

Pickleball in Prisons?!

Did you know that some prisoners in America are getting the opportunity to play pickleball? Roger BelAir has spent a good portion of his life around money. A former vice president in banking and an investment broker, he said that the most rewarding thing he's ever done doesn't make him money...it actually is a huge financial drain. "It goes against my DNA to think any other way." But that's what he's done...changed his DNA. He now finds himself in the role of a pickleball advocate and coach in correctional institutions...from Rikers Island to Cook County Jail. BelAir has traveled the country teaching pickleball to prisoners.

"It's fun and rewarding. I've never done anything so satisfying in my life. There are people who feel there shouldn't be fun or games in prison. But, even if you don't want them to have joy, the guards have to use force 15-20 times per day at Rikers. If you could cut that in half, isn't that better for everyone?"

Getting to play PB in prison is a reward for many of the inmates...and co-existing on the court with someone of a different age, race, or even someone in another gang, is a necessity.

As Villager Pickleballers, we can relate. We've all shared the court with someone of a different skill, age, or background. You have to figure things out together if you want to win and that figuring-things-out part is all the fun. "You have prisoners who are enemies and, all of a sudden, they are playing as a team and laughing together. You have inmates who won't talk to each other, but then voluntarily get involved playing PB on the same court. I see guys in different gangs high-fiving each other. There's something positive that comes out of each hitting session. I had no idea that something like PB could be so powerful until I saw it myself."

About 95% of incarcerated people are eventually released back into society. If Pickleball could possibly be a factor in reducing the recidivism rate back into prison, wouldn't our world be a better place?

Happy Pickleballing, Villagers!