

NC

PRISON NEWS Today

Amplifying the Voices of the Incarcerated Statewide



FIRST LADY ANNA STEIN

WANTS TO USE HER
ELEVATED PLATFORM TO
REWARD REHABILITATION

NCPNT

WINNER OF THREE
2025 AMERICAN PENAL
PRESS CONTEST AWARDS
1ST PLACE
BEST LONG-FORM STORY
2ND PLACE
BEST SPORTS
&
3RD PLACE
BEST OPINION



Created and Written by the Incarcerated, for the Incarcerated

LETTER FROM THE EDITORIAL STAFF

BY CRIS GARDNER

OVER 2000 YEARS AGO, THE ROMANS used public message boards to inform the citizenry of the news of the empire. Whether it was the exploits of their beloved generals who were abroad expanding their powerful empire or the day to day changes in the policies governing their lives, these message boards were the place everyone went to for the news.

For the next millennia and a half, the job of disseminating the news was left to poets and storytellers, who traveled from village to village earning their meager livelihoods by entertaining the public with poems of heroism and tales of daring.

The printing press came along in 1456, but it was another 150 years before the world's first newspaper, *The Relation*, was published in Strasbourg, Germany.

On March 24, 1800, *The Forlorn Hope* was published in New York, becoming the first known prison publication. *The Prison Mirror* followed in 1887, created by members of the James-Younger gang, the notorious outlaws led by Jesse James. It is still in publication in Minnesota today.

Since 1800, over 700 prison newspapers have been produced. Some had the sanction of the institutional authorities, while others were produced underground.

Acknowledgments

ON SEPTEMBER 19, 2025, THE Pollen Initiative recognized the best in prison journalism at its newly relaunched American Penal Press Contest. The contest, which originally ran from the 1960s until 1991, returned thanks to the Pollen Initiative and their partnership with Southern Illinois University's School of Journalism, where the contest originated.

The awards presentation was held at San Quentin Rehabilitation Center and streamed live nationwide. Event hosts were Pollen Initiative Executive Director Jesse Vasquez and Editorial Director Kate McQueen. *San Quentin News* Editor-in-Chief Kevin D. Sawyer emceed.

Twenty-one prison publications submitted 179 pieces. *NC Prison News Today* (NCPNT) and *The Nash News* (TNN) submitted pieces for 10 of 14 categories and won nine awards.

The Angolite and *The San Quentin News* were among those that followed. They became two powerful voices through their quality writing and reach beyond the prison fences. They not only informed the prison population of what was going on in their world, but they also shared the struggles of the incarcerated with the public at large.

The *NC Prison News Today* (NCPNT) joined this collective in 2024.

Being a part of this historic publication made it possible for us to interview the newly appointed secretary of the Department of Adult Correction, Leslie Cooley Dismukes in February of 2025. It was the first known interview of a government agency head by a prison publication in the state's history. Timothy Johnson shared the secretary's vision for the direction of the North Carolina prison system with our readers. (See *Volume 1, Issue 2 of NCPNT*, pg. 2)

In another first, our staff met with and interviewed Anna Stein, the first lady of North Carolina, in June of 2025. During this interview, we learned the incarcerated have a new and powerful voice working on our behalf to improve the odds of success for those of us who will one day rejoin society. (See *current issue*, pg. 2)

More importantly, we were able to com-

municate your concerns and cares as incarcerated men and women, because we share a life experience that only the justice-impaired can relate to. By sharing these stories with the first lady, she gained valuable insight that she will broadcast to the rest of North Carolina. And she took notes.

The outside media has the attention of Johnny and Suzie Q. Public. The stories they generate about us do not depict the incarcerated in the best light. Therefore, having our own prison newspaper is important. Through the words of the incarcerated writer, we may be able to show Mister and Missus Public that we are not, at our core, the summation of our worst day. Rather, we are living, breathing, and caring individuals who, if given the opportunity, would be productive members of society with a greater appreciation of the freedoms we have long been denied.

The benefits of our temporarily elevated station as members of the editorial staff of NCPNT are not lost on us. But neither is the responsibility. The task of the prison journalist is to ensure the stories of the incarcerated are conveyed with everyone we can reach. If we don't share our stories with the outside world, we already know which stories they will hear. **NCPNT**

We owe a huge debt of gratitude for our success to a long list of people. The following are but a few of the many: Ms. Mildred Spearman, our first champion, Ms. Pamela Walker, our last, who recently left to pursue her dream of working with juveniles, and Mr. Brad Deen, our current leader, who's trying to fill some very big shoes.

Mr. Richard Stancil and Gene Zboralski who spent hours sending emails and doing research for our articles. And our NCPNT liaisons, Ms. Mitchell and Ms. Smith.

Mr. Jesse Vasquez and the Pollen Initiative team for reviving the Penal Press Contest, inviting us to participate, and arranging for us to watch the live event.

And to all the other prison journalists, we are proud to be a part of this esteemed guild with professionals like you. **NCPNT**

NCPNT Awards

1st Place, Best Long-Form Story—*"The Spirit of Giving"* by Cris Gardner

2nd Place, Best Sports—*"Caitlin Clark: Changing the Scope of the WNBA"* by Tony Johnson

3rd Place, Best Opinion—*"The Effects of Mass Incarceration on the Children Left Behind"* by Kwame Teague

TNN Awards

1st Place, Best Visual Journalism

2nd Place, Best Magazine of the Year—*2024/25 Winter*

2nd Place, Best Photo—*"Peterbilt"* by Kalab Lackey

2nd Place, Best Visual Journalism—*"Orphan Us"* by Jason Williford

3rd Place, Best Local Coverage—*"Nash Holds 2024 Mock Election"* by Cris Gardner

Staff Advisor of the Year—*Charlotte Walyko*

A full list of winners can be found at:
americanpenalpresscontest.com

NC PRISON NEWS Today

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How to Submit an Article

For longer form articles or short stories — between 300-800 words — you may submit your writing to the facility liaison. The liaisons will accept only 10 articles per month. For poetry, recipes, and letters to the editor, use the app on Edovo. Articles must be no longer than 800 words

and must be submitted to your liaison by the 20th day of the month. Any articles longer than 800 words will not be accepted. If you don't meet the deadline, or the liaison has reached the 10 article limit, you will need to wait until the next month. Any accepted submissions may be edited for

content, grammar, or clarity. See also, "What We Want" and "What we Do Not Want" (Volume 1, Issue 1, page 2) for more guidance on what is or is not acceptable.



THE NASH NEWS CONTRIBUTORS:

Jon Adams	Reporting, Editing	Brian Jones	Reporting
Howard Ashleman	Reporting	Kalab Lackey	Photography
Steven Blue	Reporting	Barry Mintz	Reporting
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Timothy Johnson	Editing, Reporting	Kwame Teague	Reporting
Tony Johnson	Reporting	Jason Williford	Illustration

SPECIAL FEATURE

First Lady Anna Stein

*Using her platform
& elevated voice
to prioritize
rehabilitation and
reentry programs*

BY TIMOTHY JOHNSON



AT NOON ON JUNE 12, 2025, THE SPEAKER in the prison block announced, “Code 3, controlled movement until further notice.” A few minutes later, a rumor circulated that North Carolina First Lady Anna Stein was visiting Nash Correctional Institution.

Our *NC Prison News Today* (NCPNT) team had received notice that we would get to interview First Lady Stein, so I knew the rumor was true. I walked by three men and heard one of them say, “I don’t care nothing about the governor’s wife coming here. She doesn’t care about us. She’s just doing it for the publicity.”

Having researched her for the interview, I knew his comments were inaccurate. First Lady Stein designated rehabilitation and reentry programs as one of her three priority areas, along with promoting rural tourism and ending the stigma over mental health and substance use disorders (SUDs).

In an interview with WRAL News’ *On the Record*, she said, “I’ve always wanted to help people who are on the margins, people who are having a tough time.” Then, she talked about using her “elevated voice” as North Carolina’s first lady to elevate incar-

cerated and formerly incarcerated people.

She was appointed to the state’s Joint Reentry 2030 Council (JRC) by North Carolina Department of Adult Correction (NCDAC) Secretary Leslie Cooley Dismukes. She is the only first lady in the nation to sign on to support the nationwide 2030 Reentry initiative. She said serving on the JRC is a natural fit for her, because it aligns with her goals and her background.

She earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology and a juris doctorate from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC). After law school, she clerked for two North Carolina Court of Appeals judges and worked in private practice. Later, she returned to UNC to earn a master’s in public health, then spent more than 12 years working at the state’s Division of Public Health, as a legal specialist on policy concerning legal and illegal substances.

Governor Josh Stein and First Lady Stein spoke at the 2025 North Carolina Rehabilitation and Reentry Conference, held in Raleigh April 1-3. At that conference, she said, “People who are incarcerated are truly the invisible of our society. I want to give them the message that I see them, and I want to

hear what they have to say.”

In the afternoon of June 12, First Lady Stein joined the NCPNT team for an interview. Accompanying her were state Representative Dante Pittman, Gerda Stein (Governor Stein’s sister), former NCDAC Chief Deputy Secretary of Rehabilitative and Correctional Services Maggie Brewer, and NCDAC Chief Deputy Secretary of Operations Brandeshawn Harris.

First Lady Stein said she wants to break down barriers between people inside and outside of prison. She identified the stigma against incarcerated people as possibly the biggest barrier. She hopes to dismantle that barrier by setting an example for North Carolinians.

She is visiting two prisons each month, with the goal of visiting every facility in the state. At each stop, she meets with incarcerated individuals, talks with them about their lives, and listens to their ideas for facilitating reentry success. Then, she highlights her interactions on her social media platform.

People are drawn to her social media because of her family, her work to promote rural tourism, and especially to videos and

pics of the first family's dogs, Lila and Harper. The dogs might be the main attraction, but viewers will see her interacting with incarcerated people.

First Lady Stein said, "They will see me visiting a lot of prisons, and they will see me talking to a lot of people who are incarcerated, talking about the amazing work that is going on and the amazing transformation for a lot of people."

She believes her example can change how people think about and respond to incarcerated people. "By serving as a role model and by putting it on my social media," she said, "I hope it makes it more likely that when people are leaving prison that the community will be more accepting, that they are more likely to give somebody a job, that they are more likely to rent to them."

She said her most valuable source of information regarding the carceral system is "far and away the people who are incarcerated." Before coming to Nash, she visited several other correctional facilities. At Sampson Correctional, she met with students participating in Campbell University's Second Chance Initiative

program. She went to Carteret and New Hanover when professors and students from Campbell Law School were helping people navigate the driver's license restoration process, talking with people waiting in line. At Wayne, she met with participants of A New Direction, a SUD treatment program. She appreciated their "very candid answers."

Her years at the Division of Public Health taught her that the stigma against people with SUDs is the "biggest barrier to tackling the SUD problem that we have in our society," which helps her understand how the stigma against incarcerated people operates as a barrier to reentry.

At the North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women (NCCIW), First Lady Stein surveyed their MOUD (Medication for Opioid Use Disorder) program, one of 24 facilities offering MOUD. During the interview, she said, "I am very supportive



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IT'S FRUSTRATING TO HEAR THAT FOLKS DON'T FEEL LIKE THEY ARE GOING TO BE REWARDED FOR GOOD BEHAVIOR.

”

of the use of medications for opioid use disorder, because the evidence shows that is the most effective way to treat [SUDs]. It dramatically decreases people's risk of overdose, which is a huge problem with people leaving incarceration."

A pioneering study done in North Carolina found that people leaving prison, within their first two weeks, are 40 times more likely to die of an overdose than the general population is. She, along with Governor Stein and Secretary Dismukes, wants to expand MOUD programs to facilities across the state.

When asked about developing a "day-one" approach to reentry success, meaning access to rehabilitation programs and classes for everyone coming into prison regardless of sentence length or crime, First Lady Stein volleyed the question back to the NCPNT team.

She turned the interview into a meeting of partners collaborating to develop solutions. She put on her reading glasses and pulled out a notebook reserved for collecting input from the incarcerated people she meets. Often, an official will have someone on their team take notes for them during a meeting, but she took notes herself, an action that showed the sincere value she gives to the incarcerated perspective.

She asked, "What would have to change in order to start reentry on day one? What would that look like? Is it possible?"

"Absolutely," I answered. "It is possible. I think the incentives have to change. People need meaningful incentives to persevere through the difficulty of true change, abstain from the negative prison options, and persist on the positive path of rehabilitation. Meaningful incentives mean an opportunity to earn a release date earlier than the current mandatory minimums—or any release opportunity for people with a life sentence."

If people entering prison with 10 or 20 years were told they could cut that in half by getting a degree, learning a vocational trade, and avoiding infractions over a long period of time, most of them would live differently in here and leave with the job and life skills needed to succeed after release. I said, "With real plans and real incentives we can change the culture of North Carolina prisons in a matter of years, not decades."

NCPNT reporter Tony Johnson summarized this idea with the phrase, "reward rehabilitation." He told First Lady Stein, "Rewarding rehabilitation is key. When people first come in with long sentences, hope is taken away. Give them hope by letting them know rehabilitation will be rewarded. You could revolutionize the prison system."

First Lady Stein's response mirrored the public's common misunderstanding in thinking the prison system functions this way. "As someone who doesn't have experience in this system, I would assume that



is the way it is. Because it makes a lot of sense,” she said. “It’s frustrating to hear that is not the case and that folks don’t feel like they are going to be rewarded for good behavior.”

The first lady also spoke insightfully about one of the public’s greatest misconceptions about people who are in prison—that they can’t change, and the corresponding mindset that someone who’s been released from prison should be considered a danger to life and property in the community.

She emphatically agreed that people can transform while they’re incarcerated and that they would be assets to the community upon release.

Her recognition of the true change accomplished by many incarcerated people compels her to support programs that connect children with incarcerated parents. Before visiting Nash, she attended and spoke at the ribbon cutting ceremony for the Arise Collective’s new program center. Arise sponsors the MATCH (Mothers and Their Children) program at NCCIW.

She told us, “I want to try to drum up

volunteers for that program. I am very interested in programs that help people be parents when they’re incarcerated, that help children have these relationships with their incarcerated parent.”

NCPNT reporter Kwame Teague explained why the state’s JRC should include currently incarcerated people. “I think that whenever you have any type of council, or any type of reentry board, there should be the voices of the incarcerated on that board, as well.”

Maggie Brewer, who was previously on the JRC, responded favorably. “I think that is something we can definitely advocate for. About a third to a half of the room that comes to our JRC meetings are formerly justice-involved individuals, and they have a great voice. But I think you make a valid point about having someone who is currently incarcerated involved.”

As the meeting ended, we thanked First Lady Stein for her time, for answering our questions, and for listening to us. We also thanked her for being a champion for the incarcerated people who want opportuni-

ties to pursue and demonstrate genuine, permanent change. After an hour with her, we weren’t surprised when she responded humbly, “Thank you for saying that. I will try.”

But she’s already doing more than trying. She’s visiting people in prison. She’s having in-depth conversations. She’s listening, asking questions, and taking notes.

Our NCPNT team walked out of that meeting floating with excitement. We were encouraged by the eager way she listened and engaged. We felt seen and heard. When one of us spoke, she focused completely on that person. She could have asked someone on her team to take notes, but she did it herself in a designated notebook, because she valued our input. She’s fulfilling the declaration she made at the reentry conference in April.

That evening, I stood at the block microwave cooking pasta. The guy who said the governor’s wife didn’t care about us approached me. “Tim, what was that visit really about today?”

He was asking because he cared, despite saying he didn’t. I told him, “I’m glad you asked. You might think she came just for publicity, but she chose supporting rehabilitation and reentry programs as one of her three priorities. She spent an hour not just talking to us, but really listening to us and taking notes. She really wanted to hear our ideas. She values our perspective. And she values us. She could be the champion we’ve needed for change to be possible.”

He thanked me and walked away. I knew he would tell others, and the message would spread.

First Lady Stein is truly passionate about rehabilitation and reentry programs. She wants to use her platform to remind the public that we are not invisible. We are human, humans who have made poor choices but have the potential for amazing change.

North Carolina has a first name in rehabilitation and reentry: First Lady Anna Stein. *NCPNT*

Photo By Indyah Bryant, NCDAC

FCC REFUSES TO HONOR MARTHA WRIGHT-REED ACT

By BARRY MINTZ

ON JULY 1, 2025, VIAPATH NOTIFIED users that the anticipated rate-drop on in-state phone calls would be delayed until April 1, 2027. The news broke my heart. My wife, Amanda, and I had been looking forward to the price relief since July 18, 2024, when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ruled to cap prison phone calls at 6¢ a minute. Many people I talked to that day were just as upset and confused as Amanda and I were. We wanted to know why the FCC suspended its decision.

Visiting the FCC website, Amanda learned that Brendan Carr, the FCC chairman, identified “negative, unintended consequences” that influenced the decision to suspend the 2024 ruling. He claimed that the 2024 ruling to cap phone charges and ban “commissions” placed a “financial burden” on the prison phone industry and their corrections agencies partners. By suspending the 2024 ruling, the FCC is protecting the prison phone industry that charges the families of incarcerated people predatory rates.

Companies like ViaPath and Securus that provide prison phone services offer commissions to state prison agencies to secure their contract. These commissions could be as much as 50% of the money collected when incarcerated people call their families and friends.

Amanda and I talk at least an hour a day. We pay \$6.44 a day. Our average monthly expense is \$180. At that rate, over the last 4 years, Amanda and I have spent \$8,640 to maintain a meaningful marital relationship.

Since I cannot possibly afford to pay for these phone calls, the financial burden is placed on my wife, mother, and friends. None of them own a billion-dollar company like ViaPath, which reported \$157.8 million in revenue in 2023.

According to a report from the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, a nonprofit in Oakland, California, “more than one-third of all families who choose to remain connected with an incarcerated loved one accumulate debt.”

In May of 2024, the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) released a statement advising the FCC to adopt rules that

“better align incentives between correctional facilities and the incarcerated people and their families who pay for incarcerated people’s communications services.” The DOJ also recognized that “communications services for incarcerated people provide an important lifeline between incarcerated people and their loved ones.”

Four decades of research proves the benefits incarcerated people receive by sustaining positive relationships to the outside community. Close family connections help reduce recidivism and promote successful reentry—outcomes that profit society in addition to returning citizens.

A 1972 study, “Explorations in Inmate-Family Relationships,” discovered that maintaining “strong family ties while in prison” led to “parole success.” In 2012, the Vera Institute reported that incarcerated individuals who stayed connected through positive relationships with their families were “less likely to be re-incarcerated.”

My prison record supports this research. Largely because of the connections with my wife, family, and friends during the past 21 years of incarceration, I have spent the last 17 years infraction-free. I am also very privileged to have family and friends who choose to pay to maintain ties with me after I received a life sentence. Others are not so fortunate.

