

WORKSHOP HELPS INMATES DRAW ON FORGOTTEN TALENTS

■ A cartoonist promotes faith by teaching prisoners to express themselves.

By ADAM BOWLES
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MONTVILLE — Jesse Austin, a self-described "crack-head" for 12 years and a Radgowski Correctional Institution inmate, wants his family in Bridgeport to know how much he has changed since he gave his life to Jesus Christ.

He said producing a comic tract to tell his story would be a great way to communicate that message.

"There is hope," Austin said. "I never thought I'd get rid of drugs in my life. It's not that I couldn't do (drugs) now. But I like what I see when I look in the mirror."

On Monday, Austin and 11 other inmates participated in two cartooning workshops with Nate Butler, whose former company produced artwork for such clients as Jim Henson Productions and DC Comics and wrote scripts for Archie, Disney and Marvel comics.

Butler, who lives in New Mexico, is now the president and chief executive officer of ROX35 Media Inc., a Bible-based ministry seeking to spread the Gospel through Christian comics.

In the workshops at Radgowski, Butler provided tips to the inmates on simple ways to produce inexpensive tracts and materials for other inmates and people outside the prison.

Messages is key

For several years, he has worked as a missionary



Cartoonist L. Nate Butler, left, demonstrates a cartooning technique Monday at the Radgowski Correctional Center in Montville. Nathaniel Alicea, top photo, practices his technique during the workshop, "Cartooning and the Christian Faith." Above, Butler shows inmates a pamphlet on drawing comics with a Christian theme.

Photos by Carol Phelps/
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overseas in places like Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines, training residents of those countries to produce comics and books appealing to their fellow citizens.

Visuals used in comics appeal to all ages and communicate the Gospel in understandable ways, Butler said.

He said the best-selling comic books in the country sell about 4.5 million copies per year.

But in the Philippines, the number one comic sells 1.5 million copies per month and the top comic in Japan sells 6.5 million copies per week.

In fact, comics are the most widely read literature,



When Butler posted a message on the Internet asking chaplains nationwide if they were interested in having a comic workshop, Westbrook was the first to respond.

"I've seen a lot of inmates who can draw," Westbrook said.

"Anytime you work in a prison, you want to redeem something that is lost. You meet people who have intelligence, creativity and talent. The missing piece is often the ethics, the morality," he said.

"Faith doesn't just relate to Sunday school, but to who you are."

Budding artists

Although some of the inmates were simply interested in learning cartooning techniques, others, such as Ernesto Vargas, 31, and Henry Andrew Lee, 24, want to produce comics with a moral message.

Lee said his comics would be based on real-life scenarios with a message to children to stay away from drugs and gangs.

Vargas said he already has contacted a librarian at the prison to see if he can include his work in the in-house newsletter.

"I've got plenty of ideas," Vargas said. "We just have to get together and get it printed."

One inmate suggested drawing comics on envelopes sent to families and friends outside the prison, an idea Butler had not considered, but strongly supported.

Inmate Mike Ryan said he likes to draw cartoons about his life to his granddaughters at home.

"It's my way of staying free and my way of keeping a sense of humor because it's so morbid in here," Ryan said.

Butler said.

But Monday was his first trip to a prison, a ministry he hopes will spread to correctional facilities across the country.

The Rev. Byron Westbrook, a pastor at Huntington Street Baptist Church in New London, is the religious coordinator and Protestant chaplain at Radgowski.