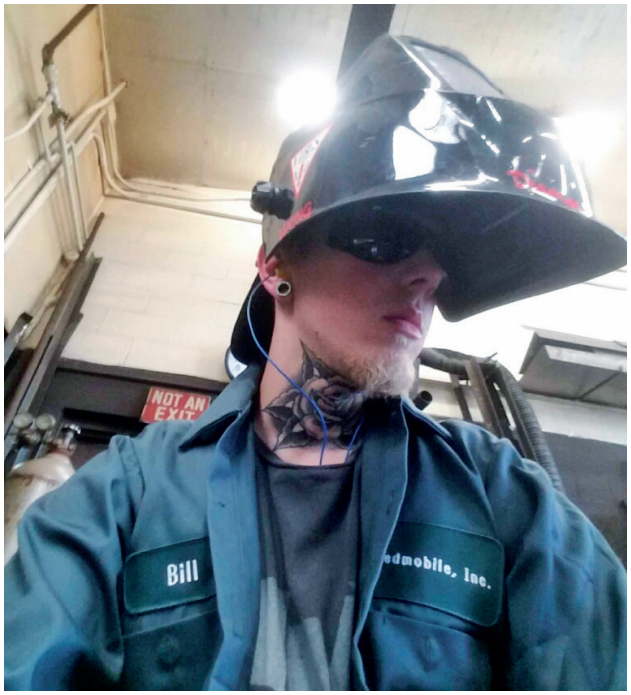
IMPROVED
REENTRY EDUCATION

VOICES OF REENTRY *Thinking Long Term*

Voices of Reentry is a series of profiles of people making good on second chances after they return from incarceration. Articles in the series tell individual stories to highlight the impact of programs funded under federal Improved Reentry Education grants.

William (Bill) Vaskie loves to weld. "I like everything about it," he says. "It's art, after you're done, and while you're doing it you're concentrating—taking your time. You look at what you've done and take so much pride—it's going to be there forever. I take sheets of metal and create something out of nothing." And, Bill adds, welding is not just a job—it's a career.

Bill's path to his welding career began when his parole officer sent him to the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, CareerLink. Coming off a 22-month stint in state prison, Bill (24) had been sober for three years. "I knew I didn't want to live like that anymore. When I was in prison, I had time to think about what I wanted for my life, and when I got out I was ready [to change]." The first step: a GED. CareerLink referred him to Lancaster Lebanon Intermediate Unit 13 (IU13), where he met Mary-Edith Leichliter, an Adult Basic Education teacher. Bill didn't need much instruction—he did so well on the practice test that Mary-Edith encouraged him to go ahead and take the exam, and he passed on his first try. Once he had that credential, Bill enrolled in the Welding Technology class at Lancaster County Career and Technology Center and, within weeks, the instructor recommended him for a job. Bill hasn't looked back. Bill's seemingly smooth path into school, a job, and a career was supported by the strong cooperation and deep partnerships between a large number of community-based organizations working together to make successful reentry possible.



William (Bill) Vaskie

Joe Gonzalez (21) can cite the statistics: over 70 percent of people who are incarcerated will go back to prison. But he also knows the longer you stay out of prison, the greater the chance that you won't be back.[1] Joe intends to be one of those people. He had been in and out of juvenile facilities in New York City since age 13, and he spent three years at Gowanda Correctional Facility near Buffalo, New York, where he was sent at age 17. "I'm not coming back," he told the prison 'old-timers'. After his release, Joe decided to leave New York City. Although he loves the energy and hustle of the city, he knows it's a hard place to start over, so he headed to Pennsylvania to live with his uncle. Getting permission for the move was complicated: it took about 6 months for paperwork to be processed between Albany, New York, and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. There was a home visit to his uncle in Pennsylvania, and a meeting with a new parole

Joe Gonzalez

officer. It was "a whole rigmarole," Joe concludes. His new parole office referred him to the Lancaster County Reentry Management Organization, which connected him to IU13. Joe wasn't immediately interested in getting his GED—he was focused on getting into the welding program, which his cousin had told him was a ticket into the union. Within a few weeks, Mary-Edith convinced him to go for his GED, which is also required for union entry. Mary-Edith "helped me out really well," Joe explains. "I'm pretty smart—reading, science, social science—I passed those the first time. Math was a little hard. Mary-Edith . . . taught me a way to solve problems that came up on the test a lot. I took the math a couple of times—passed on the second try." Bill Vaskie and Joe Gonzalez had different academic needs, and Mary-Edith was able to customize the support she provided to each because of IU13's Improved Reentry Education (IRE) grant funding.