Most incarcerated people across the state who have incentive wage jobs make only \$2.80–\$7.00 per week. Still, many others are unassigned and receive no incentive wage. Between no weekly wages, low weekly wages, and high phone rates, incarcerated individuals must choose between buying hygiene items or calling their families. I’ve observed some men selling their meal trays just to call home.

Whether incarcerated individuals lack the funds to stay connected

to their families or the families accrue debt to maintain contact with incarcerated loved ones, the issue is the same: predatory pricing practices that target incarcerated people and their families. For this reason, the US Congress passed legislation to empower the FCC to act on behalf of these families in crisis.

In 2022, Congress passed the Martha Wright-Reed Just and Reasonable Communications Act (WRA). The WRA was named after a grandmother who struggled to pay her bills and stay connected to her grandson. Often, she faced the choice of either paying for medication or accepting the calls.

The WRA gave the FCC the authority to set caps and create policy to regulate in-state prison phone rates, which the commission did in 2024. However, a year later the FCC decided not to protect citizens like Martha Wright-Reed or my wife from predatory companies like ViaPath. Instead, it protected the billion-dollar prison phone industry from experiencing “financial burden.”

Under the WRA, the FCC bears the responsibility of safeguarding the public from communications businesses by ensuring these businesses adhere to practices that are both “just and reasonable.” The FCC demonstrated that neither justice nor rationality is its concern with the suspension of the 2024 ruling—a ruling that would have relieved the decades-long financial burden that the prison phone industry has placed on the families of nearly two million incarcerated people in the nation. *NCPNT*



SPECIAL FEATURE PICKING UP THE PIECES BY PURSUING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE



An incarcerated father loses his son to gun violence. Two years later, he loses his daughter. Then, he summons the strength to offer a second chance to the young men who killed her.

BY JON ADAMS

GUNSHOTS THUNDERED OUTSIDE THE car. Karizma Mebane sat inside talking on the phone with her father, Christopher Gattis, who sat in a prison. She abruptly told him, “I can’t talk right now. Something is going on.” *Click*—the call fell silent. Prison made it impossible for him to help her.

On October 7, 2022, a stray, yet sinister bullet ended their final phone call and, sadly, Karizma’s life. She was 21 years old.

Gattis learned of his daughter’s death later that night. Familiar feelings of despair, fear, and guilt swamped him. *I can’t go through this again*, he thought, reflecting on the murder of his son just two years earlier.

Grieving the loss of his sole remaining child, he felt the pain intensify upon discovering the suspects were two young Black men—brothers—facing life sentences for murder. He thought of them sitting where he sat in 2001, in jail facing life in prison after killing someone. He wondered if such a harsh, hopeless sentence would result in true justice for his daughter, his family, and

the suspects.

Over two years later, on April 10, 2025, Gattis faced the men charged with killing his daughter. In agreement with the Durham County district attorney (DA) and organized by the Religious Coalition for a Non-Violent Durham, Gattis decided to pursue restorative justice.

Restorative justice is a concept that focuses on addressing the tangible needs of people impacted by, and involved with, crime. It recognizes the flaws of the current justice system, specifically the system’s failure to meet the needs of both sides. Victims need answers, healing, and closure. People who commit crimes need accountability and growth. Both need restoration.

Restorative justice prioritizes meeting these needs. Traditional justice prioritizes meeting the needs of the state through punishment, ensuring the guilty get what they deserve, a justice philosophy known as *just deserts*.

Ben Haas, the Coalition’s executive direc-

tor, said, “Current forms of justice leave a lot of needs unmet. Restorative justice leans into that empty space.” Advocates like Haas affirm the necessity of appropriate punishment while emphasizing the personal needs of victims, the affected community, and even the individuals convicted of crimes.

The concept of restorative justice first emerged in American courts in the 1970s, but it didn’t gain traction until 1994 when the American Bar Association endorsed victim-offender mediation. Since then, grassroots organizations, such as Haas’, have formed across the nation.

Haas has championed this cause in Durham since 2017. After witnessing a murder outside his apartment building, he realized, “Those are *our* people. Those are *our* neighbors. There is no place we can send them where it won’t affect us.”



Gattis, 56, has experienced first-hand

Graphics By Cris Gardner & Dominique Perry

the current justice system's failure to meet needs, but also the liberation of restoration and forgiveness.

In 2001, Gattis sat chained in an Alameda County courtroom, on trial for first-degree felony murder. After the jury declared him guilty, one side of the courtroom cried and the other cheered, a clash of contrary emotions. "My family wanted empathy and compassion based on the circumstances," said Gattis. "The victim's family wanted death based on the evidence."

Gattis believed he would receive a mitigated sentence because of his fractured upbringing: a fatherless childhood and a home environment infested with substance abuse and violence, which led to homelessness at 17 years old.

The judge sentenced Gattis to life without the possibility of parole—restorative justice's antithesis.

Shuffling out of the courtroom as a first-time felon, Gattis thought about his four-year-old son and three-month-old daughter. He figured life couldn't get any worse, but he didn't know that two decades later his already hopeless sentence would be aggravated to life without his children.

While in prison, Gattis refused to allow concrete cinderblocks and razor wire to restrict him from parenting his only two children. He embraced this unfathomable challenge by penning countless letters, dialing phone call after phone call, and receiving visits from them as often as possible.

Gattis also focused on self-improvement. He signed up for numerous classes and attained multiple degrees from college correspondence programs. He wrote books and arranged for the profits to go to his children and his victim's family.

One day, Gattis received a letter from a member of that family. Three words etched on the paper revolutionized Gattis' beliefs about forgiveness, justice, and restoration: "I forgive you."

The family member cemented their words with action, submitting an affidavit for his clemency petition asking for Gattis to be resentenced based on his personal transformation while incarcerated. This act filled Gattis with hope: *Maybe I won't die in prison; maybe I will be reunited with my children and grandchildren.*



But August 16, 2020, shattered those dreams into pieces. On that day, Gattis' son, Christopher Tyrick Gattis, was murdered. "Ty" was 24 years old and two classes shy of graduating from Liberty University with a bachelor's degree in sports management.

Gattis had built an indelible bond between himself and his children through countless pen strokes of ink, dollars spent on stamps and phone time, and hugs and kisses at visitation. Although letters, phone calls, and visits can create formidable relationships, they can't block bullets.

"The news sent shockwaves through my body," said Gattis, recounting the day prison staff informed him of Ty's murder. He collapsed on the floor, his painful cry echoing throughout the block.

Torrents of support poured in from family, friends, and his incarcerated community, but grief and guilt nearly consumed him. During that time, Karizma saved him. Her silly jokes and infectious laugh revived his resolve. "She became my second heartbeat," Gattis said. But all heartbeats eventually cease to thrum.

With Karizma's death, Gattis suffered, for the second time, the same pain he once inflicted—the anguish of losing a loved one to gun violence. One question captivated his thoughts: *Can I forgive my children's killers the same way I've been forgiven?*

While navigating his grief, Gattis wrote a letter to the DA in charge of his daughter's case to request information. The prosecution team presented the evidence to Gattis during a 30-minute phone call. Gattis discussed the case with his family, and they decided the suspects needed something other than a substantial prison sentence. They needed mercy, forgiveness, and restoration—needs attainable through restorative justice.

Receiving forgiveness from his victim's



family, and two decades serving a life sentence, taught Gattis an essential lesson: Justice is more than punishment. This lesson led to his April 2025 meeting with the young men responsible for his daughter's death.



Exhausted from a restless night, Gattis walked down the sidewalk to face the men accused of killing his daughter. Tears pooling in his eyes, he knew what he had to do, but knowing didn't make it easier.

Recalling the morning of the video conference, Gattis said, "I hesitated." If not for the unlikely encouragement from the correctional officer escorting him, he might have turned around. The officer told him, "It's time to speak for your daughter."

Gattis said the meeting started with each participant contributing a positive word. Words such as *honesty, grace, mercy, responsibility, and love* established an atmosphere where reconciliation could transpire. The two young men then provided Gattis and his family with a detailed account of Karizma's death.

"I broke down in tears," Gattis said. "It was hard to hear, but I wanted to look into their eyes and gauge their emotions to see if they were deeply sorry for her death and the pain my family suffered."

Gattis composed himself, then addressed

them, describing Karizma and how her unexpected death affected everyone who loved her. He explained the difficulty of his daily battle to cope with his children's deaths amid serving a life sentence.

As a part of the restorative justice process, Gattis presented them with a "repair agreement" to complete. He asked them to do four things:

First, read his book, *Tears We Can't Ignore: Gun Violence Destroying Families and Changing the Trajectory of Neighborhoods*, and write a reflection letter to him about what they learned from it.

Second, donate, in his daughter's honor, to any organization that campaigns against gun violence.

Third, do community service, ideally with an outreach program targeting troubled youth.

Fourth, undergo therapy to assist with their emotional regulation and impulse control.

The brothers vowed to complete the agreement. Gattis and his family forgave them and promised to advocate for leniency at their sentencing on June 4, 2025.



The day before the sentencing, Gattis shuffled out of Nash Correctional Institution in full-body restraints and was transported to the Durham County jail.

The next day, Gattis sat in the jury box of a packed courtroom, ready to publicly forgive the accused. Since the two young men had completed the repair agreement, the DA offered a plea bargain where they would plead guilty to manslaughter and serve a minimum of seven years in prison.

Gattis waited fretfully, but the chance to speak on their behalf never came. The defendants rejected the plea bargain, because they mistakenly thought the restorative justice process would result in probation instead of a reduced prison sentence.

Their decision shocked and frustrated Gattis. He said, "I wasn't supposed to make any gestures towards the defendants, but I made eye contact with one of the men and shook my head because I knew what they were facing."

With the plea bargain rejected, they face an onslaught of high-class felonies: first-degree felony murder, attempted murder, shooting into an occupied dwelling, and

discharging a firearm within city limits. If found guilty, they will join Gattis and thousands of others serving life sentences, men and women who long for the second chance they were offered. Their trial is set to begin in December 2025.

Gattis said their decision has not changed his mind. He still wants the brothers to receive mercy from the court. He hopes they reconsider their options and the DA grants them another opportunity to accept a plea bargain.



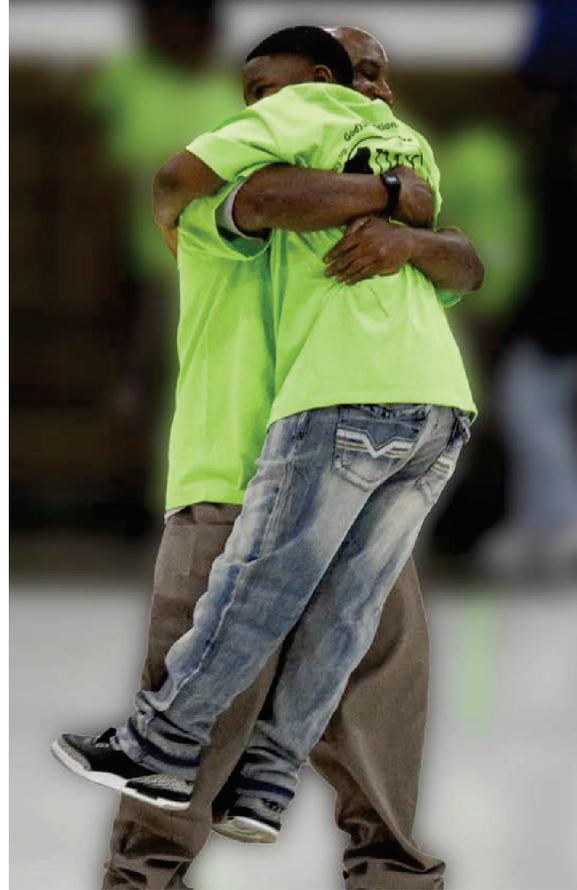
Gattis still grieves the loss of his children every day, but he is learning to cope with life without them. He willingly shares his story—their story—with anyone keen to listen. He said, "I know my children would be proud to know our family represents the core values that they stood for, that we represent the same empathy and compassion that they had for the misguided."

He walks down Nash's chipped and weathered sidewalks with a smile and his head held high. Men of various backgrounds, ethnicities, and religions eagerly greet him and seek his counsel. He hardly seems like a man serving a life sentence who has experienced enormous loss.

Gattis attributes his perseverance and growth to his Christian faith. He counts the spiritual influence he had on his children as his most significant accomplishment. He cherishes memories of praying with them in visitation and witnessing them proclaim faith in Christ. He will always treasure those memories and now cherishes creating new ones with his grandson.

This past March, Gattis became the first grandfather to participate in the One Day With God program at Nash. This program gives incarcerated fathers an opportunity to spend an entire day with their children. Participants play games, eat lunch, take pictures, give gifts, and build bonds.

One of Gattis' fondest memories from that day is his grandson's amusing question during lunch. "Can I have another piece of birthday cake, Grandpa?" His grandson hadn't even touched his pizza, so Gattis asked him why not. His grandson emphatically answered, "Grandpa, you don't understand. I don't get cake at the house. Only



Gattis and grandson bridge the generational gap at One Day with God

vegetables, vegetables, and more vegetables, so I'm going to enjoy this cake."

Gattis' grandson wanted just dessert. For Gattis, opportunities to invest time in his grandson and ensure that he grows to become a man of empathy and compassion are his *just deserts*.

Despite the pain of missing his children, the status of his daughter's case, or his uncertain future, Gattis hopes. He hopes there is purpose in the pain, hopes the suspects are restored, hopes to get out of prison one day, and hopes to help others by sharing his—their—story.

Although Gattis can no longer hold his children, holding his grandson at One Day With God helped him continue picking up the pieces. "When my grandson came through the door, I ran to him. It was the best feeling to be able to hold a piece of my son in my arms." *NCPNT*

Editor's note: Charges against the brothers in connection with the death of Karizma Mebane were dropped in December 2025. "The district attorney's decision to drop the charges does not change our choice to forgive," Gattis later said. "My family wanted to do restorative justice regardless of the outcome. I hope the brothers learn from this situation and become better men."

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PROVIDES CLOSURE ON BOTH SIDES OF FENCE

BY LUCAS RASH

MAIL CALL,” SHOUTS THE FLOOR OFFICER, his voice booming across the prison dayroom. Men pour out of rooms and converge on the officer’s desk, hoping they will receive mail tonight. Names are called, and little paper treasures are collected. “Raaaash,” drawls the officer. *Somebody loves me tonight*, I think. I glance down and realize the name on the envelope is foreign to me.

I quickly head back to my room, intrigued by who sent this letter. With the letter open, I read, and my world begins to spin. I practically fall onto my bunk as the crushing reality of what has happened sets in.

This letter is from April*, the daughter and sister of the man and boy I killed. In 2008, I was driving under the influence and caused a car accident that took the lives of April’s dad and brother.

In the letter, she tells me she has forgiven me. A barrage of feelings washes over me, and I feel free for the first time in a long, long time. The feeling of freedom is beautiful, and not even the razor wire fences can keep all this joy in.

This unexpected letter from April was the first step toward healing, initiating a restorative justice process. Restorative justice is a way of doing justice that focuses on genuinely repairing the damages caused by a crime. It seeks to bring together those who have been affected by a crime in a process that allows the victims to have their questions answered and the offender to accept responsibility in the victim’s presence.

Restorative justice programs include several types. One, a victim offender conference, brings together the victims and the offender of a crime for a meeting led by a trained facilitator to discuss the impact and consequences of the crime. Restorative justice coordinator Lorraine S. Amstutz explains, “The meetings are not intended to provide a ‘Kumbayah’ moment, where people would hug and everything would be alright. Rather, the meetings are seen as a way to acknowledge the harm and injury

to individual and community relationships caused by a crime.”

After the initial surprise of receiving April’s letter subsided, I knew I had to reach out to her. Sitting in my room, staring down at the pencil in my hand and the blank paper before me, I had no idea what to write. A plethora of mixed emotions fought for control over my mind, yet one thought dominated everything else: *I must not hurt her again.*

I poured my heart out to her in the letter, expressing immense gratitude and astonishment over her willingness to forgive, but also sorrow and the utmost remorse over what my actions had cost her.

We began to correspond, and a positive



Lucas Rash talks to Chaplain Jobe, NCDAC chaplaincy services director

relationship developed. We even shared a few phone calls. She discussed her pain, but she also told me about her school, work, and family. I discussed my experiences as a student, my son Logan, and my faith. During our many talks, she mentioned that she would like to meet one day. Whenever I would contemplate this scenario, I was filled with an overwhelming sense of joy and great fear.

Seeking restoration is often a difficult process, but these programs produce a multitude of benefits. Numerous reports support that victim offender conferences often lead to increased well-being for victims and reduce recidivism for offenders. A study by

researchers at the Center for Restorative Justice and Peacemaking finds that “victims expressed a need to share their pain with offenders as well as receive assurances that they would not commit a repeat offense.” The study also states that what victims most value is the opportunity to talk with the offender.

These face-to-face dialogues help offenders better understand the implications of their offense as it pertains to the victims. This new understanding makes it more likely an individual will not repeat their past mistakes.

It’s December of 2023, and we’re at Foot-hills Correctional Institution for a victim offender conference, hosted by Jon Powell, director of the Restorative Justice Clinic at Campbell Law School.

I wait, standing in the corridor. My hands are sweating, and my stomach is doing backflips. The slider suddenly opens and two people walk through. April makes eye contact with me for the first time and immediately bursts into tears. I drop my head, and a part of me seems to die on the inside.

We sit around a small table, and no one speaks. The silence is deafening. At first, we nervously tiptoe around one another in conversation, but we gradually grow more comfortable. April asks me some difficult questions, and I answer honestly and respectfully. At one point, Jon asks her what she thinks about what’s been said, and April replies, “I wanted to look into his eyes to see if he was genuine. And now that I have, I think that he is.” Our time has been full of some heavy emotions, but near the end we find ourselves laughing together.

I will always appreciate the privilege of meeting April and the newfound sense of peace she has given me. She restored something within me that had been broken for too many years. My prayer is that she was also able to find the same restoration and peace through our conference. April has given me hope for a better tomorrow, and I wish that this same hope will lead her all her life. **NCPNT**

TIMOTHY WHITE lived on North Carolina's death row for over 25 YEARS. Then one day, the governor **COMMUTED** his sentence. Now, he must adjust to

BY CRIS GARDNER

LIFE AFTER DEATH ROW

TIMOTHY WHITE SAT IN HIS CELL ON the last day of 2024 quietly entertaining himself by scrolling through his tablet. Outside his Central Prison (CP) cell window, on the streets of Raleigh, preparations were underway for the onslaught of revelers soon to arrive to celebrate the New Year.

