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Doin' time and doin' fine

By **Cameron Tait**

FIRST-time offenders at Port Phillip Prison in Truganina are learning important skills to prepare them for life on the outside while at the same time raising money for charity.

The inmates at the maximum security Penhyn youth unit are taking part in the Doin' Time small business program, which has screen-printed T-shirts and shorts for the public and a range of companies, including Virgin and for the Pier to Pub swim.

The men, aged 18-25, are part of an association called Serving Time. Since the program began four years ago, it has helped raise more than \$100,000 for organisations such as the Royal Children's Hospital Good Friday Appeal, White Lion and Kids Under Cover.

There are about 25 prisoners involved in the program at any time, working in the areas of manufacturing, finance, human resources, marketing and sales.

A company director chairs a weekly business meeting and a secretary takes the minutes.

The prison's youth develop-

ment officer Anne Hooker — the driving force behind the program — said it had a positive impact on the lives of those who took part.

"They're responsible for all the decisions affecting the business," she said. "They support one another, resolve issues together and work as a team and learn valuable skills so they go back into the community as responsible young men. When they first arrive, they're often angry about being here, but they only have to be involved in this program for a week and their attitude changes.

"We want their experience in jail to be a positive rather than a negative one and want them to learn skills so they're eventually able to start their own business if they want to."

Deputy Premier and Attorney-General Rob Hulls visited the prison last Friday and praised the work of the men and their contribution to the community. He said it was important the program gave young offenders the opportunity to gain skills and qualifi-

cations to enhance their future employment opportunities.

"Research shows if prisoners have steady employment upon their release they are less likely to reoffend," he said.

"The program helps prisoners understand job pathways available to them once they complete their sentences and to build a life which is crime-free.

"Previous participants have reported improved self-confidence, teamwork and improved leadership skills."

Mr Hulls said prisoners had developed decision-making, communication and self-management skills as they tackled typical issues and challenges commercial operations face.

"They learn the different aspects associated with setting up and running a small business under the guidance of industry experts who donate their time to mentor participants. It allows them to develop personal attributes like commitment, motivation and adaptability."

Inmate and Doin' Time general manager Vinnie said the

program provided prisoners with the opportunity to challenge themselves.

"We're like one big family, he said. It gives us a focus and something positive with which we can channel our energies and really make a difference.

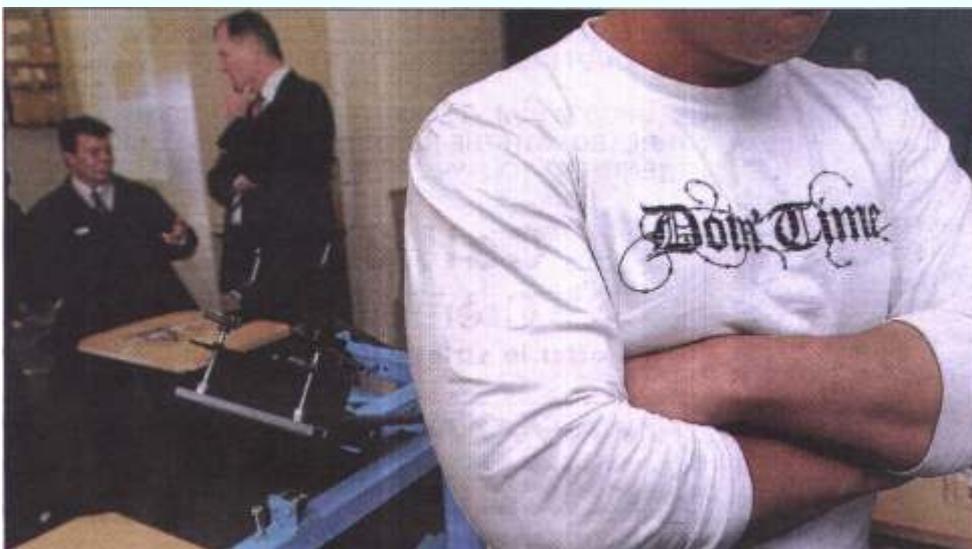
"The satisfaction we get out of doing a good job makes all the hard work worthwhile."

Former western suburbs police officer Rod Boyd, who now manages a community radio station, volunteers as one of the prisoner's business mentors.

"We all know they're in here because they've done the wrong thing, but it's through programs like this that we hope to stop the revolving door," he said.

"In the old days we used to lock them up and that was it, but one day they'll be released, and the skills they're being taught here — including teamwork — will stay with them forever."

For more information about the program, visit www.servingtime.org



Business success: An inmate shows one of the T-shirts during Rob Hulls' visit.

Picture: Cathy Jackson