

RELEASE

News related to Connecticut's formerly incarcerated citizens and the organizations that serve them



FOCUS ON

employment



Brought to you by students at Central Connecticut State University,
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welcome to **RELEASE**

Welcome to the first edition of Release, a publication devoted to collecting stories about citizens with criminal histories and the organizations that serve them. Produced by the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy (IMRP) and created by students from Central Connecticut State University, the newsletter provides profiles, general features, interviews, videos, informative graphs and more. Our goal: to empower ex-offenders and to educate the larger Connecticut community on what it can do to stem recidivism. Release covers employment, housing, education, children of incarcerated parents and other subject areas that relate to building a productive life with a criminal history. For your free subscription to Release, which will be distributed online on a monthly basis and also published in print on a quarterly basis, please register at www.releasenews.org.

Would You HIRE THEM?

*Behind the Scenes at a Job Skills
Training Seminar for Ex-Offenders*

by Jesse Duthrie

BRIDGEPORT, CT -- Stephanie Miller Urdang sits at a small table with a thick manila folder and smiles at each person who walks in the door. Ex-offenders of Bridgeport come to this office twice a week for three weeks to fulfill the Bridgeport Professional Association (BPA) course, which helps ex-offenders find work, and, in turn, reduce the rate of recidivism.

Today, three men and one woman sit quietly in the room. They're young, African American and dressed in a range of styles, from Nike basketball shoes to polished heels. They introduce themselves to me, and then sit back in their chairs. I can feel them contemplating my presence.

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***"I soak in the hard life
these men and women
are born into, and
often times are unable
to escape."***

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One-by-one, each person stands up and addresses himself or herself to Stephanie, who has taken on the role of potential employer. They deliver what they feel is a good pitch about themselves to a potential employer. One man looks up to the ceiling, as



BPA GRADUATES POSE AFTER THEIR JUNE 2011 GRADUATION

he tries to string together sentences, and runs the edge of his sneaker against the floor.

Stephanie complements each person emphatically, turns to me and asks, "Now, wouldn't you hire that person?!" I'm not sure I would. Sure, the canned openers are appealing, but the idea of hiring a former convict feels...well...scary. Put into a position of hiring an ex-offender, many employers back away for numerous reasons: lack of trust, pre-conceived notions, lack of information. The list goes on. I, playing the fictitious employer, avoid the honest answer.

"Yes. I would hire them."

I smile at Stephanie and she returns the gesture. As I relax back in my chair, scribbling notes into my pad, Stephanie prompts open-ended questions to the group. Questions like, "What is your best quality?" and "What is your worst quality?"

Suddenly, Stephanie turns her eyes, magnified by thick glasses, on me, the alleged observer. She wants me to answer the same questions.

I tell the group my best quality is my ability to write, and my worst quality is that I'm too lackadaisical. She asks

me again what my worst quality is, and this time I should pretend that she's an employer. I think for a moment, and tell her I'm an over-achiever: I take on too many tasks and, even though I always get them done, I tend to stress. The group laughs, knowing it's a good answer for an employer. One man extends his hand for a high five and tells me he's "gonna use that for my next interview!" Any remaining awkwardness in the room dissipates; I've been accepted by the group.

After we go over the questions, Stephanie asks the group to open up about what it's like to be without a job and the struggles they face while finding employment. The man sitting next to me who gave me the high-five, shifts his tone from a serious job candidate to a street-smart kid. He speaks fast in sentences stuffed with slang. He reminds me of Omar from the HBO show *The Wire*. When I ask him what it would be like to find

to the beach from my house. I can walk through downtown in my flip-flops, eating ice cream, not worrying about gunshots or police. Growing up with a single mother, I've had to work since I turned 15, but a friend or family member with a connection somewhere set me up with most of my jobs.

Once the Omar character gets going, he tells us that a friend of his had a gun held to his head just the other day. They all agree that they fear violence from their peers in the streets more than arrest by a cop for a crime.