A voice came over the intercom system calling White's name, telling him he had a legal visit. He thought it was odd his lawyers came to see him on a holiday, so somewhere deep in the pit of his stomach a spark of anticipation grew into hope. With a furrowed brow, White, a quiet, unassuming figure with a neatly trimmed salt and pepper beard and a prominent spider tattoo on the side of his neck, pulled on the signature red jumpsuit that clearly stated his custody status: Death Row Inmate.

White's attorneys had approached him in the summer of 2023 about applying for clemency when then-Governor Roy Cooper decided to review the cases of North Carolina's condemned.

White resisted at first. Since 1976, North Carolina governors had commuted the death sentences of only five people. White's chances were slim. And, if the governor granted his petition, he would lose access to his court appointed attorneys. Spending the rest of his life in prison without legal representation was not appealing. Still, the alternatives were bleak.

Executions in North Carolina are in moratorium while the methodology makes its way through the courts. Questions were raised about the drugs used in lethal injections and whether or not a doctor must be present during the procedures. Because of this, North Carolina has not executed anyone since 2006. Despite the pause, White knew his sentence was almost certain to be carried out one day. He weighed his options and, in the end, decided to file the petition.

White was one of more than a dozen men called that afternoon. One by one they filled the small office of the sergeant on duty to wait for an escort to visitation. "Hey, Sarge," one of the men asked, "what's going on here?"

"You'll find out when you get down there," the sergeant replied brusquely.

White spent his early childhood on Winston-Salem's south side. His childhood was "tumultuous," filled with violent scenes of his mother being beaten by his abusive father.

White's mother left and eventually remarried, but he found himself without a positive role model in his young life. There was no one to teach him how to deal with his complex emotions.

"My anxiety would just build up," White said. "It would get to the point where I would go start a fight or destroy property to keep from exploding."

White's mother and stepfather sent him to wilderness camps, psychiatric hospitals, and group homes, any place they could think of to tame their out-of-control child. Nothing seemed to work.

At 13 years old, White ran away from home and wound up in a juvenile detention center. A year later, he was charged with two counts of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon after he threw a pair of scissors at his parents. He was sentenced to probation.

White was soon in trouble again. He went to prison after being found guilty of a string of breaking and entering cases. He was released from prison in May of 1999. That October, White was arrested for the murder of his neighbor.

Under advisement from his attorneys, White pleaded guilty and was sentenced to death. "It was so surreal," White said. "You know how on TV the judge says, 'And may

God have mercy on your soul'? Well, he really said that." White was quickly transferred to CP's Death Row.

White spent the first five years "getting high and being angry." Although he kept mainly to himself, he became close with Sam Flippen, whom he met while in the Forsyth County jail. Flippen and White ended up on the same unit at CP and became good friends.

Life on Death Row was surprisingly sedate. Most days were filled with long bouts of quiet, while men watched televisions mounted on the concrete wall of the cell block, played games on metal tables bolted to the floor, or spent time in their cells reading or writing.

Over the years, White endured watching the men he knew be put to death. The process would begin when the warden called one of the men down to a small office on the block. He would be told he had "a date." This began a series of daily meetings with psychologists, lawyers, and other state officials. "The psych doctors would ask if you felt suicidal," White said, rolling his eyes. "They wanted to make sure that you stayed alive long enough for them to kill you."

Many times over the years, White watched as his neighbors were moved from the block to "death watch," a unit where the condemned received their final visits and ate their last meals.

Meanwhile, a very loud internal clock continued to count in his head. Every time one man left The Row, someone else moved up a notch on the list.

The men on Death Row would hold a midnight vigil for their neighbor's execution. When White lived on unit two, he could see the old receiving area from his cell. "The ambulance would park there to wait for the body." The executions were usually held at 2 am. White and some of

the others would remain awake, peering into the night through their small windows. They could see the protesters on Western Boulevard holding their candles. After the execution, they watched the poisoned, sheet-covered body of their friend as he was loaded into the waiting ambulance. “It was our way of seeing them out, of being there for them the only way that we could.”

In 2006, the state gave Flippen his date. The date arrived two months later.

“We tried to talk and carry on as if it were just another day,” White recalled of their last hours together. They talked about football—they shared a love for the Dallas Cowboys. They spoke about their hometown. “Flip’s execution was like the elephant in the room, something we didn’t discuss right up to the moment that they came to take him away.”

Flippen was well-liked. A line formed to say farewell. They hugged Flippen and expressed their love to him until the guards hurried him out to the death watch area.

“All executions are hard,” White said. “But Flip’s was one of the hardest because of my closeness with him and for the very real possibility that he was innocent of the crime.” White said he spent time alone after the execution, shedding tears for Flippen and his mother. He tried to rally himself, remembering the times they shared.

At times, White became angry. He couldn’t understand how anyone thought the world was a safer place without Flippen. “I missed him, and I still do. But I had to keep moving and not allow his execution—or any other—to suck me into a pit of despair.”

Flippen’s execution is the last the state has carried out to date.

△

On December 31, 2024, White and 14 other men who were called to the visitation room had their sentences commuted to life without the possibility of parole. It was the first time more than one sentence had been commuted at one time and only the second time any governor commuted more than two death sentences. In fact, all previous commutations happened to men who had

been served their last meals.

White is still conflicted over the governor’s decision. “I keep asking myself, ‘Why me?’ What did the governor see in my case that made him choose me?” White said he feels a type of survivor’s guilt. “There are guys in there who are just as deserving, if not more, than I am.”

Governor Cooper reviewed 89 petitions from the 136 people on Death Row. He said he took many factors into consideration, including the circumstances surrounding the crime, the age of the convicted at the time of the crime, their mental capacity, and the adequacy of their representation during trial and sentencing. Governor Cooper also looked at the potential racial influences, as well as the person’s conduct since being in-



Timothy White hard at work at the Nash Optical Plant

carcerated. Of the 15 men whose sentences were commuted, one declined and another died in the infirmary.

After receiving the news, White returned to his unit filled with nervous energy and doubts. He was greeted by his neighbors shouting their congratulations. White and the others were immediately removed from the Death Row housing units and placed in an adjacent block recently emptied just for them. White recalls being asked what size pants he wore. “I had no idea,” he said. “I’d worn a red jumpsuit the last 24 years.”

The newly reclassified men were sent to various camps across the state. White transferred to Neuse Correctional Institution.

After living in a single-man cell for two and a half decades, White landed in an open dorm. The shock of living around so many new faces was almost too much for him to bear.

White transferred to Nash Correctional Institution in April 2025. He is slowly adjusting to his surroundings. He takes a creative writing class, works at the optical plant, and attends Buddhist services.

In May, he had his first contact visit in almost 26 years.

Still, he is not quite sure how to feel about everything that transpired. “I’m fifty-fifty,” he said. “I still feel like I have a death sentence. I just have a long, drawn-out death sentence—death by incarceration.”

After living on The Row for so long, White is trying to find joy where he can. For years he was allowed outside only during the day, and only when the weather was nice. Now, for the first time in over 25 years, he finds himself walking outside letting the afternoon rains wash over him.

“It’s so many little things,” he said, grinning broadly. “The trees, the grass, standing outside at night and seeing the moon overhead.” White also enjoys petting the cats on the yard. “To be able to pet and hold a furry, living creature again. I love it.”

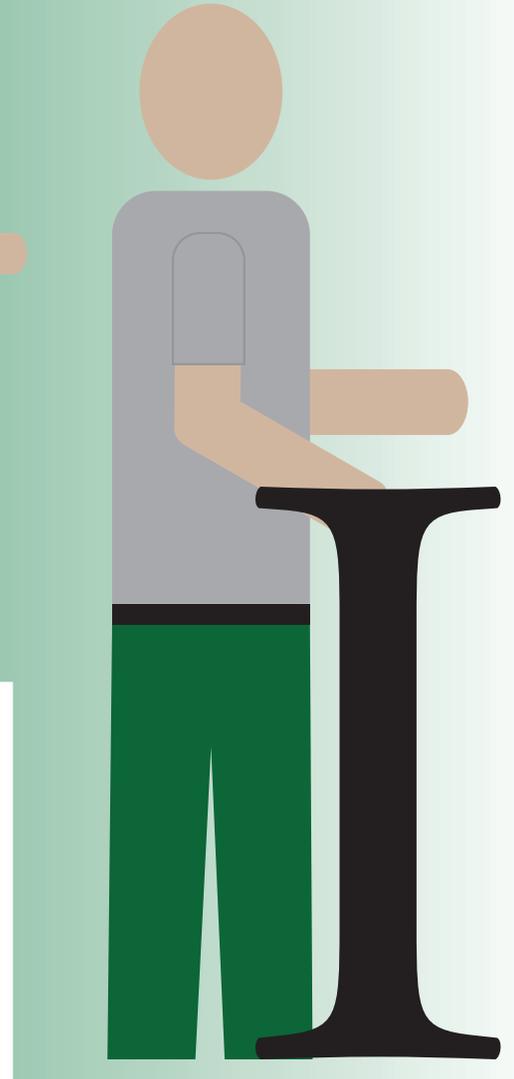
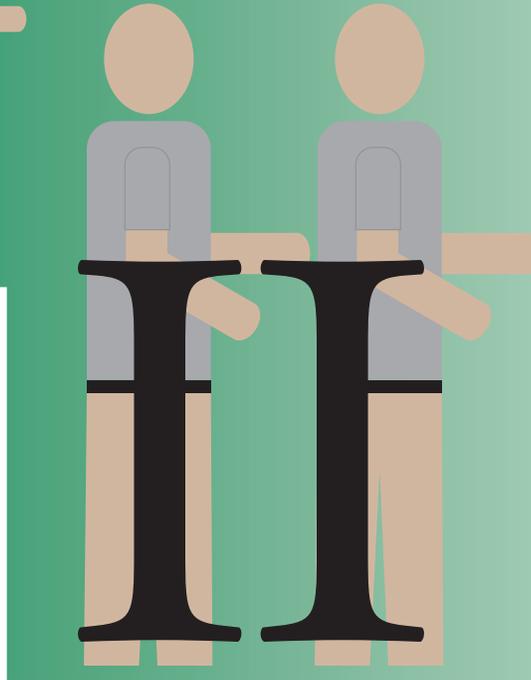
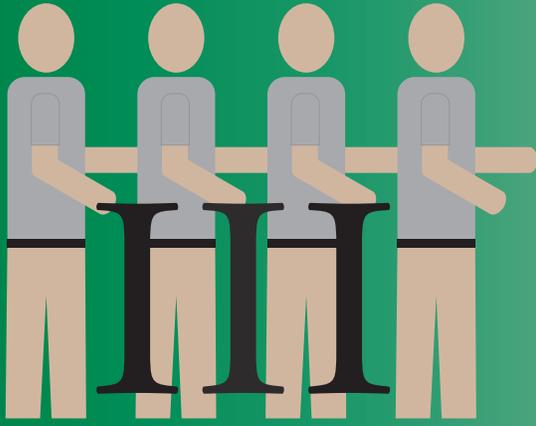
White says there are a lot of good people still on The Row. “The vast majority are there because of one terrible decision, usually fueled by drugs and/or alcohol.”

White carries a certain level of responsibility now that Governor Cooper commuted his sentence. “What I do now is a reflection on the friends I left behind on The Row.” He feels it is up to him and the others to live in a way that proves they were all deserving of the opportunity.

To the people left behind, White said, “Don’t lose hope. I had once resigned myself to the fact that I would die on The Row, if not in the death chamber itself. But things are changing; hearts and attitudes are changing. Good things will happen if you don’t give up.”

The 121 people still languishing on Death Row certainly hope so. *NCPNT*

NCDAC's new SRG policy provides a path to those wishing to exit the gang life.



By HOWARD ASHLEMAN

IN 2012, ANTONIO JONES (AJ) GOT INTO a fight on the recreational yard at Granville Correctional Institution. After he went through the disciplinary process, the Security Risk Group (SRG, formerly Security Threat Group) sergeant informed him that she had known about his gang affiliation but waited for him to get in trouble to validate him. AJ was classified SRG level one.

Twelve years later, AJ was caught with a cell phone while at Scotland Correctional. He refused to reveal who brought him the phone, and the infraction resulted in him being demoted to SRG level three, even though he hadn't been an active gang member for twelve years. He didn't know the new level would cost him dearly.

The North Carolina Department of Adult Correction (NCDAC) recently released memos announcing changes to the SRG policy. The changes took effect May 15, 2025. The NCDAC's policies for people who are classified as SRG add further restrictions to the standard prison rules. SRG includes three classification levels, with level one being the lowest and level three the highest. The higher the level, the more sanctions placed on the individual.

According to *NorthCarolinaGeneralAssembly.gov*, there are over 4,800 inmates classified as SRG. The state's prison population is approximately 31,000. This means people classified as SRG make up about 13% of the prison population.

AJ was born to a fifteen-year-old mother and raised without a father, but with a lot of help from his grandmother and aunt. With no siblings until he was fifteen years old, he found those bonds in neighborhood

friends in Durham. Those friends led to his involvement in gang life. "My family was kind of chaotic at the time, and I was always seeking a 'better' family," said AJ. "So, the friend I chose was the one who called me his 'little brother.'" In the sixth grade, he got initiated by being jumped by three kids.

Getting classified SRG level three placed AJ under the maximum level of sanctions. The most difficult restriction for AJ was the limit of two phone calls per month. AJ has five children by four women, which meant calling four numbers to talk to each kid just once. "How do you choose which kid to call? They're always excited to talk to me, so my heart broke every time they asked, 'Can you call me back?'" AJ lamented.

He also wanted to talk to his mother, aunt, and grandmother who raised him, which increased the difficulty of deciding how to use the two phone calls. That challenge led him to circumnavigate the rules, which led to further problems. "I had to pay for phone calls from other prisoners, which led to all kinds of problems."

Another difficult injunction AJ experienced was the removal of anyone who wasn't immediate family (parent, grandpar-

ent, sibling, spouse, and children) from his visitation list. This meant AJ's aunt, who was his main emotional and financial support, was removed from that list. "It was a major blow," said AJ. "I'll never forget the hurt in her voice as she asked me, 'Can't they look and see that I'm the one who's supporting you? Can't they hear our phone calls? We need to be able to talk to each other! I need to be able to see you!'"

AJ was also disqualified from participating in various classes and programs.

While at Scotland Correctional, he encountered a turning point in his life. He had been inactive in the gang life but wasn't doing anything positive to change himself, until then. "For the second time that year,

I watched a man take his last breath,” AJ said. “I realized how fragile life truly is, and that I wanted to get back to my family and be the man I was destined to be. The only way I could guarantee my freedom was to ask Jesus to come into my life.” AJ got serious with his life and started focusing on the goals necessary to fulfill what he sees as his calling as a man and father.

The SRG policy changes bring hope to the incarcerated people who wear the SRG label but want to make positive changes like AJ. Under the revised policy, incarcerated individuals who are classified SRG will receive structured and periodic assessments a minimum of once every twelve months. They will be offered behavior-based reduction pathways where they are able to reduce their SRG levels through sustained good behavior, program participation, and avoiding restrictive housing.

The NCDAC, recognizing the role family support plays in rehabilitation, has also changed policy to permit SRG level three people to make unlimited phone calls to immediate family members on their approved visitation list and receive contact visits with the approval of the facility’s warden.

“Good thing is, our contact visits are redeemed, even if we are level three,” AJ said. “But some of the memo was a little misleading. It said we would get unlimited phone calls to approved visitors. It never mentioned anything about the original two calls a month.” The policy gave unlimited calls to immediate family, but it took away phone calls to anyone other than immediate family for people who are classified SRG level three.

Another significant change in policy concerns custody levels (security housing level), which designate whether a person resides at a minimum, medium, or close custody facility. As of May 15, 2025, someone who is classified as SRG level three when processing into prison will be sent to close custody. Someone classified as SRG level three who is currently in minimum or medium custody will face custody demotion if found guilty of an infraction. And level three people cannot be promoted to minimum custody.

People classified at level three or two are not stuck at those levels. The revised policy offers a path to level reduction all the way to declassification with specific requirements.

After release of the revised SRG policy, AJ received a review, which resulted in his SRG level dropping from three to two. “Now, I have unlimited calls to any number, and I received my first contact visit with my mom and grandma in over two years.”

AJ is using his incarcerated time wisely. He works second shift in the kitchen and is taking four classes: ACDP Recovery Road, creative writing, beginners art, and Fatherhood Accountability, a class to help him become a better parent. Also, AJ is studying psychology, trauma, and non-profit building during his free time. “I plan to further my education once released, but I’m looking for opportunities to begin that process here,” said AJ. He desires to work with the youth when he returns home.

The updated SRG policy change is positive for the prison population in North Carolina. It offers incentive to leave the gang life. And it encourages rehabilitation, which facilitates reentry success.

The journey hasn’t been smooth for AJ, but he is determined to continue to build and be an example for others who have been involved in a gang. He tells them, “You’re not going to upgrade to a better version of yourself overnight. Don’t beat yourself up over your failures. If you’re failing that means you’re trying. Even if you don’t believe in the Bible, don’t cheat yourself by exchanging progress for comfort. Where there’s tension, there’s opportunity for transformation.” **NCPNT**

These are minimum requirements and do not guarantee level reduction. Any incarcerated person who is validated SRG and interested in reducing levels should talk to the facility intelligence officer or the warden to ensure they are doing everything to be successful.

III

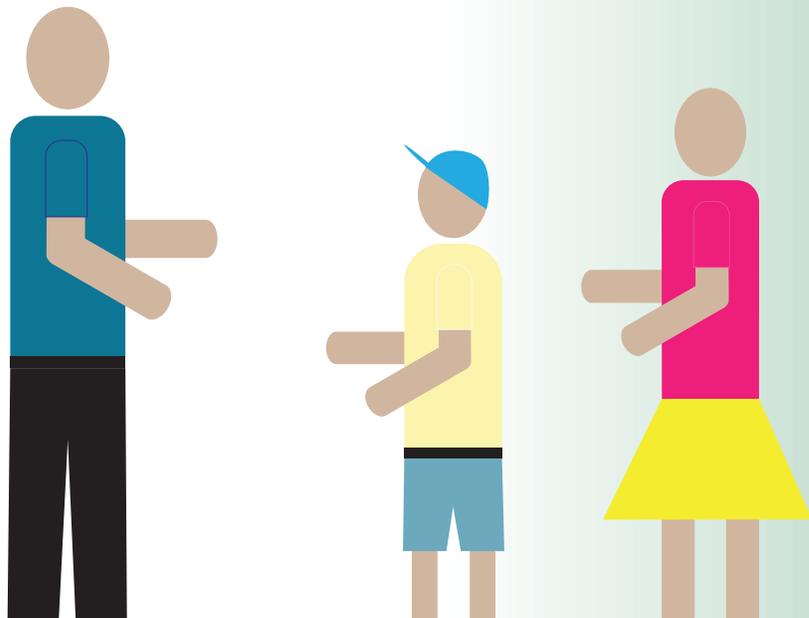
To move from a level three to two, the person must have remained free of any A-class infractions for 12 months, must not have been in the RDU (Rehabilitative Diversion Unit) or on RHCP (Restrictive Housing for Control Purposes) or HCON (High Control) status within the past 12 months, and must have held a job or engaged in programming at some point within the last 12 months.

