

IMPROVED REENTRY EDUCATION



LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Introduction

JFF's [Voices of Reentry](#) series includes profiles of individuals participating in the nine programs supported by the Department of Education's [Improved Reentry Education Project](#). The series is intended to put a face on the statistics of reentry. These profiles bring out the diversity of the lived experiences among the participants and provides invaluable insights into the complexity of rebuilding a life after incarceration.

These testimonies of personal transformation also highlight the program elements that the participants believe made a difference in their success. In these stories, one sees the elements that research posits will reduce recidivism, and the best practices for improving education and training outcomes. With the personal transformation, these profiles also provide recommendations for organizations and institutions developing reentry education and training programs in their communities.

Change of Heart and Mind

In our Voices of Reentry series, each of the men and women we profiled spoke to a transformation in changes of heart and mind that propelled them towards stable post-incarceration lives. Their experiences bring to life the research findings about the personal changes that promote recidivism.¹ Loosely described, the men and women describe how the programs promoted changes in:

- how they think about themselves
- what they believe and value
- who they hang out with
- who and how they love

¹ Central Eight Criminal Risk Factors & Treatment
http://www.ajc.state.ak.us/sites/default/files/imported/acjc/BehavioralHealth/criminogenic_riskstx_target_s.pdf

Dorothy Gonzales' experienced a downward spiral after leaving ninth grade, but still her time in prison was a "slap in the face." But as she tells the story, prison was also the turnaround. It's where she [learned to value herself](#). Joe Gonzalez was in and out of juvenile facilities between the ages of 13-17, and then "graduated" to state prison with a three-year sentence. When he was released, he wanted to make the changes necessary to never go back to prison. He initiated a complicated process to be able to leave New York and move to Pennsylvania so he could get out of old patterns. He enrolled in and graduated from a program to get his GED and welding certification. He also [changed the way he thinks](#) about his future: "I have short-term, mid-term goals, and long-term goals" to own a business.

Kalei Cheeks learned lessons that helped him [change who he hangs out](#) with and avoid trouble. The counselors in the BROWNS program, stressed the principle of "I over E" – intellect over emotion. Kalei put this into practice: a friend asked him to go out after a party. He wanted to say "yes", but at the last minute Kalei changed his mind and went home. "The next day they were locked up."

When they participate in the reentry programs, these men and women not only impact their lives, but help others change their lives. Howard,ⁱⁱ a mentor in the Lorain County Community College's (LCCC) Success Mentor program had letters from inmates that he worked with that testified to Howard's success at changing how well people supported their [loved ones](#). "I remember that story you told me about how to treat my kids, how to treat my wife, and how to look at a job as a way to take care of my family. ...thank you."

These changes did not come easy for the participants. There were highs and lows in their lives as they worked towards transformation, and in some cases significant setbacks. In the end, their commitment and the commitment of the staff paid off.

Program Design Makes a Difference

While each profile documented diverse experiences of individuals from across nine programs, there was remarkable consistency in the program elements program elements "made the difference." What stands out is the ability of these programs to bring together the best practices in recidivism (described above) and adult education and training into a continuum of programming. While each program is different, the participants highlight similar strengths across the programs that helped set their trajectory for success:

- Staff "put participants first" when working with participants to develop a plan for post-release and support transitions from corrections to community.
- Program staff build relationships that put the "person" before the "inmate."
- Programs integrate services to help participants address and navigate challenges inside and outside of the classroom.

- High quality education and training aligns with participant aspirations and employment opportunities.
- Program staff prioritize preparing participants for good jobs not just any job.

A clear take-away from the profiles is that this work requires a long-term investment by program providers because it is very intensive work for the program staff and the participants. As the [Pennsylvania Department of Corrections](#) looks at their work, the corrections system has made a commitment to provide resources in facilities to prepare people for skills needed in reentry. Successful reentry disrupts enduring race inequality as the population is disproportionately people of color. Returning individuals to their families with the agency and skills impacts multiple generations and the communities where people come from and where they return.