Another man tells the group that he could leave the table, go back to his neighborhood, and make \$1,000 a day selling drugs. I sit all the way back in my chair and cross my arms. I am speechless. Expecting the same reaction from the rest of the table, I look around the table to see I'm the only one shocked. The others look at me flatly. Even Stephanie handles this in stride; she hears stories like this

"In the uniform, I feel a positive energy that flows through me," one man says proudly from the end of the table. Not only are these agencies helping people develop skills to enter the job market, they're giving them the tools they need for the entire process from interviewing, to searching for job openings and how to follow-up after an interview.

I leave the meeting and get in my car to head home. Driving down the streets of Bridgeport, I see roads that need to be re-paved, loiterers sitting outside gas stations, beaten up cars with tinted windows and hear the bass from rap music that's so loud it drowns out my own radio. I soak it in, conscious to the reality these men and women are born into. I become sympathetic to their desire to find a better life. Fortunately, there are people like Stephanie Miller Urdang, who are fighting to change that.

The people in the BPA meeting have lived hard lives but they are also trying to make a change, not just for themselves, but for all of those around them. After all these hardships, the only thing they want is a chance at a better life.

I think about my response to Stephanie's question, "Would you hire them?"

My answer? Absolutely.

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"Put into a position of hiring an ex-offender, many employers back away for numerous reasons: lack of trust, pre-conceived notions, lack of information."

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a job, he tells me, "You don't even know man. For us, it'd be like hitting the lotto. You know?" The rest of the group smiles and nod their heads.

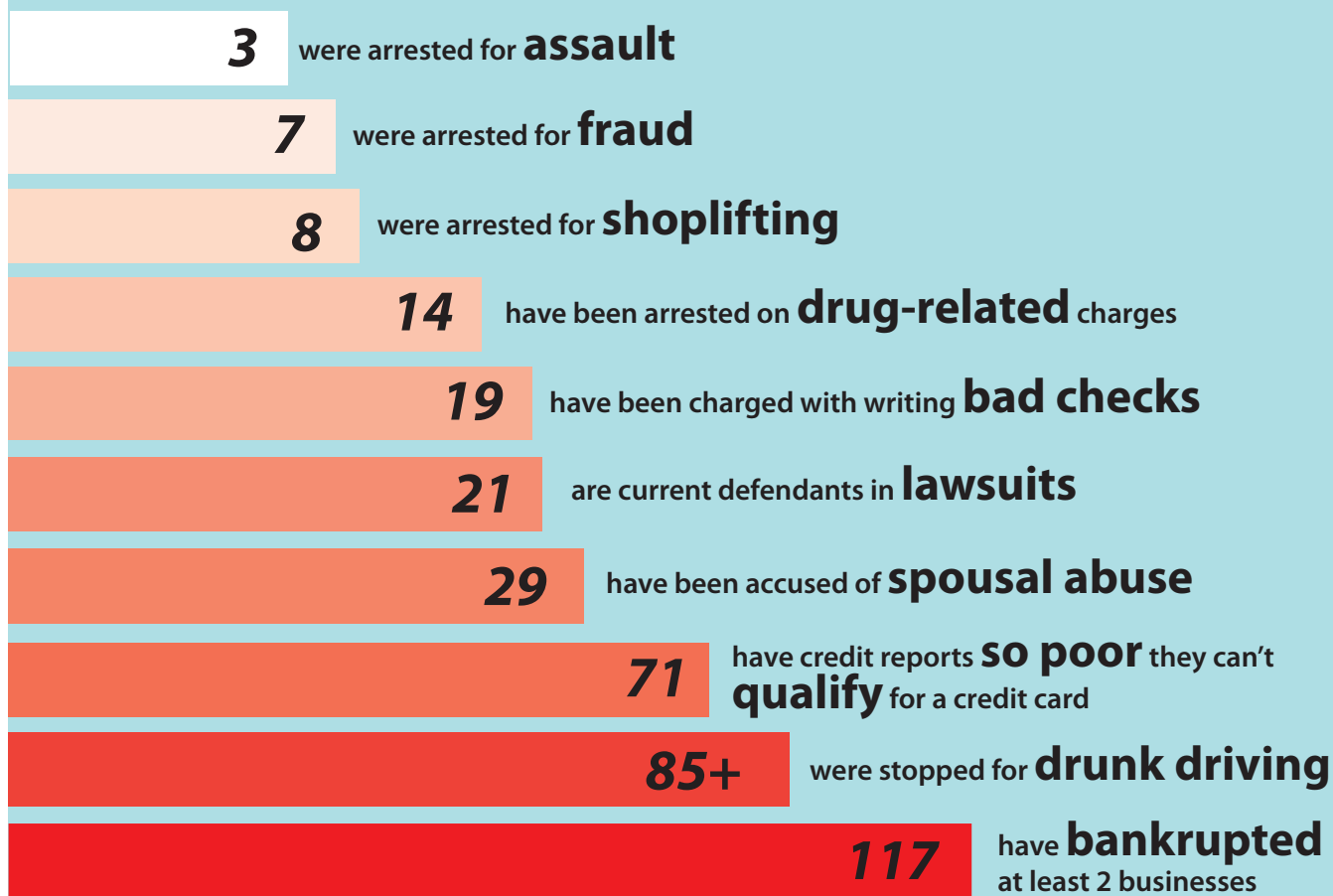
I couldn't possibly know how it'd feel for one of these guys to get a job. I grew up in Niantic, a middle-class town in southeastern Connecticut. I can walk