II

To move from a level two to level one, the person must attend the GEAR (Gang Education and Renunciation, formerly STGMU) program, have no A-class infractions (B-class infractions will be reviewed based on severity and number of infractions) for a period of 12 months, and must have been off RHCP or HCON for a period of 24 months.

I

To move from level one to no SRG validated status, a person must remain free of any A-class infractions (B-class infractions will be reviewed based on severity and quantity) for a period of 12 months. After 12 months since placement on level one and no infraction history, the person may request to renunciate their affiliation through the Offender Renunciation Process. After requesting the process, the person will go through the investigation and approval process before meeting with the Renunciation Committee for final decision.



CAUGHT IN THE FOSTER CARE-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

BY TIMOTHY JOHNSON

A PIPELINE SENDS ITS CONTENTS FLOWING from one end to the other. When Larry Thompson, Joseph Carroll, and Joshua Weatherspoon entered foster care, they didn't know they were caught in the foster care-to-prison pipeline.

Their involvement with that system made them more likely than not to end up incarcerated. According to The Marshall Project, the foster care-to-prison pipeline sends nearly 60 percent of the male children who enter foster care to incarceration.

Their stories expose three main failures of the foster care system: failure to provide effective therapy for previous traumatic experiences, failure to provide safety and care during foster care, and failure to provide support during the transition through young adulthood.



Larry Thompson entered prison at 19 years old, but he described being “mentally incarcerated since 4 years old.” He said his mother was abused by her father, and she doled out the same abuse to Thompson. “Violence was her most often used tool to deal with confrontations and problems,” he said. “She sexually abused me and hurt me mentally on so many levels.”

From ages 4 to 13, he was abused by his mother and other family members. While she was in prison for killing his father, Thompson stayed with his grandmother, where he suffered further abuse. He said, “I was introduced to horrifying levels of rape, incest, and fear by two much older male cousins.”

Foster care is used by children's welfare services when a child is identified as, or suspected of, having been orphaned, abandoned, abused, or neglected.

Child abuse is deliberate physical injury, sexual acts, or emotional injury inflicted on a minor.

Child neglect refers to a parent or guardian's failure to supply basic domestic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing.

Foster care parents qualify by taking a course on foster parenting and passing a background check and home evaluation. They receive a financial stipend for each foster placement.

Source: *Salem Press Encyclopedia*

At one point, he was sent to live with a wealthy uncle in South Carolina. “For the first time, I had plenty of food, a warm bed, clothes, new toys, and Kool-Aid with sugar in it.” But what seemed a refuge soon became another house of horrors, when his uncle abused him, too. “He destroyed my trust and faith in human beings and their capacity to do or be good.”

The Department of Social Services (DSS) took him and his two siblings from their mother after a school guidance counselor reported the scars she noticed on him and his younger sister.

“I had to walk right by my mother, who was leaning on the side of the door and crying. I was dying inside,” he said. “I felt like I was betraying my mother, even though she was no good for me. My heart hurt so bad. I hated this world and people.”

He lived in seven foster homes over the next couple of years. He remembers being treated nicely when he arrived at his first foster care placement, but he didn't trust the couple's intentions. The abuse he had suffered inverted his feelings and thinking, creating an inability to trust that caused him to isolate and refuse to talk to counselors. Soon, the counselors quit trying.

At 19, he was charged with second-degree rape. “I allowed the chaos around me to become the chaos inside me,” he said. “I held in my heart all the pain, suffering, confusion, and fear dominating my life. They turned me into the very thing I hated.” He later learned a technical phrase for what the abuse did to him: “priming of the mind,” which normalizes the abnormal and corrupts a person's feelings and thinking.

The short-term counseling the foster care system provided for him did not adequately address the traumatic experiences Thompson suffered prior to his entrance into the system. Without the needed therapy and healing, the unresolved trauma significantly contributed to his journey to prison.



For Joseph Carroll, family reunification was impossible, and adoption never happened.

Carroll spent his first six months alive in a neonatal intensive care unit, because his

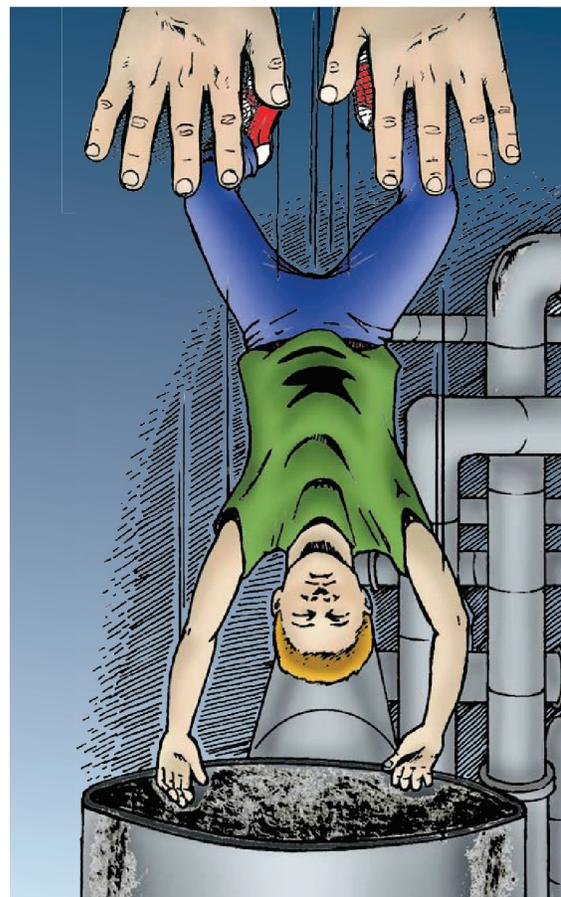
mother used crack cocaine while pregnant. She left before his first memory. He said, “I never met my mother. I never experienced a mother's love.”

His father was an alcoholic, who Carroll described as a “happy drunk.” When Carroll was 6 years old, his father went into a diabetic coma. Carroll went to live with an older half-brother. Those three months left him forever wounded. “I was subjected to every horror of abuse that could be done to a child.”

His father recovered but not for long. On April 8, 1994, when Carroll was ten, his dad died from diabetic complications. He came home from school to find Stokes County DSS waiting for him. Twenty minutes later he was on the way to his first foster placement.

He said his first foster parents were good people, but he was withdrawn and angry. Mental health counseling was provided, but only briefly because he refused to talk. After 90 days, that placement was terminated. “My resistance was too much for them,” he said. “I was mad at the world. I was damaged goods.”

Over the next eight years, he experienced 23 foster and group home placements.



Along the way, he experienced physical and sexual violence, in addition to mental and emotional abuse. “Foster care instilled a survival-of-the-fittest mentality,” he said. “Physical protection was my total focus, at the cost of psychological well-being. I had to make weapons just to survive, just to not get raped.”

He was charged with a crime for the first time at 11 years old. At 21, he was in prison, sentenced to life without parole. He said the only good thing about foster care was that it prepared him to survive in prison.

For Carroll, the system failed to provide either effective treatment for the trauma he suffered pre-foster care or safety and care during foster care.



Joshua Weatherspoon described his original home environment as “highly dysfunctional.” His mom was addicted to drugs and alcohol. Care, love, and food were scarce, but drugs, alcohol, and violence were abundant.

He said, “I experienced physical, verbal, and emotional abuse almost every moment of the day.” Neglect offered the only respite from that abuse. He and his siblings were taught to steal to eat. “They would take us to stores, and we would steal stuff. We would break in houses and raid their refrigerators and cabinets,” he said. “I didn’t like stealing but had no choice.”

He went to the first group home at age 12 and welcomed it, because for the first time he consistently received food, clothes, and shelter. He said, “I had the opportunity to be a kid without worrying about surviving.” He repeatedly refused to leave and return “home” when he was eligible.

After five years in two group homes, he was placed in foster care. There, he hoped to be embraced as part of the family, but he soon realized they were motivated more by the money they received for taking care of him than by any feelings of love. “The hardest thing about foster care was the gulf between the genuine emotional attachment I had for my foster parents and their inability to reciprocate,” he said. “I was tired of not being wanted.”

He graduated high school and held a series of jobs, but the money was never enough. “I was working hard, making decent money, and saving, but I didn’t know what to do with it.”

Weatherspoon’s cousin and friends came around flashing money they had gotten from robbing convenience stores. They, and the money, convinced him to join them. Being forced to steal food as a child distorted his sense of right and wrong, so participating in the robberies didn’t seem as wrong as it should have. One of the robberies resulted in a man’s death.

The foster care system failed to provide him with the life skills he needed to successfully transition out of foster care into adulthood. “Foster care didn’t provide or equip me with any real skills to succeed in life, especially money management,” he said. “Looking back, they failed me most in this area.”



Despite the trauma of the past and decades in prison, Larry Thompson, Joseph Carroll, and Joshua Weatherspoon have become kind and caring people.

Thompson mentors and counsels his incarcerated neighbors as a member of the North Carolina Field Minister Program. He shares his story of abuse to help others who suffered similar horrors feel secure sharing their story.

Carroll greets each person with a handshake and a smile, opting for a more personal greeting than the normal fist bumps. He asks, “How’s it going?” and waits for an answer, because he genuinely cares.

Weatherspoon’s warm demeanor and infectious smile brighten the darkness of prison for the men around him. He will soon join Thompson as a field minister.

The foster care system is supposed to protect children and preserve their future. With more than half of foster care alumni spending time incarcerated, the foster care-to-prison pipeline is flowing with depressing efficiency. That efficiency proves the foster care system is not working effectively.

North Carolina can rescue the next Larry, Joseph, and Joshua from flowing through foster care to prison by ensuring effective counseling for pre-foster care trauma, preventing abuse and trauma during foster care, and supporting former fosters through the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Roughly 10,000 children in North Carolina are in foster care. Unless the pipeline’s flow is disrupted, five thousand of them are caught in the pipeline and flowing through the system to prison. **NCPNT**



Foster Care Facts

- People who go through foster care end up with less education, less employment opportunities, and more mental health issues than others.
- More than half of people raised in foster care end up in prison.
- Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, found that more than half of those from foster care had been incarcerated by their mid-20s.”
- University of Chicago’s Chapin Hall research center found former fosters were only half as likely as the general population to have either a high school diploma or GED.
- Another study of former foster children aged 20-34 in Oregon and Washington reported that only 1.8% of the group had attained a bachelor’s degree, compared to a quarter of the general population. Only 80% were employed, compared to 95% of the general population.
- According to records from the 12 months before the same study, 54% of the foster alumni presented clinical levels of at least one mental health issue.
- The foster alumni were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder at “a rate *twice* as high as U.S. war veterans.”

NO ONE HAS TO ASK WHETHER OR NOT Jessica Ellison is in the building. Ellison, formerly Jessica Trevena, is a sales representative for Correction Enterprises (CE) in Raleigh. Part of her job requires her to make frequent trips to meet with Nash Print Plant to check on the status of her customers' jobs and avert any potential issues before they arise. She is often seen standing with a group of incarcerated employees working out details and troubleshooting issues of problematic jobs.

Ellison's personality is prodigious and infectious. It cannot be contained by the walls of the 56,970 square foot Nash Print Plant. She is 100 percent country with an ingrained southern drawl and a voice strong enough to carry to the back row of any theatre on Broadway. She states to one and all that she is not just down here, she's from 'round here.

After making her rounds, Ellison collects her things and makes her way to the gatehouse. She passes through the final set of doors and walks across the parking lot to her car. Sitting in the front seat, she stares at the concertina wire-lined chain-link fence. She does not let this moment pass without acknowledging the fact that fences, much like these, once stood between her and her loved ones as she served an eight-year sentence for robbery with a dangerous weapon.

In early 2011, Ellison woke up in a hospital. She was handcuffed to a gurney and on a life support machine. A uniformed police officer stood outside her door, waiting to ask her questions, questions that she was having a hard time answering for herself. The events of the previous night were a chaotic blur. To this day, she is still not sure exactly what happened. There had been drugs and alcohol. Her teen-aged son and his friends fought with her boyfriend. At some point, she took the boyfriend's car and drove away from the scene.

This was not the first time Ellison was involved with the justice system. She had been in and out of jails and prison over the past ten years. As she stood in front of the judge, one with whom she had not garnered any favors due to her frequent visits and sarcastic remarks, she realized she had to change her life drastically. Before the judge's gavel fell, she resolved this would be the last time she put her life in someone else's hands. Her transformation began that

IN A LEAGUE OF HER OWN

Jessica Ellison did
the crime, and she
served her time.

She learned a lot about
herself along the way.

Then, she broke down
barriers for all of us.

BY CRIS GARDNER



day, starting with her attitude.

"It didn't matter what they asked of me," she said of the officers and administrators of whatever prison she would wind up in. "I was going to do whatever they told me to do. If they told me to peel potatoes, they would be the best peeled potatoes, ever. If they told me to clean the bathrooms, well, they would be spotless."

Ellison arrived at North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women (NCCIW) in Raleigh later that year. She enrolled in the commercial printing class. Each semester, the class recommended one exemplary student for promotion to work at Quick Copy, the digital print plant located there at that time. Ellison excelled in the class despite not knowing anything about computers.

"They had to teach me everything," she said. "They had to teach me how to turn a computer on. I had no idea what a flash drive was."

Despite her lack of computer skills, Ellison learned quickly. She finished at the top of her class and earned the coveted spot in the plant. Once there, she worked hard to learn every aspect of the business. She first worked in bindery and eventually moved to printer operator. She also worked

in the warehouse and made her way to the front office, where she did clerical work and learned how to estimate jobs for potential clients.

"She has an outstanding work ethic," said Gene Zboralski, former supervisor at Quick Copy. "There were 60 women working on first shift, and Jessica had a willingness to take the lead and to step up and teach the other women what they needed to know in order to do their jobs."

Ellison said she loved every aspect of the work. She constantly asked her supervisors what else she could learn.

This work ethic drew the attention of Penny Evans, the CE account executive from 2001-2017. She worked alongside Ellison daily and became her champion. She spoke with then-director of CE, Karen Brown, about hiring Ellison for a work release position. "When I got ready to retire, I said, 'Jessica is the best you got in print. I'm going to be gone in a couple of months, and if you want to make this work, she's the one to make it happen,'" Evans said.

Brown took the unprecedented step of advocating for Ellison, creating a work release position. It was the first time one had been considered in the company's 125-year

history. In that position, Ellison continued to learn more aspects of the print industry.

Before Ellison was released from NC-CIWI in 2018, CE took their historic approach one step further and offered her a full-time position at the new customer service call center, where she followed up with customers to gauge their satisfaction with their jobs and to promote other CE-provided services.

Ellison described the transition from incarcerated employee to state employee as seamless. Reentering society with a guaranteed job helped enormously. “On the job, I knew what I was doing. Everything else was confusing to me, but this I knew,” she said.

Still, other aspects of her reentry were extremely difficult. Because of her felony convictions, she said finding housing was almost impossible. It took her a year and a half to find a place to live, and that only happened with the assistance of the woman running the halfway house who recommended Ellison to a landlord she knew. He took a chance on her. For the first time since Ellison was a child, she had stable housing.

With her housing and employment handled, Ellison continued to garner achievements. She received a promotion to sales representative. At the same time, CE began sending Ellison into prisons to inspire others with her success story. Ellison was still on post-release supervision when CE sent her to speak at California prisons with notorious names, such as San Quentin, Folsom, and Mule Creek.

Ellison said she doesn't have any problems walking back into prisons—with one exception.

“The only time I really feel freaked out is when I go back to NCCIW. A lot of the same staff is still there. I am going in and out of doors I was not allowed to use before. This time I have a key card, and I can leave anytime I want to.”

The message she wishes to deliver is an important one, important enough to override her anxiety. She wants them to know, “I see you. I know what you are going through.” She believes they, too, can accomplish great things. “Don't give up,” she encourages the women. “It doesn't matter what you have done, or how bad it is. There is always redemption. There are second, and even third, chances. Don't underestimate yourself.”

Photo Courtesy of Correction Enterprises

In 2022, Ellison was awarded the Governor's Award for Excellence. This award recognized her as “a leading sales and customer service representative.” The award specifically mentioned her “commitment to providing an exceptional experience for her clients” and stated, “of the 445 surveys submitted to Correction Enterprises since March 30, 2021, 74 responses mentioned [Ellison] by name and recognized her exceptional performance.” She was credited with “[playing] a key role in reviving previously lost relationships with several agencies, leading to an increase of over \$600,000 in sales.”

Ellison said she was overwhelmed by the honor, adding, “I still don't know how I won. All I did was treat people the way I would want to be treated.”

Zboralski said her success in the business is due to the fact that customers know she would never mislead them on anything.

“

On the job, I knew what I was doing. Everything else was confusing to me, but this I knew.

”

“They trust her,” he added.

Nash Print Plant Manager Kris Petrie says she doesn't think about Ellison's past. “I trust her implicitly, and she's just Jessica. However, when I do take a moment to remember how she came to work with us, and the challenges that she has faced, it makes me very proud of her.”

Ellison uses her unique perspective to temper customers' expectations to the reality of the prison work environment. She works closely with the incarcerated men and has no problem reminding her customers that just because the men are incarcerated does not mean they don't bring unique and varied talents to the table. Many of the incarcerated men at the print plant recognize her as a role model who has pierced the veil of uncertainty that many employers have about employing the formerly incarcerated. Just as the CE staff once inspired her, she now inspires others.

Ellison acknowledges the role CE played in bolstering her self-esteem, which led to her eventual success. “I didn't think I could do anything. I didn't think I was smart enough,” Ellison said. “Because of the years of abuse I suffered in my past, and due to my drug addiction, I had given up on myself. I just needed someone telling me that I could do it. I needed the confidence.”

Ellison believes she was lucky to end up where she did. “That was God's doing. He gave me the tools that I needed. I was ready to make a change, and I did it,” she said.

Seven years after leaving prison, Ellison is a changed woman. She not only accomplished a lot in her professional life, she made great strides in her personal life, as well. She rebuilt relationships with her children, to whom, she admits, she was not a good mother. She also built relationships with her grandchildren, three of whom were born while she was incarcerated. And she got married in 2023.