FLEXIBLE SERVICES TO MEET INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Like Joe and Bill, almost a third of incarcerated people don't have a high school diploma or equivalent credential.[2] IU13's reentry education programs serve adults who need a high school equivalency credential as

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT & CRIMINAL HISTORY

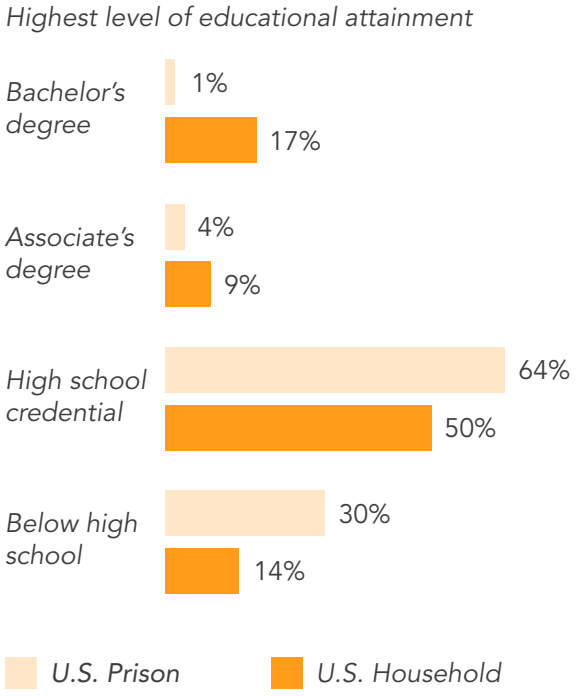
Without a high school diploma or access to postsecondary education, people with a criminal history have limited employment options and are likely to continue to commit offenses, which leads to further incarceration and reduced educational and economic opportunities.

30% of all inmates have less than a high school diploma

64% of incarcerated adults have a high-school credential

94% of returning adults cite education as their primary need for successful reentry[3]

Educational Attainment for Correctional Population vs. General Population, 2012-2014



Source: PIACC Prison Study, 2014; https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016040.pdf

a first step toward postsecondary education and access to jobs. Under the IRE grant, IU13 is able to expand the range of education and job-training services it provides to returning citizens and customize them to match individuals' needs.

Mary-Edith and her teaching partner, Wyman Fowler, have both taught Adult Basic Education classes inside the Lancaster County Prison for years. For most of their tenure, students who needed to continue taking GED/HiSET classes after their release joined classes offered in the community. Because these classes are open to all adults in the community, they run on a set schedule, and students are expected to keep up with the pace of instruction. The transition to the larger, less personalized classes taught by teachers they didn't know was difficult for reentering students, and many dropped out. The IRE grant changed that. It has enabled Mary-Edith and Wyman to offer GED/HiSET instruction outside the prison and allows for 1:1 or 1:2 instruction and a seamless transition for reentering students. This "greatly increases their ability to stick with their classes and obtain a GED/HiSET diploma," Mary-Edith explains. The grant allows Mary-Edith and Wyman to tailor their instruction to students' needs in terms of both content and schedule. Reentry is complicated, and students have multiple responsibilities to juggle. Sometimes, studying for the GED/HiSET has to go on the back burner. But when students are ready to resume, "they haven't missed anything—we can pick up right where we left off" and that's "huge for these students"—the class didn't continue in their absence, so they haven't "failed again," says Mary-Edith.

CONTINUITY: AN ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT AT IU13

Reentry is stressful, and reentering students are much more likely to come see Wyman and Mary-Edith at IU13 because they already know them. This continuity is another innovation made possible by the IRE grant. Years ago, Wyman remembers, there was no connection between the prison education system and the services available on the outside. Integrating the services means that individuals leave the prison and start receiving support services the next day; they work with people they already know, who are able to teach, connect them with needed services, and provide moral and practical support. Mary Edith calls this a "soft handoff from inside to outside," and she has no doubt that it has improved the reentry experience and made it easier for returning citizens to get the education and training they need to get and keep jobs.

IU13 provides a different kind of continuity for students transferring from a prison in another county or even another state, as both Bill and Joe did. Moving to a new place presents opportunities for a new beginning, but it also requires returning citizens to find reentry support. The IU13 staff is able to quickly build rapport with students who are new to them. They have flexible, comprehensive reentry education resources at their disposal, which they can tailor to individuals' needs, whether they were released yesterday or last year, from a jail in Lancaster County or from a prison in upstate New York.