every day. Without speaking, her body language tells me, "That's just the way it is."

The conversation shifts from life on the streets to what they gain from BPA. Everyone who enters the program receives a dress shirt, slacks, dress shoes, and tie (or dress and heels for women).

WOULD YOU HIRE THEM?

Of this group of 535 promising members:



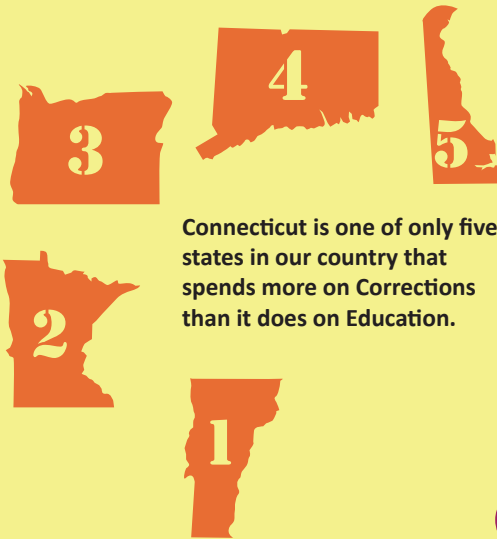
guess what?

You already did!

This is the **Congress** we elected and placed in top leadership!

OTO

YOU KNOW?



Connecticut is one of only five states in our country that spends more on Corrections than it does on Education.

The average cost to incarcerate one individual in the state of CT for one year:

\$ 44,165.

+ \$40,000 in increased costs to our court system
+ lost tax revenue

85%

of federal offenders who violated parole and returned to prison were unemployed at the time of remand.

An unemployed offender is

4 TIMES

more likely to return to prison than his counterpart who has been afforded the opportunity to work.

Changing MINDSETS

*A Q&A with Roberta Meyers-Peebles,
Director of National HIRE Network*

by Casey Coughlin

The National HIRE Network works nationwide to assist state and federal advocacy groups to change employment policies and public opinions concerning people with criminal histories. Roberta Meyers-Peebles, director of Legal Action Center's National HIRE Network, works with organizations around the country to change state and federal policies, specifically changes dealing with the sealing/expungement of records, certification of rehabilitation, and anti-discrimination protection. For additional information on Peebles or the National HIRE Network visit www.hirenetwork.com.



ROBERTA MEYERS-PEEPLES

saferfoundation.org), the Center for Employment Opportunities (www.ceoworks.org), and The Osborne Association (www.osborneny.org). They are definitely considered the experts in the field of work force development for people with criminal histories. We look for organizations that provide these services across various communities across the country.

COUGHLIN: Can you speak briefly about some projects HIRE is currently working on?

PEEPLES: We are supporting people around the country. Each state determines what is most important. Definitely "Ban the Box" which has caught on like wild fire

some right of action to challenge any determination that is made against them. We are also working on a national campaign to eliminate the drug felony ban on TANF/FS (currently individuals with drug felony charges are banned from receiving services for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families/ Food Stamps.) Our main focus is eliminating employment and education barriers. It's critically important to recognize that this population has been marginalized and will continue to be so unless the law says it can't be done.