Zboralski's hope is that Ellison's experience and success will create more opportunities to employ formerly incarcerated individuals. Many programs are currently under way that could do that. But as of the date of this publication, only four people have gone from working at CE while incarcerated to finding employment with them upon release. Most recently, Jorgie Brown began working at the Customer Service Center on Yonkers Road. The hope is that others may follow.

“Jessica is a big asset to CE,” said Zboralski. “If they are using her as a beta test to see if hiring the formerly incarcerated can work, then the test passed with flying colors.” **NCPNT**

Editor's Note: Recent changes in CE hiring practices require security certification for more than half of CE positions—supervisors, managers, and directors. This type of certification is not open to those with felony convictions. Despite this, CE Director John Coleman and his leadership team are focused on continuing to hire newly released CE workers for open CE jobs. His goal is to have 5% of the CE workforce be restored citizens by 2030.

CE leadership is making plans to market CE plant workers who are nearing their release dates to be hired for open CE jobs prior to their release.

SPECIAL FEATURE

STOP AND GIVE ME 50 ... WORDS

WE CAN SPEND ALL DAY TALKING WITHOUT SAYING ANYTHING OF TRUE IMPORTANCE. WE OFTEN HEAR THE EXPRESSION, "THEY AIN'T TALKING 'BOUT \$#@%!"

THE EDITORIAL STAFF OF NCPNT WONDERED WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF WE ASKED RANDOM PEOPLE TO DIG DEEP AND COME UP WITH A MEANINGFUL RESPONSE TO A COMPLEX QUESTION, BUT WE ONLY GAVE THEM 50 WORDS TO ANSWER.

SO, WE ASKED, "IF YOU HAD ONLY 50 WORDS, WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOURSELF ON DAY ONE OF YOUR INCARCERATION?" HERE'S WHAT THEY HAD TO SAY.

Never forget who you are, what you are capable of, and where you want to go. The entire world will attempt to define each of these for you. But the world's answers will never satisfy you. Only you can decide. Only you can define you.

—Jamar Gordon
26 years incarcerated



Prison is a setup for a comeback. You can make your time hard, or you can make it easy. Work on your case, set goals, and go to school. Choose your friends wisely. Be a man of your word. Protect yourself. Trust in a power higher than yourself.

—Larry Evans
23 years incarcerated



Now that you continued the cycle, educate yourself and help your son break the cycle. You have forever altered your kids' lives. Don't try to be a friend. Be the father they need. Change the narrative that is placed upon you. Let the world know your mistake doesn't define you.

—Ronald Williams
25 years incarcerated



Everyone you meet doesn't have your best interests in mind. More importantly, watch the company you keep, because the individuals you associate with are a reflection of who you want to become. Finally, pursue education, mind your own business, stay in your lane, and always be aware of your surroundings.

—Kyle Triplett
20 years incarcerated



There's no such thing as the future, only the present, which because of your effort, will take time to catch up with you. Waiting for the future is like waiting to breathe. And in prison, there's no such thing as holding your breath. Only slow sips of now.

—Michael McCoy
25 years incarcerated



Your body is locked up, not your mind. It holds the potential to be an overcomer. With integrity, along with treating others how you want to be treated, you can unlock the door to a victorious future. Hope is the key. Keep going. And above all, put God first.

—Dominique Tucker
8 years incarcerated



Don't fall into the hype of the convict code, Little Lucas. Yes, respect, social boundaries, and minding one's business are important. But you don't always have to punch someone or physically challenge them just because of a perceived disrespect. Learn. Help your neighbor to grow one day at a time.

—Lucas Rash
15 years incarcerated



Find yourself. The man that you'll be tomorrow is a direct result of the choices you make today. Figure out who you are, and live according to that. And know that being a man of good principles and convictions will garner all of the respect that you'll ever need.

—Kenneth Meeks, Jr.
21 years incarcerated



Remain an extreme realist. Never become delusional about where you are and why you are here. Your microcosmic existence behind bars does not make you any less of a man, nor does it define you as a man. Recognize the huge difference between "surviving" each day and "living" each day.

—Anthony W. Allen
22 years incarcerated



You will experience a lot of heartaches and headaches. But you have to focus on being your best you, and don't change what is good about you. Change the things you don't like, because this is about you building a new you.

—Robert Spencer El
15 years incarcerated



Your attitude and actions can unite or divide the community you live in. Unification brings change. Division brings destruction. Strive to build your neighbor, not tear him down.

—Michael Berger
13 years incarcerated



You are not identified by your worst mistake. There is freedom found while being incarcerated. It's alright to be you. Be different. Stand out. Have a willingness to be corrected as you live out a life of humility, with a teachable spirit. Finally, breathe, knowing it will be okay.

—Loren Hammonds
28 years incarcerated

Don't waste time! Work your most important muscle, your brain, 3x harder than any other. Don't read passively; read actively! Next, save money. Twenty percent of everything. And lastly, learn to grieve, because you will suffer loss. But you can, and will, gain enough to change perceptions and, therefore, reality.

—Gary Hayes
18 years incarcerated



Be exactly where your feet are. Don't allow yourself to be overwhelmed or consumed by the realities of time. Focus on who you would like to become, and exhaust your energy becoming that individual. "Time" will take care of itself; it always does. Optimize you.

—Bryce Williams
12 years incarcerated



Don't give up. Use each moment to better yourself. Don't succumb to the ideology that your condition is final just because you have a long sentence. Don't live in a manner not conducive to rehabilitation. Changing for the better beginning on Day 1 will prevent unnecessary delays in your rehabilitation.

—Dadi Kenyatta McNair
19 years incarcerated

Now, drop your **50**—and **ONLY 50**—words. Which song best describes or expresses you and why? Text your answer using the NCPNT survey on EDOVO. We will post the top 15 answers. Please include **"#50 Words Song,"** your full legal name, and how many years you have been incarcerated.

CAN A CONVERSATION SAVE A LIFE?

BY ISAAC MELCHER

THE DAY I HAD BEEN PLANNING, AND dreading, for almost two years had arrived. Walking back to my cell after the fight I'd just had with my ex, all I could think about was never seeing or talking to my kids again. The possibility of a life sentence had not quite tipped the scales to make me kill myself, but life without my kids was enough to send them crashing down.

Prison life has a way of isolating individuals in a crowd of people. We turn inward to distance and protect ourselves from the memories of what brought us here. But that isolation blinds us to the struggles of those around us. Sometimes a simple conversation and a willingness to listen can make the difference between life and death—as it did for me on that day in April 2020.

Ten feet from my cell, an older man I played cards with intercepted me. He noticed the despair written across my face and insisted I talk to him. I think the conversation that ensued was nothing less than God speaking directly through this man. That conversation prompted me to apply for the inaugural peer observer team at Pasquotank Correctional Institution in January 2022.

The Peer Observation Program (POP) seeks to help those placed on Self-Injurious Behavior (SIB) watch. The program was piloted at Mountain View Correctional in 2019 and has since been implemented in five North Carolina facilities: Eastern, Neuse, Pasquotank, Mountain View, and Nash. Training focuses on specific job requirements, understanding all aspects of suicide, and strategies for prevention. The peer observer sits with someone in crisis for a 4-hour-shift. They document their observations every 15 minutes, listen with compassion, and, most importantly, signal staff to stop any self-injurious behavior.

SIB cells are located in the Special Management Unit (SMU), which can be a very stressful place. Adding to that stress, individuals placed on SIB receive no clothes or property, except a green, rip-proof smock, called a “turtle suit,” and a blanket. Peer observers can help to potentially ease the stress.

Some people may feel a person has a right

to take their life, but reports from those who survived a suicide attempt, and national statistics, prove that suicidal feelings are a temporary psychological state. Given enough time, people who consider or attempt suicide come to a place where they no longer desire to take their life.

Twice in my life, I contemplated suicide. Both times were due to clouded perspective—an inability to see past my present circumstances. My circumstances and my coping ability improved. My perspective cleared, and life became worth living again.

The goal of SIB watch is to get people through the crisis to a place where they can think more clearly about an action that cannot be undone. Helping others reach that clarity is one of the most fulfilling aspects of being a peer observer. Having another incarcerated person present and willing to listen provides an environment conducive to sharing and reevaluating.

Opportunities to encourage come often, and conversations are frequently wide-ranging, with a level of openness and vulnerability rarely seen in the prison setting. Anyone who has a heart for helping others will have plenty of chances to make a positive impact.

Peer observers aren't the “police,” and we're not there to snitch on those on SIB or anyone else in the SMU. We're there to help those going through the worst of times get past their moment of crisis.

Since beginning my peer observer journey, hundreds of hours of volunteer experience have given me a sense of purpose and fulfillment I didn't think possible on this side of the fence. Every time I set foot in the SMU, I prepare myself to act as an extra line of defense between the men and their despair. Doing

that is as simple as offering a smile and nod of acknowledgment, or I may talk to them for the entire four-hour shift.

I may never know how much I impact a man's life, but I want him to know he is seen, he is not alone, and I'm willing to help. I let them know that I have walked in their shoes, been through similar circumstances, and don't judge them. I share the conversation that saved my life, or commiserate with the difficulty and stigma associated with SIB. No one wants to wear a turtle suit!

I encourage anyone who is interested to become involved in helping and serving others through POP to contact their facility's mental health program manager to see what the options are. Even if you're not currently at one of the five institutions utilizing peer observers, maybe you can be the one to get it started.

It turns out that fight with my ex was not the end of my relationship with my kids, but rather a misunderstanding easily resolved. I'll always be thankful for the conversation that saved my life. And I'm grateful to use my life to help others—one conversation at a time. *NCPNT*

MYTHS ABOUT SUICIDE

1. **MYTH: DON'T TALK ABOUT IT** – THERE IS A BELIEF THAT ASKING SOMEONE ABOUT SUICIDE MAY GIVE THEM THE IDEA AND CAUSE THEM TO KILL THEMSELVES. HOWEVER, ASKING ABOUT SUICIDE IS USUALLY THE BEST WAY TO DETERMINE IF SOMEONE IS AT RISK.
2. **MYTH: DECISIONS ABOUT SUICIDE ARE FINAL** – SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE IF A PERSON DECIDES TO ATTEMPT SUICIDE THEY WILL FIND A WAY. THE FACT IS, SUICIDAL IMPULSES ARE USUALLY BRIEF, LASTING NO MORE THAN A FEW DAYS.
3. **MYTH: MOST SUICIDES OCCUR WITHOUT WARNING** – SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE THERE IS NO WAY TO IDENTIFY THOSE AT RISK. IN REALITY, MOST PEOPLE DO SHOW WARNING SIGNS OF SUICIDAL THINKING.
4. **MYTH: ALL SUICIDAL PEOPLE ARE CRAZY** – THERE IS A MYTH THAT ONCE A PERSON EXPERIENCES SUICIDAL THOUGHTS OR HAS MENTAL HEALTH SYMPTOMS, THEY ARE NO LONGER “NORMAL.” THIS MYTH IS BASED ON THE STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH MENTAL ILLNESS. IT IS NOT CONSISTENT WITH THE FACTS.
5. **MYTH: SOME PEOPLE ARE JUST PLAYING GAMES. SUICIDE IS ALWAYS SERIOUS.** IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS STRUGGLING WITH SUICIDAL IDEATION, SEEK HELP RIGHT AWAY.

THE PROGRAM THAT JUMPSTARTED MY TRANSFORMATION

BY MATTHEW GRANT

MY TALE OF TRANSFORMATION DOES NOT exist without JumpStart.

In 2023, I returned to my dorm after working a 10-hour shift in the Correction Enterprises sewing plant at Columbus Correctional Institution. Walking by the bulletin board, I noticed a flash of color among the black and white backdrop of unit rules and PREA guidelines. Curious, I walked over for a closer look.

The flyer had “JumpStart” in bright text and a figure doing what looked like a flying karate kick. Included was some mumbo-jumbo about changing your life, and a date for an informational meeting two weeks away. *Probably just another gimmicky program*, I thought, before going about my business.

As the meeting’s date approached, the flyer kept catching my eye, so I decided to attend. At least I would get out of the block.

Stepping from the cold January air into the warmer air inside the corrugated-tin shed used for visitation, I saw nearly a dozen non-staff civilians scattered about the room’s perimeter. I sat in the back row and waited.

Eventually, a man stepped to the podium. He introduced himself and the program’s other volunteers. His name was Ed Troha, president of JumpStart USA. Next, he told us the history of JumpStart.

In a South Carolina prison, four men in a Bible study discussed why they saw men repeatedly return to prison. They asked, “What did these men lack? What would equip them for success reentering society?” The answers to those questions inspired the creation of JumpStart in 2008. Since then, the program has spread to 18 facilities across South Carolina, as well as prisons in North Carolina, Georgia, and Ohio.

JumpStart aims to break the cycle of recidivism. The 40-week intensive program is Christian-based but emphasizes a “not church as usual” approach. Instead of relying on feel-good sermons, it focuses on real work and accountability. JumpStart disci-

ples men and women inside and outside of prison, teaching the core values of responsibility, accountability, and submission to authority, values necessary for success on the outside. Since its inception, over 6,000 men and women have graduated, more than 4,500 have been released, and 96% of those released have stayed out of prison.

JumpStart sounded like the program I needed. Serving life without parole, I had grown disheartened watching men repeatedly squander their chance at freedom. I wanted to do something but had no idea how to make an impact.



Left to right: JumpStart USA President Ed Troha, Mission Advancement Director Rob Whitner, Matthew Grant, and JumpStart North Carolina Executive Director George Benner.

“I learned my mother had only a week to live. I wasn’t equipped to deal with losing her. Faced with my greatest fear, I prayed to God for the first time in 20 years.”

I was enthusiastic about the program but not about the faith-based curriculum. Then, I met Rob Whitner, JumpStart’s director of mission advancement and one of its four creators. While he spoke, I was struck by the sincerity and conviction radiating from him. I don’t remember his exact words, but I remember the first words I spoke to him: “Man, I want to do what you do.”

As one of 22 men selected for JumpStart’s inaugural class at Columbus, I eagerly learned ways to disrupt the recidivism cycle with the men around me. Each participant received a “lifebook” authored by JumpStart CEO Cary Sanders, who served nine years in South Carolina. The lifebook’s weekly

assignments coincide with chapters in *A Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren and are designed to encourage critical self-examination. Discussions are centered around learning and applying principles such as obedience, dependability, and truthfulness. These discussions were instrumental in transforming me into someone who actively pursues responsibility and accountability.

After nearly 30 weeks into JumpStart, I learned my mother had only a week to live. I wasn’t equipped to deal with losing her. Faced with my greatest fear, I prayed to God for the first time in 20 years. Being an introvert, I kept my grief and pain to myself. She passed on a Monday. It was the worst day of my life. By Thursday evening I needed JumpStart. It had become my refuge, a place filled with real love from genuine people.

Opening that night’s meeting, Whitner said God placed a special message on his heart to encourage somebody and shared Psalm 34:18: “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.” The message was for me. I was both broken and crushed, but that message began my healing. Each remaining week took on new meaning for me.

I thank God for giving me the courage to sign up for JumpStart. It helped me begin healing and provided a reason to keep living.

Despite my life sentence, I felt a sense of purpose. I learned God has plans for me, including using me to inspire others to transform their lives. Equipped by JumpStart, I’m committed to doing my part to combat recidivism in North Carolina.

JumpStart volunteer Karen Knight encouraged me to apply to the North Carolina Field Minister Program, where I’m fulfilling the dream of obtaining a college degree.

My transformation is not complete, but thanks to JumpStart and its volunteers, my life is dedicated to doing what Rob Whitner does—serving the incarcerated population and the society they will reenter. *NCPNT*

LIFE WITHOUT PAROLE AND LOVE WITHOUT LIMITS

BY TONY JOHNSON

LIFE AND LOVE BECAME INTERTWINED when Adam first held Eve in the lush garden of Eden. The two are still all tangled up today.

The Sentencing Project reported in 2024 that 1,434 people in North Carolina are serving life without parole (LWOP). People sentenced to LWOP don't have a release date, parole date, or any avenue to ever earn their freedom. In essence, they have no concrete future outside of prison.

However, many lifers still hope to experience love like the rest of society. They long to ride the maddening love-roller coaster that every lovesick fool rides. Once someone serving LWOP finds love, they face many obstacles in trying to strengthen and build that love.

Barry Mintz and Christian Pascasio found love while serving life.

At 51, Barry's personality is every bit as jovial as Santa Claus, and his appearance isn't far off. When he laughs, his dimples shine and his belly shakes. But his heart for serving his fellow man is the trait most like the man known for delivering presents to children on Christmas morning.

Barry and Amanda Rochelle-Mintz knew each other in high school, but they never dated before he came to prison in 2006. In 2021, Amanda contacted Barry after receiving an update about him from a mutual friend.

Amanda's intention was to befriend Barry. Before contacting him, she researched friendship with the incarcerated. She discovered that many people on the outside leave, or "ghost," people serving time. Sometimes people who begin a relationship with a lifer find they can't handle the uncertainty of the future, the financial burden of maintaining the relationship, or society's stigma against these types of relationships.

Amanda weighed both her feelings and Barry's before communicating with him. She said, "I did not want to befriend him,

then just drop out of his life." Instead of ghosting Barry, Amanda married him on December 18, 2023, in the prison's visitation room.

Amanda said, "Marrying Barry is the best decision I've ever made."



Barry Mintz and his wife Amanda



At 35, Christian looks like a muscular version of Antonio Banderas from *Desperado*.

Christian has always been a romantic. He said, "I've chased love for as long as I can remember." Now, he is a romantic with scars. Failed relationships due to his LWOP sentence inflicted deep emotional scars in Christian. Despite these scars, Christian still proclaims, "Love is the most beautiful thing God created."

In his failed relationships, Christian tried to build a lasting relationship, but he struggled to find the right woman, someone who was willing to stay in a relationship with him despite no evident future beyond prison.

Over time, he learned to recognize the bitter signs that the end was near. One sign was the repeated question, "Babe, how

much longer until you hear from your lawyer?" Christian's life shattered each time he heard a partner say, "It hurts me to wonder if you will ever come home." He felt compassion for them, but he struggled when he was left to pick up the broken pieces alone, while they moved on.

Eventually, Christian decided to give up on love—forever. Then, Samantha Mathis sent him a message on the GettingOut messaging app used by residents of the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction. And everything changed.

In August 2024, Samantha saw Christian's picture on a Facebook pen pal site for the incarcerated, GTL GettingOut Pen Pals, and couldn't resist contacting him. Exchanged messages eventually led to a phone call. "The moment I heard his voice," Samantha said, "something clicked."

Christian dreaded telling her he had LWOP. But as they grew closer, that conversation became unavoidable. To his surprise, Samantha didn't leave after learning his sentence. Instead, she asked, "What do you want me to do?"

