

## Getting Fit, Prison-Style



Mr. Marte performing dips at his gym. He bills ConBody as a “prison-style boot camp.”  
EMON HASSAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

APRIL 9, 2016

### Fit City

By NOAH  
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Two years ago, at a park on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Coss Marte took hold of a corroded metal pipe and felt the weight of his body as he lifted his feet off the ground for some pull-ups. With each heave, he watched the city’s skyline rise and fall through the early morning haze.

For Mr. Marte, the predawn routine provided a touch of solace during a precarious

chapter of his life. Less than a month had passed since he had been released from prison, after serving four years on drug-related charges. In his heyday as a dealer, Mr. Marte said, he oversaw 20 underlings who supplied the neighborhood with marijuana, cocaine, heroin and ecstasy. The operation, he said, took in more than \$2 million a year, affording him a lavish array of cars, jewelry and real estate.



Coss Marte, the owner of ConBody, demonstrating a bench-dip routine.  
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Just out of prison, Mr. Marte was leading a decidedly humbler existence, spending his nights on a fraying suede couch at his mother's apartment on Rivington Street. Determined to find legitimate work yet hampered in the job market by his criminal record, he began an internship at Goodwill and spent nights cleaning toilets at a hotel.

As Mr. Marte powered through rounds of calisthenics with some friends that morning, he said, he caught the attention of a passer-by who asked to join the workout session. For a price, came his reply, and the man returned from an A.T.M. with \$200 for a month of training.

"I knew I needed to fix my act up, and this felt like a second chance," Mr. Marte, now 30, recalled. "Fitness was my salvation."






Mr. Marte doing a set of toe touches.  
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From that chance encounter sprang ConBody, which Mr. Marte bills as a “prison-style boot camp,” located in a basement studio on Broome Street, just down the block from a spot where he used to sell drugs. The business now draws 300 to 400 clients a week to its 40 classes, which are based on a regimen Mr. Marte developed in prison after doctors warned that soaring blood pressure and cholesterol levels threatened his life.

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Over six months, Mr. Marte said, he shed 70 pounds in a workout that relied on his own body weight and could be performed in the space of his cell. He said he honed his physique so effectively behind bars that dozens of other inmates implored him to lead their workouts. His group of devotees eventually dropped a combined 1,000 pounds, he said.

“I’ve always known how to hustle,” he said. “It’s what makes me succeed, but it’s also what put me in prison in the first place.”

Mr. Marte performing chin-ups at ConBody, which draws between 300 and 400 clients each week to its 40 classes.

EMON HASSAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Mr. Marte said he turned to the drug trade as a child, eager to provide himself with luxuries his family could not afford. His parents struggled to piece together a living after emigrating from the Dominican Republic, his mother working in a clothing factory, his father at a bodega. Crime and poverty scarred the pre-gentrification Lower East Side of Mr. Marte’s youth. He remembers having to clear needles from his stoop on many days. “It was like a war zone,” he said.

At 12, Mr. Marte set up shop on a milk crate on Eldridge Street and began peddling marijuana. Two years later, he moved on to selling cocaine and heroin. Despite a string of arrests and brief incarcerations, Mr. Marte continued to expand his enterprise, capitalizing on the influx of wealth in the neighborhood. It was only

after his latest stint in prison — following a painful stretch in solitary confinement and a sister’s religious exhortations — that he resolved to change his ways. “I was overcome with regret, so I began asking God for forgiveness and guidance,” he said.

Nonetheless, he found himself stymied by the impediments that plague so many former inmates — not least, trouble finding work. Forced to disclose his criminal history on applications, Mr. Marte floundered in the job market. “The stigma was so strong it was like serving double time,” he said. “No one even bothered to call me back.”

Shane Ennover leading a fitness class at ConBody in Manhattan.  
EMON HASSAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

So he decided to create his own business.

“ConBody was a chance to reclaim my economic freedom,” he said.

As the company grew, he sought to include other former inmates. Four of the six trainers he now employs have served time. The other two grew up with relatives and friends who had been imprisoned. Among Mr. Marte’s cohort is Shane Ennover, with whom he crossed paths at Greene Correctional Facility in Coxsackie, N.Y.

“I don’t know where I’d be right now without this job,” said Mr. Ennover, 27. “No

one else was giving me an opportunity.”

At a recent Saturday morning class, a dozen students shuffled through a faux cell door and into an unassuming workout den. There, a floor-length mirror fogged from humidity as Mr. Ennover led the group through an endless series of push-ups, squats, lunges, [burpees](#) and [mountain climbers](#). During one particularly brutal sequence, Mr. Ennover assigned tasks by flipping through a stack of cards, with each suit a signal for a different activity.

Elizabeth Wexler, 25, who lives in Alphabet City and works in NoLiTa in restaurant management, had been an itinerant exerciser until she found ConBody, where she now takes classes three times a week.

“It’s a nice symbiotic relationship,” she said. “I’m getting a great workout, and Coss gives these guys a future.”

As the business day came to a close, Mr. Marte locked the door behind him and took stock of the neighborhood. The bodega where his father once worked, he remarked, had become a wine bar. “Times are really changing,” he said.

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