COUGHLIN: If you could change one thing about the hiring process as it stands today what would you change about it?

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"To me it's more about getting to a place where people are willing to give everyone who applies for a job a fair chance to compete."
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COUGHLIN: I noticed National HIRE Network does not run any job placement programs directly but does refer people in need of services to other state and community run programs. What are the top three programs you are sending people to in the country?

PEEPLES: There are organizations that exclusively serve this population, who are nationally renowned such as the Safer Foundation ([since 2005. \(Ban the Box policy would remove questions of past criminal histories on job, housing, and social service applications \(\[www.allofusornone.org/campaigns/ban-the-box\]\(http://www.allofusornone.org/campaigns/ban-the-box\)\). Another one that's ideal for me is anti-discrimination legislation for qualified workers who have criminal histories. People should have](http://www.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

PEEPLES: For [National HIRE Network] it's about changing mindsets. I think one of the biggest challenges people with criminal histories face no matter what level of education they have, level of [job] experience, or the seriousness of their record, they always have to overcome the stigma of having a record. To me it's more about getting

to a place where people are willing to give everyone who applies for a job a fair chance to compete.

COUGHLIN: As an expert in this field what is the one question that you never get asked that you feel you should?

PEEPLS: I never get asked, “What should I do to support the individual that comes to me?” To me that’s about looking at each individual as an individual and recognizing that every person that comes through that door is not going to have the same desires and goals. It’s this constant lumping people into a group and not recognizing that we are talking about people who have different backgrounds, histories, and influences. It plays out with the direct service providers and it plays out in the policy making arena. That’s actually how we came up with our tag line for HIRE; individuals with criminal histories.

COUGHLIN: Does HIRE work with any other national agencies?

PEEPLS: We do a lot of work with National Employment Law Project (www.nelp.org) and some with The Sentencing Project (www.sentencingproject.org). But on the issue of employment and criminal records it is really NELP and HIRE doing a lot of the policy advocacy work with the advocates in the states. We really do not take any credit for getting laws passed. It is always the advocates within those states that put in the hard work to identify leaders in the legislature to take up their cause and to build the necessary groundswell

required to push a campaign through. Our goal has always been to work with those groups early on in their strategy development and come in when called to help with providing

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*“People should have
some right of action
to challenge any
determination that is
made against them.”*
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the national perspective on the issues the local advocates choose to pursue. We’ve worked with numerous groups who have been very successful and I would only take some credit in saying that in many places we just laid the seeds for action.

COUGHLIN: How do you see society changing? Is humanizing the stories of this population the right road to go down?

PEEPLS: I think there are two strategies; we definitely need to continue down the road of trying to humanize and remove labels. Folks need to recognize that the person’s criminal history is not who they are; it’s something that they’ve done. But, I also believe that legislation and even litigation will bring change. That’s why [National HIRE Network] really focuses on the legislative process and tries to create policies that will enforce, require and encourage people to have [hiring] practices that are fair and objective.

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RELEASE?

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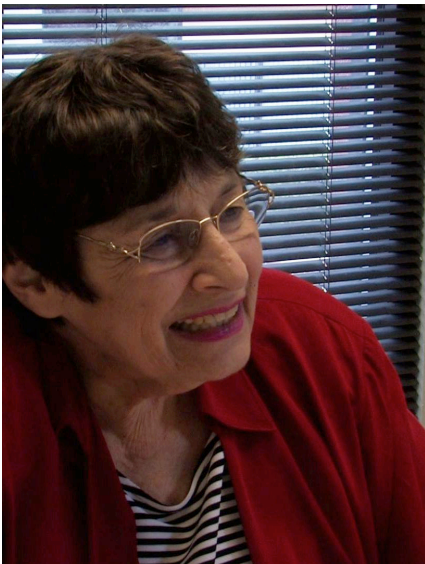
She Would Give You Her Last **ANYTHING**

*Stephanie Miller Urdang
makes a difference*

by Jesse Duthrie

The wall honors “The Hired,” all the ex-offenders Stephanie Miller Urdang, founder of the Bridgeport Professional Association (BPA) of Connecticut, has helped find a job. A huge variety of faces fill the 30-foot space—the serious, the smiler, the young.