Samantha's question conveyed her commitment and showed Christian he'd found the one he was searching for. "Before Samantha I believed women like her were a fairy tale," he said. "I didn't think I'd ever find one."

Christian finally found love. On February 15, 2025, he asked Samantha to marry him. She said, "Yes!"



Once a lifer finds love, they must stay connected. Phone calls are one of the main ways the incarcerated stay connected to the outside world. Every phone call from prison is severed after 15 minutes.

Forced to build romantic relationships in 15-minute increments, couples learn the importance of making every moment count. Samantha said, "It forces us to be intentional about communication and to show each other how much we love each

other every day. We've learned to appreciate the smallest moments and cherish every interaction."

Barry and Amanda, or "Team Baranda" as they call themselves, consistently invest in their relationship. They share daily good morning messages, talk about their struggles, and discuss their hopes and dreams for the future, despite Barry's LWOP sentence.

The couple's investment encompasses every aspect of their lives. Barry said, "We not only take an interest in each other's lives, we also learn about the things that drive each other."

When Amanda worked as a sales coordinator for a resort chain, Barry studied the hospitality industry to better understand Amanda's daily work and accompanying stresses. Amanda learned about Barry's role as a field minister, his job since graduating from the North Carolina Field Minister Program.

Their investment in each other's lives allows them to make the most of their limited time together.

Men in romantic relationships sometimes fail the test of tough times. The harsh reality of LWOP put life into perspective for Barry and Christian.

For Barry, the hardest part of having a life sentence is not being with Amanda during life's challenging times. Instead of doing time, he wants to do life with Amanda—the good and the bad.

"My greatest struggle is the pain I feel when I can't hold my wife when either of us is having a bad day," said Barry. "It hurts that I can't just sit and grow old with my wife."



Christian can relate. He wants to comfort his fiancée through the tough times. He said, "When Samantha feels alone or powerless, I want to be there to hug and shelter her until she feels protected and loved."

Christian admits loving Samantha while serving LWOP is hard on him. He said, "I love her so much and want to be there with her."

Samantha said the cruelest parts of Christian's incarceration for her are the forced

physical separation and the emotional fatigue. Holding hands for two hours and one closed-mouth kiss at the beginning and end of each visit does little to quench a couple's desire. And visitation officers and security cameras invade every second of every visit.

The lonely days of not having Christian present make Samantha feel isolated. This constant isolation from her fiancé causes emotional fatigue, making faith and patience crucial in her fight to overcome the stress of loving a lifer.

Christian and Samantha have built their relationship on their faith. Both of them credit each other and their relationship for bringing them closer to God. He said, "She makes me feel like God has a purpose for our lives."



Christian Pascasio and his fiancée Samantha Mathis



God is also the center of Barry and Amanda's relationship.

Barry's faith and work as a field minister motivated Amanda to deepen her relationship with God. She proudly proclaimed, "Barry is a man of God."

Barry's faith is evident in the way he views his relationship. He believes Amanda was heaven-sent. "She is my once in a lifetime love that God intended to complete my soul."

The phrase, "My once in a lifetime," cap-

tures their carefully crafted connection. It comes from a book Amanda sent Barry: *You Are My Once in a Lifetime*, by Marci. After receiving the book, Barry read an excerpt from the book to his wife each day. Then, they had to detach into their separate worlds to begin the day alone.

Acts of love like that build a strong connection between two people who live in different worlds—one free and one incarcerated—but both committed for life. A relationship between a person who is free and person who is incarcerated is challenging.

To make this type of relationship work, Christian advises, "Be honest with yourself and your partner about the baggage you bring into the relationship. That way you can work on it together."



Overcoming obstacles together is vital for any healthy romantic relationship.

For a successful relationship, Samantha suggests, "Go into it with open eyes and a full heart. Be realistic about the challenges, and be deeply committed to communication."

Through communication, Christian and Samantha's relationship is full of meaning, joy, and happiness. Their relationship has helped her see the world in new ways, a perspective shift that transforms every day and adds value to life. She said, "My fiancé adds so much value to my life."

Amanda also finds value in her marriage. In Barry, she found a partner who empowers her to make choices that better her circumstances, something she once

thought impossible. She said that their love is "so much more than I can define. A mental, physical, and spiritual connection."

Love transcends prison even for those serving life. "Love exists within the most spiritual part of our being," Barry explained. "Because of this, our marriage and the love that binds us together will also transcend the limitations of time and space."

These loving couples believe love can overcome anything—even the all tangled up mess of life without parole. *NCPNT*

CHEF JEFF'S VISIT TO NASH AND SAMPSON SERVES UP HOPE

BY MICHAEL MCCOY AND STEVEN BLUE

CHEF JEFF HENDERSON IS AN award-winning chef, New York Times bestselling author of *Cooked* and *If You Can See It, You Can Be It*, and host of the cooking shows *The Chef Jeff Project*, *Family Style with Chef Jeff*, and *Flip My Food with Chef Jeff*. He is also formerly incarcerated.

Chef Jeff discovered his passion for life in one of the unlikeliest of places—a prison kitchen dish pit. After his release from a 10-year sentence, he became a successful and acclaimed chef. Despite his success, he didn't forget those he left behind. He frequently returns to prison and shares his story to encourage the people inside, especially individuals struggling with hopelessness and stagnation.

On January 30, 2025, Sampson Correctional Institution warmly received Chef Jeff as he shared his moving story of success after release. His presentation, "Unlocking Your Potential: What Every Prisoner Needs to Know," covered his years of confinement within the federal correctional system. Many men and women, both inside and outside of prison walls, dwell on the negative dynamics found within the criminal justice system. He assured his audience that destructive anger aimed at "The System" and its representatives does not tell the whole story.

"There are people on both sides that want to see us win," he said. However, success—like any great dish—demands following a specific recipe. He used his personal history and culinary skillset to point out how a legitimate career is possible using skills and interests that residents may already possess. Through personal letters and vocational and educational programs, he fed his change by using newspaper articles featuring successful chefs to find mentors to help him grow. What happens in cellblocks, dayrooms, and dreams in solitary moments are all relevant to future prosperity.



Above: Chef Jeff speaks with diners at Sampson; Below: Chef Jeff with Michael McCoy

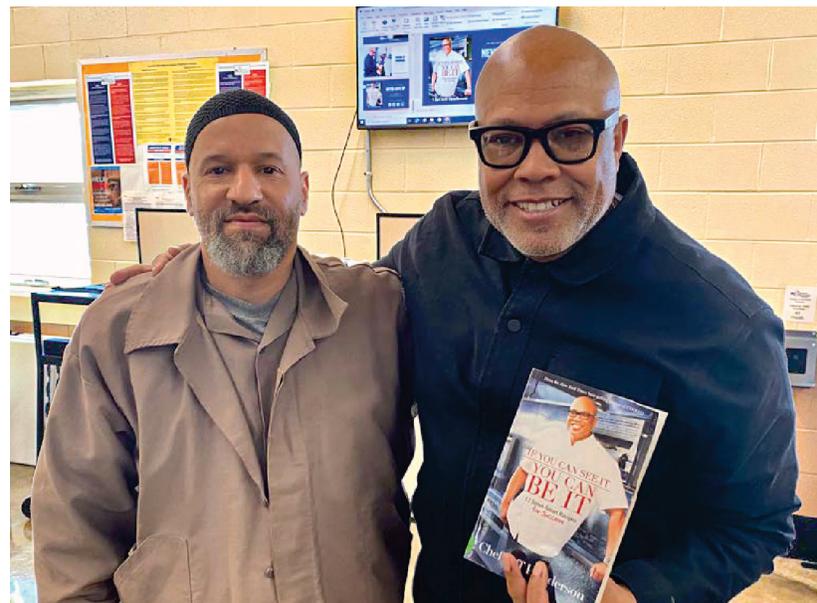
On April 3, Dr. Anthony Vann, deputy secretary of administration for the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction, arrived at the Nash Print Plant with Chef Jeff and other guests in tow. Dr. Vann allowed his guests to introduce themselves and tell their stories. When Chef Jeff took center stage, he made the focus of his message a single word: *hope*.

He highlighted events happening on the other side of the fence that the incarcerated may not hear about, from rehabilitation and reentry expos to the outcry for changes to the criminal justice system. From politicians to the civilian population, people are supporting, even shouting for, reform. He assured the workers that they weren't invisible, forgotten, or dismissed. "Change," he declared, "is coming."

Before leaving

Nash, Chef Jeff promoted consistent positive behavior. He encouraged the workers to keep their jobs and stay out of trouble, things that would help them reap the benefits of the changes to come. He closed with a second word for his audience to focus on: "soon." He repeated that change is coming, and it's coming sooner than expected.

From the streets of San Diego to the kitchens of Las Vegas, Chef Jeff uses his transformed life as an ingredient for inspiration. He travels the globe bringing a recipe for hope to the incarcerated. *NCPNT*



BAD BOLOGNA AND A BIOPSY BRING BACK BELIEF IN HUMANITY

BY TYLER BOWMAN

A HUSH FELL OVER THE CLASSROOM AS the corrections officer entered. “Tyler Bowman, report to receiving,” he bellowed. My heart sank. Although reporting to receiving meant going on a medical trip for an appointment I had been waiting months for, I dreaded the uncomfortable and degrading process of suffering through a day trip into society.

I trudged through the February rain in the direction of receiving and contemplated refusing to go. Despite my apprehension, I couldn’t afford to refuse, because I needed to have my skin checked for cancer by a dermatologist.

I arrived at receiving—the area where staff processes people in and out of the facility. An officer confirmed my identity, tossed me an orange jumpsuit, and told me to grab one of the bag lunches sitting on the counter. I stripped down under supervision, balancing on one foot as I handed him each sock to prevent touching the filthy floor.

I debated whether to eat the slimy bologna sandwich in the bag. Although hungry, I decided against it, knowing it would likely contribute to me getting carsick.

Shackled at the wrists and ankles, I hobbled down the sidewalk toward an awaiting SUV. As soon as the car door closed, anxiety gripped my chest. I felt constricted by the metal bars lining the side windows in one-inch increments. A polymer barrier directly in front of me blocked the flow of cool air conditioning, creating a pool of stagnant heat in the backseat.

We hit the road, and flashes of vertigo from carsickness quickly kicked in. My pale face must have been obvious in the rear-view mirror. One of the officers spun around and half-way joked, “Don’t puke in my back seat.” I thought about telling him he should be glad I hadn’t eaten the bologna sandwich.

My old stomping grounds in Raleigh passed by in one-inch frames and felt more foreign than familiar. Raleigh had changed. The world had changed. But most of all, I had changed. I no longer felt a part of that world, and that world no longer considered me a

part of it.

We pulled into the parking lot dermatology clinic. When the vehicle’s back door opened, I sighed in relief at the fresh air and rain hitting my face. I took my sweet time shuffling across the parking lot.

Entering through the office’s side entrance, the aroma of perfumes and air fresheners bombarded my olfactory senses, a sharp contrast to prison’s daily combination of sweat, mildew, and only God knows what else. While waiting in the examination room, I listened to the hub-bub of daily office life. Phones ringing, coworkers laughing, and the clicking strokes of someone typing played like an old familiar record, a nice reprieve from the aggressive shouts, slamming doors, and general hostility I had become accustomed to in prison.

A clinician swooped in to hand me a paper gown, then quickly disappeared. I dressed down to my boxers and stepped into the backless gown. The average person might have felt exposed, but years of strip searches have desensitized me to feeling any embarrassment.

Moments later, a small group of women entered the room with a chart and playful chatter. I had anticipated having to cater to delicate sensibilities so as not to make anyone uncomfortable by my mere presence. Well, that wasn’t necessary. They were completely at ease. They talked and joked with

me as they prepared to insert a needle into my nose to numb it before carving off a chunk for a biopsy.

Their friendliness threw me off guard. Nearly a decade had passed since I received this much female attention. As the women joked around during the examination, I realized it was my own sensibilities that needed catering to. My detachment from “normal” citizens had weakened my self-esteem, which I had not been aware of.

I wondered, if 10 years in prison has already made me feel this awkward in society, how will I act around people after 42 years in prison—my minimum sentence.

The way the nurses treated me reminded me that there are people in the world who still see people in prison as human. It’s easy to understand why incarcerated people believe the narrative that society hates us. So much points to that perception as being true: the news tells us, legislative policies tell us, and even our own loved ones tell us.

I felt human on the car ride back to prison. Weeks later, I was relieved to learn the biopsy result was negative.

My perspective on venturing into the world had changed. Yes, the process itself is degrading and miserable, but if an incarcerated person gets to experience even a moment of humanity, then it’s worth waves of car sickness and a bag full of bad bologna. *NCPNT*



Illustration By Jason Williford &
Color By Dominique Perry

CONVOCATION BRINGS OUT THE BRASS

By MICHAEL SUTTON

As a student in the North Carolina Field Minister Program (NCFMP), I look forward to two school events each year—graduation and convocation. I am always filled with pride as I watch the graduating class accept their diplomas and set out on their new mission. I also like to see all the students in the same place at the same time in their blue polo shirts at convocation.

Each June, students in the NCFMP eagerly await the arrival of the incoming freshman class. Dozens of men make the trip to Nash to interview for the program throughout May. The arrivals in June confirm who got accepted into the program. Current students greet the men as they arrive, congratulating and welcoming them into the program.



Over the next couple of months, the new class participates in a six-week preparatory curriculum and gets acquainted with their new surroundings. All of them anxiously await the start of the fall semester. But, before the semester begins, the new class attends convocation, where Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS) officially welcomes the men to the program.

This year's convocation was held on August 13 in the Nash gymnasium. In addition to SEBTS faculty, Nash staff, and current students, Department of Adult Correction (DAC) dignitaries and pillars of the community from around the state also welcomed the new class.



Top: Incoming freshman class; Bottom: Freshman Rashon Squire with SEBTS Professors Dr. Smyly and Dr. Moncada

Tammera Hill, chief operating officer (COO) of DAC, Dr. Danny Akin, president of SEBTS, and Jan Bostick, executive director of Game Plan for Life, were three of the key speakers who welcomed and encouraged the incoming class.



Timothy Johnson, field minister, with Chaplain Sarah Jobe, director of NCDAC Chaplaincy Services



Superintendent of Education Services Dr. Brooke Wheeler with sophomores Aaron Holland and Zach Hobbs



Ms. Hill from Prison Education Services with Devon Carter, field minister at Granville Correctional Institution

COO Hill used her time to deliver an energetic and humorous speech. She shared how she was impressed by the student body in their blue polos. As she realized her allotted time was drawing to a close, she quipped, “Blessed are the brief, for they shall be invited back,” eliciting laughter from the crowd.



Dr. Rocky Wright, director of Prison Programs at Judson College, with NCDAC Chief Operating Officer Tamera Hill

Dr. Akin stressed the importance of always having a vision. He also thanked the field ministers in attendance for what they are accomplishing and for the sacrifices they make to serve others.



SEBTS President Dr. Danny Akin

Recalling her car accident earlier in the year, Jan Bostick tearfully described how the students and field ministers were the first people she heard from. She considers the NCFMP one of the most important programs sponsored by Game Plan for Life. Ms. Bostick considers these men “wounded warriors” and reiterated her belief in their redemption.

Game Plan for Life Executive Director Jan Bostick



These incarcerated men from throughout the state’s prison system will spend the next four years studying to become field ministers. They will earn a Bachelor of Arts in Pastoral Ministry before deploying to prisons across the state to counsel, encourage, teach, and otherwise serve their peers.

At convocation, they got the opportunity to meet the Game Plan for Life supporters who fund the program, members from the community who encourage them, and the DAC officials who make the policies that govern their lives in prison.



Matt Carsner, missions pastor at Hope Community Church, with Barry Mintz, field minister



Freshman Ryan Hare and Game Plan for Life supporters

This was the first convocation where the guests stayed after the ceremony and had lunch with all the students. This added interaction made this year’s event bigger and better than previous ones. But that is not what made this year’s event so special to me. I am looking forward to the next big event—graduation. Next year, I will be walking across that stage. I will be one of the men setting out to serve my incarcerated community. *NCPNT*

SAMPSON'S AA SUPPORTING RECOVERY ONE DAY AT A TIME

BY MICHAEL MCCOY

ON THE EVENING OF JULY 14, 2025, Sampson Correctional Institution celebrated its annual appreciation dinner for those involved in the Alcoholics Anonymous program.

The Old Mill Branch of Alcoholics Anonymous has maintained continuous meetings at Sampson for decades and filled the rooms with stories of hope and humility while men recover from the deadly disease of alcoholism. While a good meal was enjoyed, minds were fed, as well.

The night's speaker, Jim M., greeted everyone as they entered the meeting and, after a brief introduction, shared a little of his life's journey through the Twelve Steps. Part of his recovery insisted he carry the message of hope inside prisons, and he recounted a meeting with the warden of Central Prison who sat him down one night and frankly expressed his thoughts on what Jim was doing. "Mr. Jim, I think that if there was ever such a thing as rehabilitation inside the North Carolina prison system, it's in AA."

The warden went on to explain how men he once considered incorrigible changed

their thinking and behavior with weekly AA meetings. Jim M. reminded the participants how, earlier in the evening, he stood at the door and shook everyone's hand as they entered the meeting. This was more than a formality. He said, "Recovery, for me, is when you can reach out and touch another person. That is to say, I see you, and I think that you are worthy of my help."

While Jim M.'s story proved to be humorous and compelling, the truth is the men at Sampson are all students of Bill W. and men like AA's Co-Founder Dr. Bob. The difference makers are those who return, meeting after meeting, with a decision to make AA not only a weekly ritual, but a way of life. A life of recovery and service. A life lived one day at a time. *NCPNT*



NCPNT Reporter Michael McCoy (in orange shirt) and The Old Mill Branch of AA's participants and volunteers pray before the feast

Photo Courtesy of NCDAC

WHAT IS ACDP?

BY CINNAMON COLLINS

WESTERN CORRECTIONAL CENTER FOR Women has a wonderful program called Alcohol and Chemical Dependency Program (ACDP).

ACDP helps participants recognize criminal behavior and thinking through cognitive behavioral thinking. This thinking helps participants recognize their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in certain situations, both then and now.

Director of Programs Ms. Spicer said ACDP is important because, "It means second chances and [learning] how not to come back to prison."

ACDP consists of education, completing nine workbooks, rational self-analysis, attitude checks, relapse prevention, anger management, art therapy, and parenting and family dynamics.

To start and end every day, participants assemble in groups of different sizes for discussion and support. The women may discuss issues that deeply touched them that

day or work out problems they are having.

The first goal is for participants to get out of prison and into a healthy environment. The women need to be able to recognize what an unhealthy environment looks like and how to avoid it.

The second goal is to rebuild relationships with their children and family members, which often break down before entering prison. Family bonds and friendships are important for growth and support.