SHORT-TERM CREDENTIALS AND IMMEDIATE ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT

Job training that leads to short-term credentials is a central focus for IU13's reentry team. "We hook them up with partners to get into forklift, welding, or [certified nursing assistant] training" as quickly as possible after release, Mary-Edith explains, because employment reduces recidivism significantly. Studies have shown that although recidivism rates range from about 31 to 70 percent in different states, when returning citizens are employed soon after their release, recidivism rates drop dramatically and range from 3.8 to 8 percent. These reductions hold true regardless of whether the returning citizen's conviction was for violent or nonviolent crimes.[4]

For most people, reentry occurs between ages 25 and 54, the prime age for labor force participation. Although over 80 percent of 25- to 54-year-olds are employed across the general population, only 33 percent of all released inmates find employment within the first year, a number that tapers off in subsequent years.[5] Without a well-paying job, returning citizens fall back on what and who they know, commit crimes, and end up back in jail, in a never-ending cycle of repeated incarceration.

For both Joe and Bill, the GED was the first credential they needed in order to get a job or get into a training program. Joe combined the GED, a Ready2Work certificate—Lancaster CareerLink's version of a career-readiness certification that documents literacy, math, and employability skills—and the short-term (5 weeks, 125

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hours) welding certificate he earned at Stevens Technical College in order to join the ironworkers' union with a cousin's help. Bill's prior experience with and interest in welding led him to enter a longer-term welding program at Lancaster County Career and Technology Center, which requires a GED. Bill will graduate with a widely recognized structural welding certification and a track record of full-time work at Morgan Brothers Metal Fabricators.

INTEGRATED SERVICES, DEDICATED STAFF

Bill and Joe each knew that obtaining a GED and welding training were essential to getting a job. But for many of the students Wyman and Mary-Edith teach, the path is less clear. Some have no idea what skills they have and what careers they might pursue after release. Others have families and other responsibilities and can't afford to go to school full time. Many continue to struggle with addiction.[6] IU13's web of support is there for each of these reentering citizens, through its connections to community-based service providers, Lancaster's Reentry Management Organization, CareerLink offices, and myriad other supports that reentering citizens need. The staffs of the various organizations know each other personally and are intimately familiar with the services their partners can provide, so they can make referrals and connect their clients to the right services quickly and efficiently. In Lancaster, the community education teachers' offices are down the hall from the reentry employment offices, and staff and teachers walk students back and forth all the time. In Lebanon, a smaller county, the systems continue to develop, but the model is the same, and the IRE grant has helped move the county's reentry services forward quickly.

Dedicated staff is the glue holding this web of connections together. IU13's Christina Davis and Trish Link have both taught in prisons for decades. Trish began her career teaching at the SCIC- State Correctional Institution at Camp Hill over 30 years ago. Christina began teaching Adult Basic Education at a prison in 1992. She retired in June 2017 from her job as adult education supervisor for IU13. Reentry work was a calling for Christina—"I believe in second chances," she says. "I've had many second chances in my lifetime. Some people are in these situations because they don't have the support they needed. We give them the tools they need to start over."

Teaching in prison is challenging, Trish Link, IRE grant project director and assistant director of community education at IU13, explains. The Lebanon facility is old, the space is small and cramped, and the Adult Basic Education teachers share a space with a K-12 instructor who teaches simultaneously—the adult students have most of the classroom space, while the younger students cluster around a table in a corner of the room. In Lancaster, the conditions are better—there is a dedicated classroom, with men taking classes in the mornings and women using the space in the afternoons. But in both facilities, there is constant change and turnover. Over the years, Pennsylvania has made a concerted effort to reduce the length of time between arrest and trial or release, which means that students may not be in the facility long enough to complete the GED course. This makes access to education after release even more critical. "You have to be flexible," Trish explains. "You never know who is going to come to class, or if you're going to get bumped from the classroom because it's needed for an attorney meeting." Not all corrections officers are supportive of the in-prison education programs, and instructors need to be able to work well with a wide range of people within the system—corrections officers, parole officers, lawyers, and other prison staff. There are "different challenges every day" Christina and Trish agree, but "the rewards outweigh the challenges."

LANCASTER-LEBANON IU13 AT A GLANCE

In addition to Adult Basic Education, the IU13 teams in Lancaster and Lebanon counties each offer career exploration and counseling both inside prison and after release.