Stephanie herself is a smiler, a warm, motherly self-described “little Jewish lady,” who organized the three week



STEPHANIE MILLER URDANG, FOUNDER OF THE
BRIDGEPORT PROFESSIONALS ASSOCIATION

BPA program, which consists of “four hours a week of training in the office,” she explains. “The goal is to make them [the ex-offenders] feel warm and open when they come here. That way,

they’ll open up to us and we can see actual change.”

Nearly all of the students graduate and 72 percent of them find work. Their retention rate on the job: an amazing 93 percent after one year. After graduation, the BPA locates job openings in Bridgeport, provides clothing and transportation, and keeps an open line of communication to assist in finding these people jobs. Stephanie sits at the center of it all, the person, as one staffer remarked, who “would give her last everything.”

Her generosity extends beyond the classroom. One BPA graduate, Vincent, found a job working third shift at a shipyard, but he had to commute there by bicycle, even in the record setting snows that winter. Despite the weather, he never missed a day. Stephanie extended her hand by buying him a headlamp, hat and gloves.

Although the BPA offers one year of support after graduation, Stephanie extends that time indefinitely. “There really isn’t a cut-off. These men, the men who are working for a better life, they are part of this for as long as they need.” It’s this kind of generosity that allows the students to feel to open and comfortable with her. At a BPA graduation, many graduates referred to her as, “Ms.

Steph.” Several past graduates call her regularly on the phone.

Stephanie’s experience in the educational field stems back 30 years. She has created and directed several successful proprietary schools across Connecticut; however, it wasn’t until 2004 that she took the leap from proprietary education to job development.



***“Everyone is entitled to
a future. And these men
coming out of prison
don’t have a lot of help
on their side.”***



Her ultimate motivation: to help those who need it most. “Everyone is entitled to a future. And these men coming out of prison don’t have a lot of help on their side,” she says. She’s also motivated to ensure that the children of ex-offenders can have better lives, a role model to look up to instead of an absent parent.

“I wake up every morning,” she says, “and feel if I didn’t help someone that day, then it wasn’t a successful day.”

Coming to the TABLE

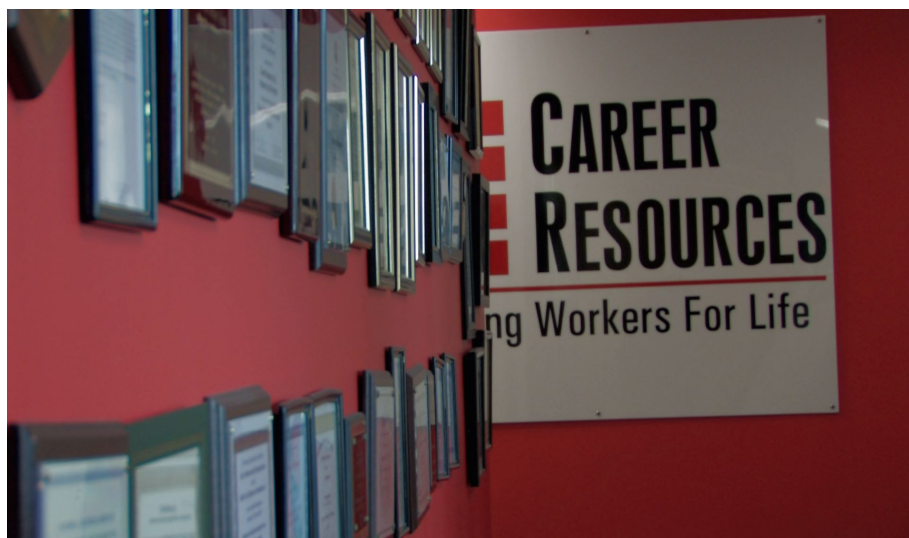
An Ex-Offender and Employer

by Casey Coughlin

Vincent Oliver “cut his first deal” at age nineteen. Now almost thirty-years-old he has spent one-third of his life in prison. When he enters Starbucks he looks out of place, his exposed do-rag and flat rimmed cap contrast against the khaki slacks and white button downs surrounding him. He doesn’t seem to mind and turns, coffee in hand, to the sea of middle aged men hiding behind silver Macs. He joins me at a large table secluded in the back of the café.