Finally, the participants need to know that they, themselves, are enough.

Spicer said eligibility in the program is based, in part, on the SASSI (Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory) diagnostic test given to the incarcerated during intake. To be considered, the applicant must score a three or above. Spicer said this score, however, is not a "hard line."

She also takes into consideration that, at the time of testing, the applicant may not have been truthful about their drug use.

She said some applicants may have been embarrassed and didn't answer questions honestly. Spicer will reevaluate the individual's situation to determine whether they can enter the program.

Other criteria that can be used to determine eligibility are a positive drug screen, court-ordered participation, or referral from staff or an officer. One hard line is that the applicant must have a substance abuse disorder and take a two-week assessment.

This program lasts from six months to a year. The deciding factors on whether someone is there longer than six months are whether they would benefit from more treatment and whether their remaining would benefit the community.

What does Spicer want to see these women walk away with, besides a certificate and the feeling of completion? "Confidence, self-esteem, and healthy boundaries," she replied. "If they have these three things, they will be unstoppable." *NCPNT*

WESTERN IN BLOOM: HORTICULTURE CULTIVATES POSITIVITY

By KC JOHNSON

SUMMER IS HERE, AND THE GROUNDS OF Western Correctional Center for Women are in full bloom. While walking the compound, individuals enjoy vibrant showers of color from bright purple verbena to blazing marigolds to fiery Mexican sunflowers.

Thanks to students (past and present) in the horticulture program, Western boasts an ecologically diverse landscape. Between the flowering gardens, the stunning view of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and various wildlife, people could almost forget they are in a prison.

This highly desired course is offered through AB Tech and accepts only 10 to 14 dedicated students each semester. The instructor, Sara de Fosset, also runs her own business and works internationally. She is adored by all for her relatable nature and vast experience.

The students come from a variety of backgrounds, and each has a personal motivation for participating. Sonia S. said, “[The program] makes me feel connected to the Earth, like a normal person, doing something that matters.”

Despite challenges, such as security restrictions, time limitations, and shortage of resources, the women persevere through creativity and determination.

BEAUTIFICATION

This semester started off with a landscaping project around the administration building. Where a large, wild bed once grew now rests a structured garden with a stone path winding through. New additions include iris, passionflower, mint, and various ground-covers.

“I can’t believe it’s the same place,” passersby commented.

Completing the pathway took eight full days and involved a multitude of tasks: cleaning debris, taking measurements, designing, pouring sand, and setting individual stones.

“I’ve never worked this hard on anything,” said Billy C.

The pride of a job well done was unmistakable.

Horticulture is not an end in itself, but a means for people to discover who they are,

without judgment or conflict.

Rehabilitation includes learning skills, developing character, and making goals. But this only happens with guidance, opportunity, and the freedom to explore.

Over the semester, de Fosset incorporates various projects that require ingenuity and teamwork.

Delia F. said the program offers her “a small bit of therapy in a concrete jungle. It helps me have hope for the future, dreams.”

DAILY TOIL

During the summer, most days begin around 8 a.m., with students checking out tools and planning the day. Most students find even the most tedious tasks therapeutic, as they value the solitude the work provides.

“I could do this all day,” said Veronica S. “I just love being out here in nature. It gets my mind off things.”

In the afternoon, class goes indoors, where de Fosset stresses the importance of different types of learning and real-world applications. She covers such topics as sustainability, ecology, agriculture, and landscape design, always with a focus on employment.

“I want everyone to know, this work is absolutely attainable for anyone in here,” says de Fosset.

The incarcerated need to hear this message. Few are aware of the numerous opportunities, which may not be mainstream but are felicitous for those with felonies. A conviction is not the end of a dream job.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Programs like horticulture offer more than just a certification or time-credit. They can be lifelines, keeping a person engaged and hopeful. At a time when life feels out of control and everyone is against them, working with the Earth is restorative and healing.

A prior student, Ruth K., noted, “God

had a ball when He created the world.”

Additionally, participants develop valuable life skills such as professionalism and accountability, which build self-confidence for post-release success. Kendra A. said being in horticulture “makes me feel I’m doing something productive.”

Yet, programs like horticulture are vastly under resourced, and often donations are needed to supplement supplies. Occasionally, the staff brings plants or seeds to propagate for a greater variety, but there is always a need for more.

Delia F. said, “Ms. de Fosset does a lot with what we have, but I wish we were granted more access to do more for the [prison] community.”

MONARCH HIGHWAY

Western is now honored to be a detour on The Great Monarch Migration.

Recently, Jacqueline Bilello, the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction’s Sustainable Land Use Program manager, donated numerous flowering plants, which attract the monarchs, giving them a place to stop and refuel for their long journey to Mexico.

Projects such as these keep those inside involved with the outside world.

Despite living in captivity, the women of Western take pride in their flourishing campus.

Amid the noise and chaos, insecurities, and uncertainty, horticulture offers a sense of peace, a time to draw energy from the Earth. The plants do not care who we are or what we did, only that we nurture them. In return, they will bless us with the gift of life. **NCPNT**



LOCK UP YOUR FINANCES OR GET LOCKED UP BY THEM

By JOE MUTTER

MONEY, FINANCE, INVESTING, BUDGETS, debt, credit. For many people, these words bring as much anxiety as a trip to the dentist (not meant to offend any dentists). Some people struggle through money matters like a patient getting a root canal. Others just brush away the importance of understanding “money stuff,” saying, “So what? None of this is relevant to my life. I make minimum wage.” Or, “I’m in prison, so this really doesn’t apply to me.” But understanding finance is essential, and it doesn’t have to be painful.

Mining through the complex financial terms and principles can make people want to pull out their own teeth, which makes the option to simply ignore the topic seem appealing. But practically anyone can understand the basics of personal finance. And ignoring personal finance allows someone else to take control of your financial future. If you don’t take care of your money, someone else will.

So, your NCPNT financial advisor is here to help you take control of your financial future by empowering you with the knowledge to succeed in the wild jungle of finance. Why should you heed my advice? I have a degree in finance and over thirty years of experience as a stock broker, financial analyst, and financial advisor. I’ve witnessed plenty of good and bad habits, their consequences, and learned from decades of experience. My goal with this series is to harness that knowledge and share it, allowing readers to sidestep financial pitfalls and practice the good money habits needed for financial success.

This series on personal finance will begin with a definition of financial literacy, then cover the specific areas involved, including the role of banking with emphasis on checking and savings accounts, credit and cash, budgeting, savings, retirement planning, and general information on invest-

ments.

Financial literacy means having a basic understanding of financial issues and the skills to manage financial resources effectively. You don’t need an MBA to understand or benefit from finance. Having just a basic understanding benefits your wallet and saves you from regret.

Finance has several facets: budgeting, major and minor purchases, savings, debt, investing, and retirement planning. Financial issues surround us every day, from buying

the money may think money management is only for the future, but practicing these habits now can enable post-release success. One way to take control of your financial future in an incarcerated context is setting aside a portion of your money gained from work, side hustles, or from outside sources.

Picture Harry and Lloyd, both of whom work in a Correction Enterprises plant, where they make \$20 each week, and have a release date 10 years away. Harry spends all that money each week, rationalizing that he doesn’t make enough to save any. Lloyd decides to set aside \$5 each week, a mere 25%. He saves \$260 per year, which adds up to \$2,600 after 10 years. Even if done for just five years, the savings would be \$1,300. While that may not seem like much money, it creates a much better situation for the person entering the world with only a \$40 check.

Harry gets out of prison with no money saved up and no understanding of financial matters. He struggles to get started and returns to prison within a year. Lloyd leaves prison with \$2,600 and a financial literacy foundation. He has enough to pay rent or make a down payment on a car. He gets a job and continues to save money, buying a house after five years. He builds a successful life, able to help his family along the way. “So, you’re telling me there’s a

chance” to be Lloyd instead of Harry? Absolutely!

Having even a basic understanding of finance can greatly increase a person’s ability to succeed. The habit of saving money, even the tiniest amount, will translate into bigger and more important habits down the road. And saving is just one part of financial literacy. The knowledge gained through this series will allow a person to empower themselves and take control of their financial future. I hope these articles create a pathway to success. *NCPNT*



LLOYD LIVING THE GOOD LIFE WHILE HARRY JUST WANTS A RIDE

necessities, such as that first cup of coffee in the morning, to major purchases, like a home. Knowledge of the topic empowers us to help ourselves and our loved ones, and it creates the opportunity to help those who find themselves in a less fortunate position.

People in prison often ask, “My family puts money on my books, so how is this going to help me?” As the maxim declares, “Reentry success begins on day one.” Habits made in prison today will be habits retained outside of prison tomorrow.

Similarly, incarcerated people with lit-

SO, YA WANNA BE IN THE MUSIC BIZ?



By Kwame Teague

THE MUSIC BUSINESS HAS ALWAYS BEEN a dog eat dog, cut-throat type of industry. From record execs to producers, and from distributors to show promoters, they've all figured out ways to rob the naive artist blind. So, I've put together a short guide gathered from my personal experience and research to help you avoid the pitfalls and navigate the trenches.

SHOULD I GET IT IN WRITING?

Just because you can make music with someone doesn't mean you can do business with them, as well. I don't care if it's your twin brother, put all agreements in writing. Money changes people.

DO I NEED A MANAGER?

Experienced managers are important members of any team. Their job consists of booking performances, negotiating potential branding deals, and developing a career plan. Their commission is usually 15%.

WHAT IS AN ENTERTAINMENT LAWYER?

Entertainment lawyers are, in a word, indispensable. The best ones are often well-connected, so they can help facilitate deals that would take you years to develop. Finding a good entertainment lawyer is often the difference between success and failure. They are expensive, between \$200-\$400 an hour. But one multi-million-dollar deal makes it all worthwhile. You can be your own manager, but you cannot be your own entertainment lawyer.

WHAT IS A PUBLICIST?

A publicist will take your most trivial achievement and make it newsworthy. If they're really good, they'll make it go viral (i.e. Local Rapper Adopts Dog.) A publicist's relationship is with the media. They are the ones who can get you on *The Breakfast Club* without paying the \$5,000 interview charge. Publicists can charge as much as \$10,000 a month. But for someone just starting out, hit up LinkedIn and shop around.

WHAT IS A COPYRIGHT?

A copyright validates you as the owner of your song, except in the case where

you write the song for someone else. In this case, the other artist can register the song as a Work-For-Hire, and they are the legal owner. Most people think you have to register your song with the Library of Congress for an official copyright. Not true. All that is required to copyright your song is that it is "original and fixed." Original means the song is original to the owner and is not copied from another source. Fixed means the song exists in some tangible form (i.e. sheet music, tape-recording, file on your computer, or the "poor man's" copyright of mailing



So, you really wanna be in show business, and you think that you got what it takes. Well, you really gotta rap to be all that, and prepare yourself for the breaks.

—Q-TIP A Tribe Called Quest
"Show Business"

it back to yourself.) It is not fixed if you rap it in your yard and someone else fixes it on their phone.

There are benefits to registering your song, one of which concerns infringement lawsuits. Infringement lawsuits are primarily used to obtain court injunctions to stop the infringement and sue for statutory damages. Registering a lawsuit can take place up to one month after learning about the infringement.

To copyright your song, go to www.copyright.gov. (\$45 if you file electronically, \$125 for paper applications)

Song titles, like book and movie titles, aren't protected by copyrights.

HOW CAN I OWN MY PUBLISHING?

Start a music publishing company. It costs less than \$100 and begins with filing a fictitious business statement at the county clerk's office. Register your company with either BMI or ASCAP (www.BMI.com or www.ASCAP.com), pay your one-time \$250 publisher's fee.

HOW DO I GET PAID?

Federal law establishes a uniform mechanical royalty at 9.1 cents per copy or 1.75 cents per minute. This applies to the pressing of CDs, albums, and cassettes, as well as streaming mechanicals like Spotify and Apple Music. On average the streamers pay about \$0.005 cents, or half a penny, per play. So, it will take 32,000 plays to earn \$160 (at this rate, you'll need 200 million streams to make your first million dollars.)

There are two PROs (Performance Rights Organizations) you can use to track your mechanical and performance royalties: BMI and ASCAP (SESAC, a smaller PRO, is only for songwriters). Mechanical royalties are paid every time your song is played or reproduced.

HOW DO I GET HEARD?

Getting your music into movies, TV shows, or video games is extremely difficult, but not impossible. There are several ways to go about it. One of the most accessible is by going through online licensing companies, such as Taxi.com, Sonicbids.com, Broadjam.com, or Rumblefish.com. BEWARE: These services charge hefty fees to sign up and shop your song for licensing. Weigh this with the fact that licensing fees for usage in a major motion picture start around \$5,000 and rarely exceed \$25,000.

If you need any contracts or legal updates, go to Nolo.com.

The good news is the internet has democratized the music business, giving the average individual sitting in their bedroom a chance to be their own Slim Shady, Dr. Dre, and Jimmy Iovine, all in one. The bad news? The internet has democratized the music business giving the average ... you get the point.

What makes you stand out in the crowd? Becoming a recording artist is a lot like the formation of a diamond from carbon. It takes an extraordinary amount of time, pressure, and heat to complete the transformation. But if you lose focus, or the pressure breaks you, then you'll only be fuel for the fire.

So, again, I ask you ... do you really want to be in the music business? **NCPNT**

Sports Feature



BILL BELICHICK TACKLES THE HALF-FAN PROBLEM

BY TONY JOHNSON

IN EVERY NORTH CAROLINA PRISON, THE sports community has a problem—a half-fan problem. A half-fan is a person (a person, not a fan, because I can't bring myself to call them that) who pulls for one college in one sport, like basketball, and a different college in another sport, like football. These some-time half-fans are over-running North Carolina prisons and are a serious problem to the integrity of the sports community. But don't worry. The University of the North Carolina has the solution to the problem: Bill Belichick.

The word "fan" is short for fanatic and comes from the Latin word *fanaticus*. According to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, a fanatic is "a person filled with excessive and single-minded zeal." A college sports fan has unbridled passion for a single college. They are all in, ride or die, in every sport, through the wins and losses.

Someone can't be a fanatic for two different college teams, when those two teams compete against each other. It's like rallying for both Donald Trump and Kamala Harris

to win the presidential election. Despite the complicated rooting interests of a half-fan, his or her problem is simple—a half-fan is a bandwagon fan. For example, a half-fan might pull for two traditional powerhouse teams in their respective sport, like Alabama or Texas in football and dook (the "correct" spelling) or UNC in basketball.

If you think you're dealing with an unloyal half-fan, check his or her professional sports teams. They usually pull for flashy teams that consistently compete for and win championships, like the Lakers and the Yankees. Okay, maybe not the Yankees anymore. When was the last time they won a World Series? Many half-fans were Patriots fans during the Tom Brady era but have now moved onto greener pastures, like the Chiefs.

As a real Tar Heel fan (you can check my half-sleeve of UNC tattoos), I pull for them in every sport, not just basketball. I can openly admit Carolina has a legit half-fan problem. During basketball season UNC is must-see TV, but when football season rolls

around, it's all SEC. Hey, I get it. Carolina hasn't won an ACC football championship since 1980. That's 45 long football seasons.

Thankfully, Belichick is here to fix the half-fan problem. Soon, Carolina basketball fans will have a reason to be Carolina football fans, too. Belichick will win, making UNC relevant on the national college football landscape. He probably won't win a national championship, but if he stays in Chapel Hill long enough, he'll have the Tar Heels consistently competing for an ACC Championship and a College Football Playoff (CFP) spot.

Winning in college football is mostly about two things: the head coach and talent. First, let's focus on the head coach. In the last few years, former UNC coach Mack Brown was often outcoached. He could never get the defense to perform, despite having talented players. Timeout mishaps became a common occurrence, often leaving Brown looking just as confused as the young signal-callers he was supposed to be managing. And his teams' post-season per-

formance was a joke. They won one bowl game, lost by one point in another, but were run off the field in the rest, going 1-5. As a diehard fan, I love Coach Brown, but his teams failed to walk the talk in between the chalk lines.

Belichick is a huge upgrade over Brown. He is the GOAT. His eight Super Bowls—six as a head coach and two as an assistant—prove it. He used to coach circles around the best coaches in the NFL. Now, he gets to stand on the sideline across from the mediocre coaches of the ACC (not including Dabo). Comparing Belichick to Brown is like comparing a Bobo Chili Cheeseburger from Al's Burger Shack on Franklin Street, which won Travelocity's best burger in America, to a McDonald's hamburger.

Second, UNC had ample talent under Brown, especially at the sport's most important position, quarterback, with Sam Howell and Drake Maye. The state of North Carolina is a hotbed for high school talent. Both Howell and Maye are from North Carolina and play in the NFL. However, in-state recruits have not consistently seen local colleges as a legitimate option where they can compete for championships and prepare for the NFL.

Belichick has an opportunity to change that perception. Talent is coming to "Chapel Bill," formerly Chapel Hill. Players are attracted to his and his coaching staff's NFL experience and reputation for getting the most out of players.

In an ESPN article by Eli Lederman, ESPN's 2025 #5 dual-threat quarterback Bryce Baker said, "Their experience in the NFL is huge. They've been on a level that I'm trying to get to. I feel like that separates them from a lot of other schools."

And Baker is not the only recruit to buy into Belichick's NFL approach. UNC currently has the 18th-ranked 2026 football recruiting class, according to ESPN. The Carolina staff is not just selling that the Tar Heels will be the NFL's 33rd team, they are connecting with players on their level. Belichick recruited five-time award-winning rapper Lil' Wayne to attend a spring practice session on April 5. Belichick has even joined social media, making his first post, "Beat Duke."

UNC has the head coach and will get the talent, but the question is: Will Belichick win football games? The past often reveals



the future. Let's take a look.

How many points per game difference would Belichick have made over the last six years, Brown's tenure from 2019 to 2024? Seven points per game is a modest estimate. Assessing Belichick as a seven-point improvement, UNC would have had a 10-win season four out of six years.

Estimating Belichick as an eight-point differential, the other two seasons would have reached nine wins, and the Tar Heels would have had an undefeated season in '19 and only one loss in '22. A 10-win season would usually send UNC to the ACC title

game, with an automatic bid to the CFP on the line.

Belichick will win at UNC. The Chapel Bill era gives all you half-fans a chance to change your ways. This is your chance at redemption. You can become a real, true-blue Tar Heel fan. But you must quickly choose your seat on the Victory Bell. Soon, the winning will begin, and dayrooms across the state will fill up fast with half-fans becoming ride-or-die Carolina fanatics.

