

Hard Work Pays Off

“I spent 7 years of my life incarcerated. I was released the week before Thanksgiving in 2009. The first week I was busy seeing friends and family. The second week I was faced with the task of what to do with my life. It was a hopeless feeling wondering who would hire me. Was being a dishwasher in a restaurant the best I could hope for? In prison I heard about programs that help released inmates get a degree. I looked but couldn't find any information on the programs. I found it was easy to blame DOC and the system for what I saw as a hopeless future.”

Johnny's story is not uncommon. Over 20,000 offenders are released each year from Missouri prisons. Today's economy makes it even tougher for ex-prisoners to be successful. Upon release, offenders face various issues including housing, employment, substance abuse, basic needs, attitude, family, negative peer associations, and numerous other factors. It is unreasonable to expect a recently released offender to effectively navigate through such obstacles alone. Just one of these factors is often enough to significantly disrupt the life of the most stable person in the community.

But why is this important? Why should we care? After all, Johnny got himself into this mess...right? The reason is simple. We all have family members and people we care about deeply. We all have possessions which we would like to see protected. We all pay higher taxes and too much for everything we buy due to the criminal activity of those who do not play by the rules. Prisoner reentry is about public safety, and we all have a stake. In order for our communities to be safer, we must both consider and support the efforts of those returning from prison so they are less likely to re-offend, and more likely to succeed.

The Missouri Reentry Process believes offenders can indeed change and become productive citizens. It is also believed the Department of Corrections is not solely responsible for offender success, but this responsibility should be shared with other state and federal agencies, local service providers, families, friends, and the offender's themselves.

Johnny's situation began to change when he shared his desire to go to college with his Uncle Buck. A college graduate himself, Buck also wondered what type of educational opportunities existed for returning offenders. After much research and discussions with school financial aid advisors, both Buck and Johnny were disappointed to find offenders are not entitled to any special funding for college. Not one to give up quickly, especially on his nephew, Buck visited the Department of Corrections website and found the phone number for the Reentry Unit. He called and spoke with Reentry Manager, Julie Kempker. “I do not know what to do” Buck reported. “I know if Johnny could just get into Rankin Technical College he would be fine...he loves to work on cars. Isn't there some way we can get the money for him to go to college?”

While Julie knew there was a way, she was not familiar with the exact process. Julie referred Buck to Dan Hanneken, a Reentry Specialist working for a mid-Missouri substance abuse treatment center. When Dan received the call, he could hear both the frustration and a glimmer of hope left in the Uncle's voice. Having recently published an article on educational opportunities and challenges facing returning offenders, Mr. Hanneken was very familiar with Johnny's dilemma. He was also very familiar with the solution; Dan himself was released from prison in 2003 before earning his college degree.

By the end of the phone call, Uncle Buck had the information he needed to go back to Rankin Technical College and access the financial aid needed to cover Johnny's educational expenses. While no *special* funding exists for returning offenders, they are eligible for the same financial aid as everyone else. "When offenders go in and ask for programs for offenders they are told no, they just need to ask for regular financial aid like everyone else" says Hanneken.

Buck emailed Dan in March to report "I am proud to say Johnny has been getting "A"s all semester in his shop classes and math classes. He has perfect attendance and turns all of his projects in early, at times a week or more early. I am not going to list how far Johnny has come in a few months, but I will say the progression is amazing. Without Johnny's determination and your help he wouldn't be where he is today. I think of you and Julie each time Johnny calls to tell me how his week went or what he learned in class. I hope you all realize the lives you are saving each day by the work that you all are doing."

While it might be unreasonable to expect a returning offender to successfully navigate reentry barriers alone, it is very reasonable to expect that with support, any offender can change and become a productive citizen. Johnny's success is the result of determination, hard work, and a lot of courage. To achieve success however, Johnny's strengths needed to be supported by a concerned Reentry Manager, an informed Reentry Specialist, supportive staff at Rankin Technical College, and an Uncle who truly cares.

With such support, Johnny now reports "I am completing my first semester at Rankin, I was nervous at first but it didn't take me long to realize I do fit in and I belong in college. It is hard work and at times very frustrating, but my professors are great and I get help from the friends I have made in my classes. There have been so many positive changes in my life in the last few months and I am looking forward to a future as an automotive mechanic."

Almost everyone in today's society knows someone personally who has been, or still is incarcerated. Please do not underestimate both the offender's ability to change, and your ability to support that effort. Let's work together to make our communities safer by helping those returning from prison lead productive lives.