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the Howard League for Penal Reform

1 Ardleigh Road
London
N1 4HS

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020 7249 7373
020 7249 7788
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www.howardleague.org

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