The closest I have ever been to a prison was as a kid, eating my Burger King lunch after soccer practice in the parking lot next to the MacDougall-Walker Correctional Institution in Suffield, Connecticut. The massive brick building lingered in the background as my brother and I threw rocks at the fence, trying to make one over the barbwire.

Vincent and I chat with the sounds of an espresso machine loudly working in the background until our other guest arrives, Walter Donne, the Human Resource Director of an electronics company in Connecticut. He wears a short sleeve collared shirt and a five o’clock shadow. He greets Vincent with enthusiasm and the two shake hands as equals. Vincent looks him in the eye like an old friend. I know the



FINDING EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR EX-OFFENDERS

Bridgeport Professionals Association’s three-week job readiness class is behind that confident handshake. Here in Starbucks the two sit not as boss and employee but as respected individuals; the square wooden table is the only thing that divides them.

Ex-offenders have been a recent addition to the Walter’s employee team. Stephanie Miller Urdang, a job developer at ReEntry Works, convinced Walter to consider employing a person with a criminal record a little over a year ago.

“The first time she wanted me to hire an ex-offender I said to her, ‘What are ya kidding?’ but that didn’t last long! She said ‘No, you just got to take a

chance so come meet Errol,’ and after I met him she said, ‘If you love Errol you will love Vincent, these guys are my favorite.’ I met with our VP of Operations for his approval; he had experience [hiring ex-offenders] at his previous company. We have had continued success with the guys we have hired.”

He stretches back against his wooden seat and introduces us to the idea of the “entitled.” He describes them as the guys who have graduated from trade school and feel that it’s their right to have a job secured for them. He tells us they don’t possess the dedication and ingenuity the ex-offenders have.

“So many kids come out ‘entitled.’ Let’s

look at my lateness report- the ‘entitles’ are on the report. The ex-offenders are dedicated. Their lateness numbers are minuscule.” He tells a story about Vincent, who taught himself how to weld when the company was short on help and facing a huge order. Vincent smiles at Walter’s praise and comments on how it’s all about getting the order filled for the customer.

“Employers have to be willing to give someone another chance.”

Walter nods his head in agreement with Vincent and adds, “Another part of this is, you know those ‘entitles?’ If they don’t work, I can’t call their mother.” He gestures towards Vincent.

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“Even now at this point, I’m in a situation where I can make choices that aren’t good for me, but I won’t because not only am I dedicated to my job, but to my children and my family.”

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 “But if one of these guys doesn’t work, I call Stephanie.”

Everyone laughs.

“I’m not kidding you. I’ve hired twelve ex-offenders, and I’ve had to call her three times. She calls me back a day later and says, ‘Everything should be okay now.’ And it was!”

I ask Vincent for any advice he might have for other ex-offenders looking for a job.

“There are so many things I would say, but [Walter] talks about dedication. You have to have it in you to go

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“To be honest with you, I work for nothing; with child support and bills, I am better off not working. But I love my job, I love the people that I work with and I am going to continue to do it regardless, because it’s going to pay back in the long run.”

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 through the storms. You have to be pliable- able to bend when it’s called for you to bend. Even now at this point, I’m in a situation where I can make choices that aren’t good for me, but I won’t because not only am I dedicated to my job, but to my children and my family. So it’s not about me no more. And that’s what other [ex-offenders] need to learn; the decisions you make don’t only affect you. They affect those who love you and those who are around you.” He pauses, and looks up from the maroon laminated table top, glances at Walter and continues.

“I believe there are spiritual forces at work. That’s how I look at my incarceration; I mean ten years- that’s one third of my life in that prison. Some people don’t come back from that. But it helped me become the

man that I am today. I am able to sit and tell my story with confidence that it’s not going to hold me back. I have made up my mind to not only do good for myself but also for my children. To be honest with you, I work for nothing; with child support and bills, I am better off not working. But I love my job, I love the people that I work with and I am going to continue to do it regardless, because it’s going to pay back in the long run.”

We all sit quietly, together, at the table.

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