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## Reece refuses to give up on COBRA youth

### After being wrongly convicted, imprisoned for 25 years, man now travels world giving motivational speeches

BY MORGAN DAY • THE EAGLE-GAZETTE STAFF • SEPTEMBER 4, 2008

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BREMEN -Many youths who find themselves in the Central Ohio Boys Residential Academy share the same story: A lifetime of being told they'll never amount to anything, that they're no good, even worthless.

ADVERTISEMENT Well, Gary Reece refuses to believe that.

Reece, a man imprisoned for 25 years after he was wrongfully convicted of crimes such as rape and murder, gave a pep talk Wednesday in an effort to build up the self-esteem and respect of about 10 youths at the Bremen facility.

"If you master the power of something, it will serve you for the rest of your life," said Reece, who travels around the world giving motivational speeches.

The facility, also called COBRA, often is the last step before prison for youth who've run into trouble with the law. Most of the residents are sent to the program for behavioral problems or running away from home, according to officials. Capt. Janelle Tacderan, who works at the facility, said youngsters spend anywhere from 10 days to a full year in the program.

It aims to teach the 11- to 17-year-olds independent living skills to help them get back on their feet once they get out. They learn to write resumes, fill out job applications, cook, clean, balance checkbooks and master time management."This is kind of a last measure," Tacderan said. "It's kind of a wake-up call to say, 'Hey, this is your chance to get your life back together.' "

Reece related to the young people by telling of his time in prison. Reece didn't shower, brush his teeth or wear deodorant for the first three years, he said. It was his way of showing everyone he didn't care. Reece



Gary B. Reece, 25 years to r Academy on

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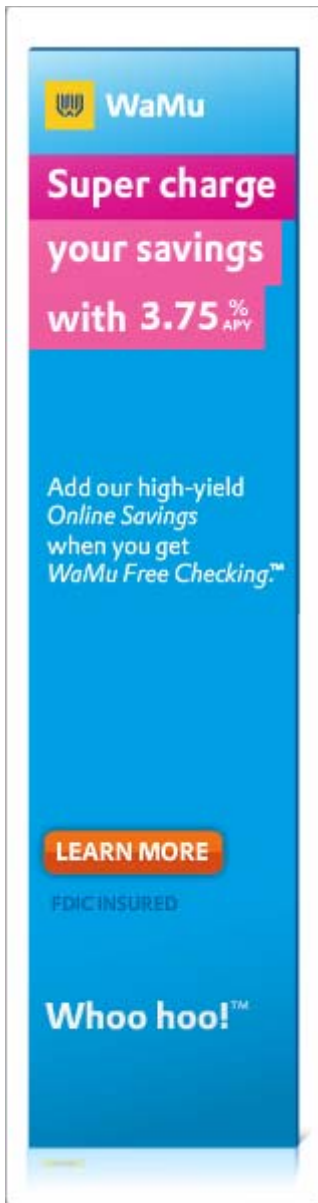
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said he had nothing to care about until he started teaching other inmates to read.

He said he taught more than 100 inmates to read.

The first person he taught was a hard-headed, "knock-out artist" named Big Bo, who eventually gave up prison brawls for books.

"He went from being hooked on drugs and hooked on violence to Hooked on Phonics," Reece said.

He urged the audience to follow in Bo's footsteps and concentrate on earning respect, not fear. He told them to finish the tasks they start and give 100 percent. That's what Reece, a high school dropout, did by earning his GED and bachelor's and master's degrees while incarcerated.

Larry Cunningham, program director, said the academy tries to bring diverse speakers who can teach the juveniles about their past lifestyles. With Reece, he said, the lesson was to never give up and to strive for change.

"I think if they choose to (change), they can," Cunningham said.

"They have to make a conscious choice to show themselves that they are somebody. Once they get that down, the rest comes easy."

Near the end of the speech, Reece asked the youth if they wanted to be a success.

Their answer: "Sir, yes, sir."

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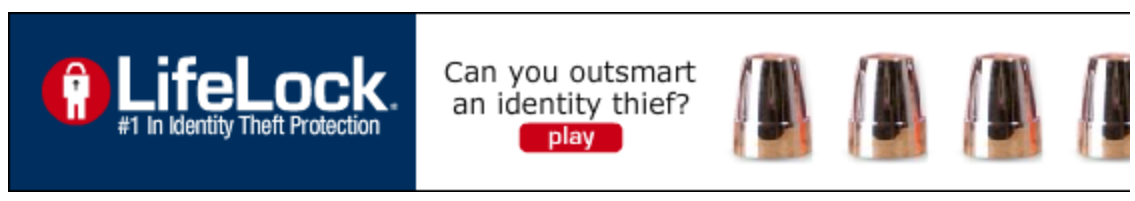
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