

Stories of Transition, Part 2: Men and Women in the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative's Reentry Program



Photo by Margaret Stanley, Allegheny County photographer, September 2012

PREPARED BY
Bill Moushey

October 2013



The Allegheny County
Department of Human Services
One Smithfield Street
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15222

PHONE 412.350.5701
FAX 412.350.4004
www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs

Allegheny County Department of Human Services

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) is dedicated to meeting the human services needs of county residents, particularly the county's most vulnerable populations, through an extensive range of prevention, intervention, crisis management and after-care services.

This report was prepared by the Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation (DARE), an office within DHS. DARE supports and publishes research related to the activities of DHS in a number of categories, including: Aging; Basic Needs; Behavioral Health and Disabilities; Child Development and Education; Children, Youth and Families; Crime and Justice; and Innovation, Reform and Policy.

DHS research products are available for viewing and download at the DHS Research and Reports Web page at **www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/research.aspx**. For more information about this publication or about DHS's research agenda, please send an email to **dhs-research@alleghenycounty.us**.

To learn more about DHS and available services, visit the DHS website at **www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/index.aspx** or call **412-350-5701 (TDD 412-473-2017)**.

© 2013 Allegheny County DHS
Published 2013 by Allegheny County DHS

George Green disputes a few of the five drunken driving convictions that caused his incarceration in the past decade, but he does not argue about the benefits of a program at the Allegheny County Jail that helped him become a good father for his baby daughter.

“I know I’ve brought these problems on myself, and now I have to deal with that because I have a child who is with me for the long haul,” said Green.

.....
After years of addiction, arrests, incarcerations and failed attempts at rehab, the birth of his son finally gave Dale Earnest the motivation to get and stay clean.

“For the first time, I said to myself, ‘Well, I know what I got to do,’” he said.

These two men credit the Allegheny County Jail’s Reentry Program with helping them sift through the rubble of their lives — during and after incarceration — to not only come to grips with their substance abuse and other problems, but for the first time to make an effort to care for something other than themselves.

BINGE DRINKING LEADS TO FIVE DUIS

If you believe Green, he was a social drinker who indulged in an occasional binge when he followed a path that led to five drunken driving charges in less than a decade.

For years, he continued to drink despite his arrests.

"I liked to drink. I'm a drinker," he would say, even as the convictions mounted.

He says two of the charges involved collisions caused by other people (when he had been drinking and driving), but the bottom line is that he had one DUI in 1998, then three more in a nine-month period in 2005–2006, which got him a state prison stint. His 2012 drunken driving conviction landed him in the county jail for a year, even though he continued to maintain that, while he was drunk, he was not behind the wheel of an auto.

While he enjoyed tossing a few back with his buddies, by the time he was locked up on his fifth conviction, he sought a real vehicle for change and found it in the jail's Reentry Program.

There has been a steep toll. Green already has lost several jobs, and potential employers cast him aside over his criminal record or because he is not eligible to get a license until after 2020.

He admits that his criminal record related to drunk driving "looks really, really bad on paper."

While he enjoyed tossing a few back with his buddies, by the time he was locked up on his fifth conviction, he sought a real vehicle for change and found it in the jail's Reentry Program.

He found it unlike other court-ordered drug and alcohol counseling programs he'd been through over the years, starting with the basic notion that if an inmate wasn't committed to the programs, they would not be admitted. If they didn't take things seriously, they would be asked to leave.

For Green, the program's drug and alcohol awareness curricula caused him to look both back and forward in helping him see how alcohol was destroying his life. He confronted the demons of his past, documenting a long history of alcoholism in his family, including a grandfather who died from problems related to drinking.

As part of the program, Green built a portfolio of references that showed he was not only committed to ending alcohol abuse but also to addressing related issues, as he finally figured out what would happen if he continued to drink. "It's just going to put me in jail. That's why I don't mess with it," he said.

"It has totally affected my life," he said of his commitment to stay clean and sober.

The other issue he started to confront while he was locked up and in the Reentry Program was his relationship with his girlfriend and their baby girl. He participated in the parenting program, where he learned about working on the relationship and becoming a good father.

Green knew his relationship with his girlfriend was shaky at best, due to his latest incarceration and other issues that had simmered before, during and after he was jailed.

So he paid close attention to the parenting program, to not only learn basic skills, but to help him rebuild his family, which had been torn asunder while he was in jail.

