

# Offering hope at Yaphank jail

BY ELLEN YAN

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Suffolk County inmate Jessie Ernst expected a feeling of hopelessness at the Yaphank jail, but what she asked for and got was downward dog — yoga classes once a week.

“I was surprised when I came here at how much they had,” said Ernst, 22, of Mastic Beach, who was transferred from the Riverhead jail in October to wait for sentencing on an attempted drug sale charge. “It was a different feeling, a different vibe. It was relief. It was like a weight off our shoulders.”

Ernst is part of the Suffolk County sheriff’s new program, “Choose to Thrive,” a holistic approach to helping women behind bars get back into mainstream society. From trauma counseling to assistance for the inmates’ children, many of the services have been offered in years past. But now, they’ve been pooled together into a structured, regular program, like a get-your-life-back college in which the women can choose the courses or services they want, including yoga poses like downward dog that help them relax and focus.

“We’re really trying to identify segments of the population so we can target their needs,” Sheriff Errol Toulon Jr. said Monday at the program’s ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Choose to Thrive started in October, following the recent launches of similar programs for other inmates. The women-only pod at the Yaphank facility

can house up to 60 people, and currently, 39 out of the 49 women there have elected to participate. The facility houses inmates who don’t have violence or discipline issues. Candidates for the program are those with a medium to high risk of returning to jail.

Nonprofits make up the backbone of the program, delivering counseling and other benefits at no charge. The New Hour for Woman and Children, in Brentwood, makes sure children visit their mothers and mothers learn parenting skills. Black Sheep People, started by a life coach in Valley Stream, holds the yoga classes.

“When you make a real connection with someone going through what’s probably the hardest time in their lives, you don’t want to lose that because it’s in that space where rehabilitation and lasting change happens,” said Jennifer Hernandez, co-founder of Bohemia-based Empowerment Collaborative of Long Island.

A drug addict who violated probation, Samantha Cotroneo, 27, of Centereach, said she’s been in jail every other year since 2013. After landing at Riverhead jail in August, she said: “I thought I was just going to do my time, go home and go back to the same routine.”

She arrived at Yaphank “angry” at herself, but the new program turned her around, enough to joke to a jail captain Monday about a better life outside the bars. “If I’m doing the right thing,” Cotroneo told him, “I’ll let you know.”



High schoolers and law students during a mock trial hosted by New York State Supreme Court Justice

# MOCK TRIAL CLUB TEAMS TOURO, TEENS

As capstone, students advocate in front of a real judge

BY KESHIA CLUKEY

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Brentwood High School junior Daniela Cruz stood before state Supreme Court Justice Fernando Camacho on Monday afternoon, delivering opening arguments.

Using what she learned from her weeks of training with students from Touro College’s Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center, Cruz stood confidently, calling on him to grant an order of protection for her “client,” an alleged victim of domestic abuse.

“I was shaking, and my heart was beating out of my chest, but I think I did pretty good,” the 17-year-old said of the presentation, her second time speaking before a judge as part of the high school’s Mock Trial Program.

Each semester, students from Touro’s trial advocacy program volunteer to teach Brentwood High School students about the legal process and how to defend and prosecute a case. The program culminates in a mock trial before a real judge.

The after-school program,

started by Touro two years ago, helps students use critical thinking to examine a legal case and develop public speaking skills.

“I felt very strongly that we should be involved with local high schools and middle schools and that we should really think of ourselves as a resident in a neighborhood, as a family among families,” said Harry Ballan, dean of the law center in nearby Central Islip. “Part of that is spending time in the high school, getting to know the students, helping to educate them, providing an activity



Samantha Cotroneo, left, of Centereach and Jessie Ernst of Mastic Beach talk inside the women’s pod in Yaphank on Monday.

JESSICA ROTKIEWICZ