IU13 works closely with multiple community-based organizations to connect students with the support they need.

Community-Based Supports

Lancaster CareerLink offers four job preparation workshops:

- Landing a job with a criminal background (required; offered every Monday)
- Resume writing
- Interviewing Skills
- Digital Skills

Lancaster Reentry Management Organization provides comprehensive education and employment services, help with housing, medical issues, and listings of resources for returning citizens and their families, among other services. The Lebanon Reentry Management Organization provides similar services.

Lancaster and Lebanon Career and Technology Centers offer a wide variety of certifications in high-demand technical fields.

Stevens College of Technology offers many short- and long-term training programs.

Harrisburg Area Community College—many IU13 students transfer here after completing the GED/HiSET.

MULTIPLE PATHS TO OPPORTUNITY

Joe and Bill each work full time, have their own apartments, and are financially independent. Both are intensely proud of the fact that they've recently bought cars and are on solid career paths. Bill is thinking about pursuing an engineering degree, and he's clear about the role that school plays in his life: "At school, I found a passion. I dropped out at 16—going to college gave me so much hope that I could finally be a normal member of society. . . . School showed me that I was worth something in life."

Bill has been sober for three years now, and he sees a direct relationship between school and his sobriety: "I only got arrested once, but I couldn't stay sober—kept going in and out on parole violations. I went to rehab about 15 times throughout my addiction, but I could not stay sober because I had no purpose in life. Going to school is one of the things that ended up saving my life; it gave me a purpose." Bill credits Mary-Edith and IU13 with helping him get on a path back to school. "Mary-Edith helped me out with everything. . . . She told me I could be anything or do anything in life, that nothing matters about my past."

Joe's intellect, energy, and ambition crackle over the phone line. "One of my goals is to get rich," he says. "I have short-term, mid-term goals, and long-term goals. I already bought myself a car. Next up: a house. I'm saving for it. And I want to open a business by age 25 or 26." Joe doesn't know what kind of business that will be—maybe a laundromat—but he knows that three out of four new businesses fail, and he plans to approach the task methodically so his business doesn't become one of the failure statistics. "I've been working on my credit score, it's 730," Joe says proudly. Above all, "You gotta think long term."

Bill Vaskie and Joe Gonzalez are able to think long term thanks to the support they received at IU13. The network of services, referrals, and resources that Mary-Edith and others activated on their behalf gave each of these young men a path to education, employment, and a second chance at a future where they can imagine buying a house, starting a business, or becoming an engineer.

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ENDNOTES

1. More than two-thirds of released prisoners were rearrested within a year of release, and 75 percent were rearrested within five years. However, first re-arrest rates drop significantly over time: 43 percent in the first year after release, going down to 13.3 percent in the fifth year after release. Source: Matthew Durose, Alexia Cooper, and Howard Snyder, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2014), https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/rprts05p0510.pdf.
2. Sixty-four percent of incarcerated people have a high school diploma or equivalent credential, and 34 percent have not completed high school. Source: Bobby Rampey, Shelley Keiper, Leyla Mohadjer, Tom Krenzke, Jianzhu Li, Nina Thornton, and Jacquie Hogan, *Highlights from the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults: Their Skills, Work Experience, Education, and Training* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016040.pdf.
3. Federal Interagency Reentry Council. 2013. Education. New York, NY: Available at: https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/SnapShot_Education.pdf
4. Peter Cove and Lee Bowes, "Immediate Access to Employment Reduces Recidivism," *Real Clear Politics*, June 11, 2015, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/06/11/immediate_access_to_employment_reduces_recidivism_126939.html.
5. John Schmitt and Kris Warner, *Ex-offenders and the Labor Market* (Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2010); Devah Pager, *Marked: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
6. Bill's struggle with addiction, and his repeated incarceration on addiction-related parole violations, is all too common: 85 percent of incarcerated people are substance involved; 1.5 million meet the DSM-IV medical criteria for substance abuse or addiction. Another 458,000 do not meet the strict DSM-IV criteria but have histories of substance abuse and were under the influence of alcohol or other drugs at the time of their crime, committed their offense to get money to buy drugs, were incarcerated for an alcohol or drug law violation, or shared some combination of these characteristics. Source: *Behind Bars II: Substance Abuse and America's Prison Population* (New York, NY: The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2010), https://www.centeronaddiction.org/addiction-research/reports/behind-bars-ii-substance-abuse-and-america%E2%80%99s-prison-population