

How Inmates Transform: PEP at Thameside Prison, UK



[Photo by Julia Cleaver](#)



Tony McLean is a volunteer facilitator for the [Peace Education Program](#) (PEP) at Thameside Prison in London. Birgitte Nielsen, a PEP volunteer in Faaborg, Denmark, and Michel Klamph, the International PEP Communications Manager in Toronto, Canada, recently interviewed Tony about the powerful impact the program is having on inmates.

Birgitte: Where do you present the Peace Education Program and how did you begin?

Tony: I am on a team of 14 volunteers at London's Thameside Prison. We originally made a PEP presentation to the prison's governor that he liked very much, and he gave us permission to do a PEP presentation at the Prison. We have been presenting the PEP twice weekly there continuously since it began in May 2015.

Birgitte: What was the impact of the PEP on participants?

Tony: It's had a wonderful impact. About 140 inmates have participated in all the sessions of the 10-week course. Many inmates have low self-esteem. They come from backgrounds where they have not been respected at all, and a lot of them feel they have never been listened to. Many of them have never really listened to anything either. With the Peace Education Program, they have learned to start listening.

It takes less than a minute in any one session for the participants to calm down and pay attention. They are usually more than happy to make comments and many like to express themselves after having studied the materials. Their self-esteem seems to be increasing and many express themselves eloquently.

It is important that the facilitator has a good ear for salient comments and writes them down to capture the understanding of inmates as they grow. It's a pleasure to see how, over time, their expressions come more from the heart rather than repeating what they have heard.

We include their expressions in reports to the prison and management. It gives the inmates great confidence when we ask their permission to quote them and mention their name. They're often surprised that anyone would want to use what they have said and are usually delighted to be quoted.

Out of the 140 participants, four didn't complete the course—less than 3%—so overall, it's been a huge success.

Birgitte: What have you gained working with the PEP?

Tony: I've gained a sense of purpose and inner strength. What we are working for is really valuable. I believe we can achieve things that I never thought possible. Interest in PEP for correctional institutions increased substantially after Prem Rawat gave the keynote address at a [forum](#) for members of the UK's criminal justice fraternity at the British Film Institute in June. There are well over 100 prisons in the country.

Michel: Do you have any methods to help participants be receptive?

Tony: We try to get to know everyone by their first name and find out what they're like. We encourage everyone to relax and enjoy the PEP sessions as much as possible.

Michel: Is that through the warmth and friendliness of the volunteers?

Tony: Yes, because the inmates respond exactly the same way, with warmth and friendliness. It really helps if we explain at the beginning that we're volunteers. That changes the atmosphere completely in a prison. The inmates don't relate to you as someone who's incarcerating them. They're amazed that anyone would give up their time—free of charge—to be with them. It doesn't even take 30 seconds for that appreciation to set in.

The attendees appreciate the materials as well. They understand that the aspects of peace Prem Rawat talks about are for the here and now. It actually helps the inmates come to terms with where they are *now*, and gives them the inner strength to appreciate their lives even in such a difficult situation. That surprises them as much as it surprises us.

Michel: Is there anything you want to say in conclusion?

Tony: I would like to thank everyone involved in the Peace Education Program. I recommend that anyone interested in volunteering pulls together a good team.

In my experience, prison inmates are particularly appreciative of the program. They really look forward to the classes and so do the facilitators. By the end of the sessions, such an atmosphere has developed—a sense of acceptance and freedom. I encourage people to start the PEP in *any* institution. Sometimes it's a matter of getting over the confidence barrier and just doing it. Then everything else flows, and you have a wonderful experience. You never know what effect the PEP will have on a person.