



# 'Fresh start' for Middlesex inmates

By TAYLOR PETTAWAY

Middlesex Sheriff Peter J. Koutoujian says a program his county jail piloted a year ago to reduce recidivism rates and create a better quality of life outside its barbed wire fences is paying dividends.

Thursday marked the one-year anniversary of the opening of Middlesex County's People Achieving Change Together (PACT) unit, which separately houses incarcerated young adults in a rehabilitative setting in hopes the men will have the tools to create better lives for themselves on the outside.

"You can see it in their eyes, the hope they have for themselves now," Koutoujian said. "This is one of the most powerful examples of what you can do in corrections."

Middlesex, in partnership with the Vera Institute for Justice, was the first county jail in the country to implement the PACT program. The goal of the program is to help the young adult population stay out of the criminal justice cycle. National studies show that young adults are over-represented in the prison population.

"The proposed changes were daunting and flew in the face of traditional corrections," Koutoujian said. "But the traditional approach wasn't working with this age group and so we need to tackle the problems that got them here like the failure of society, failure in education, housing, health, social networks and more."

"What we do here has a ripple effect," said Alex French, program director for Vera. "This



CHRIS CHRISTO PHOTOS / HERALD STAFF

**WORK EXPERIENCE:** From left, inmate Raphael Parkinson, a young adult in the PACT program, Rep. Paul Tucker and Sheriff Peter Koutoujian talk in the barber shop at the Middlesex Jail and House of Correction in Billerica.

will have an effect forever and spread everywhere. Here we are responsible for throwing the first stone into the water. We see this as groundbreaking."

The PACT unit shows glimpses of the outside world: a barbershop, a library and a college classroom are all set up to help the transition out of prison. The inmates live as if they would outside of the criminal justice system — they work and pay bills, take courses toward a college degree and learn to cultivate healthy relationships. The program works to teach inmates how to successfully re-enter society and have the resources to be successful to better serve their communities and their families, Koutoujian said.

A major difference from a traditional unit is the relationship between inmates and corrections officers. The two groups share meals together, play board games and have one-on-

one talks, where they learn to interact with one another on a more personal level.

"The walls with the young adults and the staff have been broken," Koutoujian said. "Bridges have been built at the same time."

"It is different here, you get a sense of care," said PACT member Raphael Parkinson. The 22-year-old has been incarcerated since September on a probation violation with a second open case pending, but he said the program has given him a new outlook. Currently, he is taking psychology courses through PACT with the goal of graduating from college with a degree in business.

"I was so selfish before ... before I would have rather been in the gym than spending time with my son and it is what I regret every day, but now I have learned to be appreciative of everything and be a better person," he said. "This basically gives me a fresh start."