All fans and former half-fans are welcome to join the Carolina family ... except dook fans! *NCPNT*

THE UNREAD LIFE: A JUVENILE LIFER'S JOURNEY TO HIGHER EDUCATION

KYLE TRIPPLETT & LUCAS RASH

IT IS NOT EVERY DAY THAT A CONVICTED murderer casually walks into a prison through the front door. But on March 13, 2025, Joey Davidson strolled into Foothills Correctional Institutional in Morganton, where 26 juveniles gathered to hear the former juvenile lifer talk about his journey to higher education.

At the age of 14, Davidson began his journey when he was arrested on a first-degree murder charge. He entered the California prison system after being sentenced to life in prison at the age of 17. Twenty grueling years of incarceration later, he was granted clemency by the governor of California.

Davidson utilized his years of incarceration productively, which led to his release from prison and allowed him to reenter society with the tools he needed to succeed. He now serves as a representative of Joe Gibbs' Game Plan For Life and as a deployment coordinator for the North Carolina Field Minister Program.

Juveniles can be a tough crowd, so naturally Davidson was first met with skepticism. But as he shared his story of being a juvenile lifer, the 26 juveniles seemed to be thoroughly engaged. Davidson's prison experience gave him credibility and respect among the juveniles. His goal was to encourage the young men to pursue educational opportunities while incarcerated.

For the next hour, Davidson spoke about three freedoms every incarcerated individual can experience: the freedoms to learn, change, and grow.

The freedom to learn is the initial step. Like every juvenile gathered, Davidson faced the challenge of whether to conform to the prison lifestyle or choose a different path. From day one, Davidson chose education over the typical prison experience of gang life and drug use. He dedicated himself to a life of learning and non-violence. Davidson said, "Education teaches you emotional control, critical thinking, and better communication."

While incarcerated, Davidson earned more than 100 self-help certificates, a two-year alcohol and drug treatment certificate, and graduated from the Urban Ministry Institute, a prison-based seminary. Currently, Davidson is pursuing a Ph.D. from South-

eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest. Equipped with the right mindset, the freedom to learn always leads to change.

The freedom to change is a choice unrestricted by steel bars and concrete walls. Davidson's transformation began when he dedicated his life to Christ while awaiting trial in the county jail. His faith helped him commit to a life of change and the pursuit of education. Davidson encouraged the juveniles to do likewise by taking all the steps necessary to embrace a new identity geared toward success and earn an education.

The freedom to grow depends on a person's ability to learn and change. Growth requires commitment and perseverance to navigate the obstacles of pursuing an education while incarcerated. Davidson said that by committing to growth, a person will be able "to navigate prison successfully."

Then, he explained the value of the three freedoms, stating, "How we use these three freedoms will ultimately determine how we use physical freedom." An education will help a person transition from navigating prison to living outside the walls.

Juveniles sentenced as adults have the highest rate of recidivism. The recidivism rate for juveniles is almost 33 percent higher than that of adults. The Foothills educational department believes education is the key to addressing this problem.

Dr. Steve Moody, the assistant principal of the Foothills educational department, who attended the presentation, said, "Mr. Davidson is an excellent example of a student making good choices and positive changes that [the teachers at Foothills] seek to encourage among their students each day."

Ms. Cook, a teacher at Foothills, remarked, "Davidson's story served as a testament to the fact that change is possible, inspiring the youth offenders to take control of their paths and invest in their growth."



Davidson instilled hope in many of these young men, who are just beginning lengthy sentences. One of them asked Davidson, "How did you survive your time in prison?" After a moment, Davidson replied, "You survive prison one day at a time. Survive today, and pursue the opportunities that God gives you."

Davidson delivered two challenges to the young men: First, "if you really want to change, surround yourself with men who you want to be like in 10 years." He wanted them to understand that people adopt the qualities of those they're around. Being around people who are determined to learn, change, and grow will help an individual adopt the same determination.

The second challenge came in the form of an analogy between being either a rock or water. A rock stands firm and makes the right choice independent of circumstances. Water just goes with the flow of circumstances, which is comparable to going with the flow of prison life.

Davidson's talk and challenges must have resonated with the juveniles. A few days after Davidson walked out the door, Dr. Moody overheard a breakeime discussion between the juveniles. Instead of discussing who had the best basketball game or who was the best rapper, they were talking about the kind of man they aspire to be—a rock, like Davidson. *NCPNT*

MY FREEDOM SONG

Music has given
me freedom and
helped me maintain
my humanity.



By ZACHARY OAKS

PRISON, AS IT IS INTENDED, STRIPS PEOPLE of what makes them feel human. We lose not only some obvious important rights as individuals, but also the not so obvious freedoms that we don't notice until they're gone, such as freedom to choose a career or engage in a hobby. These passions make us who we are. They make us unique individuals.

Before prison, my career and hobby fused in my passion for music.

For as long as I can remember, music has been a major part of my life. I grew up in church, where my family and friends sang, which inspired my love of music. My parents tell me stories about me actually having rhythm before I could even walk. Like many toddlers, I beat on pots and pans like a drum set, but I did it with the rhythm of a trained drummer.

So, quite naturally, the drums were my first love, then came piano and organ. I learned to play, not from formal lessons, but by watching and listening. Any time we were at church, my parents knew they could find me near the instruments with wide eyes fixated on the musicians as they played.

As the years passed, I played and practiced whenever I could, until I was actually good enough to play during church services. Traditional Black church services can last for a while, with plenty of singing and shouting, so I had to get good fast and had to get used to playing for hours without much of a break. Playing the drums and keys for hours required immense work and energy,

but it was totally worth it.

Music has an incredible power to help people feel free and fully human. Through 16 years in prison, music has done this for me. And playing music has allowed me to help others feel this freedom.

I've been to several prison compounds, and at every one I've had the chance to play an instrument in some capacity. I've played an old organ, an upright piano, several keyboards, a few drum sets, and even an acoustic guitar. Whenever I'm playing an instrument, I feel free.

I enjoy any chance to play, but playing with someone else who has put in the work to sound good is the most fun. It's like a well-oiled machine that is operating on all cylinders. Anyone can jump on an instrument and make some noise, noise that may sound good, but musicians work together to make music that reaches into people and frees them.

I've had the chance to experience this kind of fun with some musicians at a couple of compounds, but I've had the most fun at Nash Correctional. I play in the choir and have played for several annual events, including the talent show, revival services, and the Black History Month program.

I got the opportunity to play in the house band at the talent show for participants who wanted live music. To our delightful satisfaction, most participants wanted live music. Thanks to case managers who showed up before and after work, we had hours and hours to rehearse, the most practice time I've had while in prison.

Rehearsals are very important, because it creates chemistry between the band members and performers, like practice does for a basketball team and their coach. Personally, I am a stickler for practice, because I want to sound good. For a musician, sounding good equals fun. At show time, we had fun because we sounded good as a result of all those hours rehearsing.

At that and other events, the spectators get to see the joy on our faces as we play and sing, joy that reveals the freedom we feel while playing. After each event, we have to come back to Earth and reality. We have to exit the freedom of music and reenter the captivity of prison.

Between events, I will always have those "freedom memories" to reminisce on, and I can look forward to the next jam session.

Although more rehabilitation opportunities are being created and key prison reform legislation being introduced, the majority of the prison population spends a lot of time locked behind closed doors.

There are ways incarcerated individuals can free themselves without risking an escape charge. I'm discussing a spiritual, emotional, and mental freedom that cannot be contained by physical barriers. Music has given me this kind of freedom and helped me maintain my sense of humanity.

I believe everyone can find a passion that liberates them. Others find it through art, writing, or learning. Every time my spirit rises through music, I'll be hoping others in prison are finding their freedom song.

NCPNT

Something *Wicked* To the Tablet Comes

BY ANDREW HODGE

OKAY, I'LL ADMIT IT. I'VE BEEN A FAN of musicals for as long as I can remember. Growing up on Disney movies got me in the habit of expecting every character to break into song at least once during the film. So, when *Wicked* appeared on the \$8 Gold Movie app on the tablet, I was instantly curious. I had heard about all the award nominations and soaring reviews it received. I decided to scoot on down the yellow brick road and see what *Wicked* had in store. And boy was it worth it.

Within the first 30-40 minutes, I knew I had made the right decision. Each character was meticulously cast, each song lovingly performed, and each scene engaging. The catchy tunes and precise choreography were matched by the soaring vocals performed by Cynthia Erivo as Elphaba (aka The Wicked Witch of the West) and Ariana Grande as Galinda (the "Ga" is silent).

The main protagonist, Elphaba, is conceived in secrecy and promiscuity. When her mother gives birth, both parents are horrified at her green skin. We immediately see that she has magical powers, but she lacks the ability to control them. She is persecuted and ostracized as she grows. Even her parents despise her.

But we also see her character shine through in the relationship she has with

her younger sister, Nessa, who is bound to a wheelchair. When Nessa is old enough, Elphaba is charged with helping her sister get settled into Shiz, the Wizard school in Oz. Due to an emotional outburst that results in a display of her powers, Elphaba is invited by the school's foremost sorcery teacher to stay and learn how to better control her magic.

With her enrollment comes the promise of maybe one day meeting the great wizard himself. But there's a minor problem. In order to stay at the school, she has to live with Galinda, the pretentious snob who assumes the world revolves around her. Galinda is everything that Elphaba is not: pretty, popular, and (in her own mind) perfect. As their personalities clash, hilarity ensues. Yet, they gain perspective about each other that forever changes them both.

Besides the moving songs and performances by these great actors and singers, other things resonated with me, especially as someone who is incarcerated. Elphaba's struggle for acceptance begins literally from the time of her birth, which only gets worse as she grows up. When we see Elphaba as an adult, she feels the need to explain her appearance to everyone she meets. She has grown accustomed to people being appalled by her green skin. She had to learn to be

tough just to get through life.

A certain stigma stains people who come to prison. Despite this stigma, many, like Elphaba, have a good heart and can be a friend if given the chance. Many incarcerated individuals feel the need to act hard or keep others distant to survive the environment. But some of us long for someone to get to know us, so we can show that we are more than our appearance, social status, or criminal history.

It's easy to relate to a story about someone who feels rejected by society when prison, by its very nature, is designed to isolate and punish the incarcerated. But for those willing to try, they may discover that they have power surging through them. And with that power comes great potential for change.

With moving songs, passionate performances, and relatable characters, this movie is a must-see for anyone who enjoys a good story and some catchy toe-tapping songs. It is a love letter to both the Broadway play and musicals in general. But even if you're a novice in the land of Oz, you can still appreciate the story, characters, and songs. If you're like me and can admit to enjoying a good musical, then rent *Wicked*. You won't regret it.

I give it 5 out of 5 flying monkeys.
NCPNT

ICED PEPPERMINT MOCHA—A PROPER TREAT ANYTIME OF YEAR

BY STEVEN BLUE

IDON'T REMEMBER HOW OLD I WAS WHEN I DRANK my first cup of coffee, but I do remember it tasted like burnt waffles. After that, I avoided the siren call of java until 2005, when I got a job working in a café. There I learned about the complexity and nuances of coffee.

To my surprise, where the beans grow, the roasting time, and the water quality all affect how the finished cup tastes. I gained an appreciation for coffee that stands to this day. A good cup of coffee can make a bad day a little smoother.

My favorite part of the job was watching the customer take that first sip, when the deliciousness forced a pause as the coffee worked its magic. The aroma and flavor of roasted coffee beans rejuvenated the mind, providing a pau to the morning struggle.

A barista's job is more than making drinks. The job also focuses on customer engagement in small bursts of time. While all orders require speed, it doesn't take much time to engage with customers. These gaps of time are where worries get dissolved, humor shared, and encouragement delivered. In the moments between steaming milk for lattes and pulling shots of espresso, an opportunity exists for connection. I tended to ask my clients random, unassuming questions to break their tension and start conversations.

My favorite job posting was at a university, where I engaged with students who were stressing out over their exams. My light questions helped break their cycle of self-doubt, reminding them to relax for a moment.

Unfortunately, the coffee we get in prison is terrible, at least from a coffee snob's perspective. We don't get to choose from locally sourced beans or a variety of roasts. During my time at Scotland, I got into the habit of breaking up Fireball cinnamon candies to flavor my coffees. At some camps, no flavor options exist. Cream and sugar are luxuries that only a few can afford, if they're available at all.

Transferring to medium custody, I continued the same habit—until someone challenged me to come up with something new. A coworker told me about the various flavors he made, planting a seed of inspiration. I called upon my memories of café menus and decided to start with a classic: an ice-cold peppermint mocha.

I chose this drink because it's timeless. People associate peppermint with the holidays, but it's also perfect for summer, when the chill of peppermint helps cool things down. Of course, witnessing someone take that first sip continues to put a smile on my face. You know the coffee is good when your pinkie points away from the cup all on its own. *NCPNT*



INGREDIENTS:

- 1 TBSP INSTANT COFFEE
- 4 PACKS ARTIFICIAL SWEETENER, OR 2 TBSP GRANULATED SUGAR
- 1 HOT COCOA
- 3 HARD PEPPERMINT CANDIES
- 2-8OZ. CARTONS OF MILK
- HOT WATER
- ICE

ESSENTIALS:

- 1-8OZ. FOAM CUP W/LID
- 1 EMPTY 20OZ. BOTTLE (A POWERADE OR WIDE-MOUTH BOTTLE IS BEST)
- 1 PLASTIC SPOON

DIRECTIONS:

1. **BREAK UP THE PEPPERMINT CANDY EITHER BY THROWING THEM AGAINST A CLEANISH FLOOR OR CRUSHING THEM WITH YOUR BOOT HEEL. IT WOULD BE A GOOD IDEA TO KEEP THE CANDY IN ITS WRAPPER. DIRT DOES NOT ADD ANY FLAVOR.**
2. **POUR THE DRY INGREDIENTS AND PEPPERMINT PIECES IN THE FOAM CUP. ADD HOT WATER UNTIL IT COVERS THE INGREDIENTS. THOROUGHLY MIX, THEN COVER WITH A LID AND LET SIT, STIRRING OCCASIONALLY TO KEEP IT FROM CLUMPING.**
3. **POUR THE ICE IN THE 20OZ. PLASTIC BOTTLE. ADD THE CANDY MIXTURE AND BOTH CARTONS OF MILK.**
4. **ENJOY!**

Note: This recipe works with most candies. Chocolate works well with black cherry, blue raspberry, cherry, and strawberry. Charm Pops also work well. When using a Charm Pop, follow the directions above, and then use the Charm Pop to mix the ingredients together until the Charm Pop melts down, but make sure the gum in the center doesn't mix into the drink.

NCDAC CONSTRUCTION APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM BUILDS FUTURES

Are you good with your hands? Do you want a good paying job that helps nail your future? The Construction Apprenticeship Program (CAP) teaches the construction trades and skills that could lead to good paying jobs in the public and private sector or possibly even running your own business upon release.

THE TRADES YOU COULD BE TRAINED IN:

- Concrete Finishing
- Masonry
- Carpentry
- Welding
- Sheetrock Finishing
- Plumbing
- Duct Fabrication
- Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC)
- Electrical
- Electronics

We are looking for incarcerated persons who want to learn, expand their current knowledge, and establish a solid foundation for a real skill that can be used after release. You could be paid to work on government buildings and renovations across the state. To find out how you may apply to get involved in the apprenticeship program, see your case manager for a CAP application or following the link for a fillable form.

Trustworthy, energized, and collaborative individuals will even qualify for Temporary Solutions contract positions with NCDAC Support Services upon their reentry back into society!

BRAILLE TRANSCRIPTION SERVICES PLANT – BRAILLE OPERATOR I, II, III AT NCCIW

SALARY BASED ON D30001 \$0.26, D30002 \$0.31, D30003 \$0.36 HOURLY SALARY

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities /Competencies: UEB Literary Braille Certification (LOC), Textbook Formatting Print-to-Braille Certification (NBA), Mathematics Nemeth/Science Braille Certification, Music Certification, CNIB UEB Technical Proficiency, Literary Braille Proofreading, Mathematics Braille Proofreading

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities Recommended in this position: Knowledge of computer keyboarding, translation software, Microsoft Office Suite, quality control and safety practices.

Minimum Education and Experience Requirements: Must have a strong reading, math or equivalent combination of educational training and experience. HS diploma or GED required; U.S. Citizenship to be enrolled in certification courses.

Potential career opportunities that may be obtained with Enterprise Braille Operator experience: braille transcriptionist, proofreader, tactile graphic designer, graphics art designer, database population, braille quality control specialist, braille writer repair person

SEWING PLANT –ENTERPRISE LABORER AT SCOTLAND CI

SALARY BASED ON D11028 \$0.26, D11029 \$0.31 D11030 \$0.36 HOURLY SALARY

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities Recommended in this position: Knowledge of mechanical trades, inventory control, forklift operation, quality control, minimum computer skill, sewing machine safety and OSHA Safety practices.

Minimum Education and Experience Requirements: High school diploma or GED are not required; however, they are preferred.

Potential career opportunities that may be obtained with Enterprise Laborer experience: machine operator, warehouse clerk, quality control, forklift operator, maintenance mechanic



Not Just Making It Right. Making It Better.

WOODWORKING PLANT, ALEXANDER CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION, TAYLORSVILLE

Both of the following positions require the following: strong work ethic, communication skills, respect for others.

COUNTERTOP FABRICATOR

Responsibilities include:

- Cutting and fabricating all things laminate and solid surface to be used for desk and countertops
- Inspecting materials for defects and imperfections
- Fabricate material according to specifications
- Maintain safe work environment
- Cut materials into desired pieces using various power and hand tools
- Ability to read and interpret blueprints
- Good math skills
- Accurately take measurements and apply them to products
- Knowledge of the fabrication process for laminate and solid surface materials
- Demonstrates attention to detail

Minimum Education and Experience Requirements

- Strong reading, math, or equivalent combination of educational training and experience. NOTE: GED or HS diploma NOT required but is preferred.

Potential career opportunities that may be obtained with woodworking experience:

- Countertop Fabricator/Solid Surface Fabricator/Laminate Cabinet Fabrication



CABINET MAKER

- This position is responsible for having the following strong attributes: The cabinet maker builds commercial wooden office furniture, cabinets and countertops using a variety of wood, laminate, and other products. Cabinet makers read drawings and interpret specifications and prepare layouts. They also set up and operate woodworking equipment, both power and computerized to machine wood products and other materials. They use various hand and power tools to prepare for building, sanding and finishing furniture.

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities Recommended in this Position

- Knowledge of any type of machining tools, hand or power
- Ability to read a tape measure
- Good hand eye coordination for machining and sanding while maintaining a safe work environment
- Understanding of blueprints used in cabinet building

Minimum Education and Experience Requirements

- Must have strong reading and math or equivalent combination of educational training and experience. NOTE: GED or HS diploma NOT required but is preferred.

Potential career opportunities that maybe obtain with Woodworking experience

- Furniture Builder/Cabinet Maker/Cabinet Installer/Custom Home Furniture