Critical to that goal was the opportunity to earn personal family meetings as he successfully completed stages of the Reentry Program. Instead of the regular non-contact visits in the jail, family meetings are held in the Reentry Program's offices.

Unlike other inmates in the county jail, who are not permitted much physical contact, the Reentry Program participants get to meet with their children twice a month in a jailhouse room full of toys. They are allowed to "hold their kids, hug them," said Green.

In general, the 38-year-old learned through the program that "you can change your lifestyle and become a better father, and person," he said.

It started with basic things like being more passive instead of very strict with his two-year-old daughter. He learned that being very careful in doling out discipline is important because, otherwise, "your own kid won't like you," he said.

During his jail visits with his child and other family members, they'd create drawings and pictures, which he later could post on the walls of his cell.

"It made me have an easier time in jail," he said. "If you are down and out, this program is a Godsend. If you don't get yourself involved, there is no hope. This program gives you some hope."

Once Green showed the program's managers that he was buying into it, they were in his corner, whether it was help with something at the jail, in court or after incarceration.

Eventually, he graduated from the two programs. He received certificates and a small jail house party of chicken wings, hoagies and soda, which increased his sense of accomplishment.

He credits John Murphy, a counselor at Family Services of Western Pennsylvania who works with the Reentry Program, with helping him inside of jail and out. He said Murphy constantly schooled him on things to do to overcome his problems and to be a good father through changes in his lifestyle.

"I'm done with that stuff [booze]. I did my time, became a better person, adapted and changed and moved on. I am not going to do anything to get put back in jail," he said.

Green said that on his release, he took the knowledge gleaned from the Reentry Program with him. "I think it over when I have issues with my daughter... It makes me realize, don't be a screw-up, don't let myself get put in this situation... because I'm going to lose every time," he said.

While he has been out of jail for many months, he still gets an occasional call from Murphy, who recently helped him make his way through a custody agreement over his daughter after the relationship with his girlfriend ended.

After months of working day-labor jobs, Green was able to find a full-time job as a flagman on a bridge inspection crew.

Now Green just tries to take things one day at a time. He was willing to tell his story because he believes that the Reentry Program was very important for him, and that it should be expanded to benefit many others.

"It helped me realize I needed to change. I came to terms with that while I was in the program," he said.

CHILD OVER CRACK

Dale Earnest had his epiphany in the county jail while he was incarcerated on a probation violation over crack use and learned that his girlfriend was pregnant.

It led him to the Reentry Program where he not only seriously dealt head-on with his own addiction for the first time, but completed a parenting class so he would know how to care for his newborn child on his release.

But this time, after having suffered alone in a jail cell during the birth of his child, Earnest decided it was time to focus on something other than doing whatever he had to do to get money for his next hit on a crack pipe.

So far, that is what he has done, even though his son had to be treated for addiction because the mother used drugs during her pregnancy.

Earnest's own drug war has taken him to depths most don't survive. He's been through every rehabilitation program in the region at least twice. Nothing worked.

But this time, after having suffered alone in a jail cell during the birth of his child, Earnest decided it was time to focus on something other than doing whatever he had to do to get money for his next hit on a crack pipe.

"When he was born, that was the catalyst [for staying clean]... that's what made it real," he said.

During his life, Earnest, of the Southside, got involved in all types of non-violent crime to get drugs, ranging from thefts and receiving stolen property to burglary and other crimes.

He now realizes that "there's nothing right about taking someone's shit."

His escalating drug abuse, he says, wasn't a daily regimen. Sometimes he'd quit for a few days, a week or a month, but once he started smoking crack cocaine, he literally couldn't stop.

"Sometimes for days. Sometimes for weeks. Sometime for months. Once I started, I couldn't stop. I've done some awful things. I've stolen from my own family," he said.

In court over the years, Earnest was able to escape state prison sentences because his crimes were all addiction-related, and he was able to cull some sympathy from a succession of judges, who gave him chance after chance to get straight.

In 2010, while on probation for a burglary charge for stealing a television from a neighbor, he was driving without a license, pulled over by police and jailed. Eventually, most of the traffic offenses he'd received were dropped, and he was released.

He had been straight for almost a year, but for some reason he immediately went and scored some crack. The next day, his probation officer learned of his arrest. Because Earnest hadn't immediately reported it, he was ordered to surrender a urine specimen. When it was dirty for crack cocaine, he was jailed again, and held for about eight months until a probation violation hearing was held.

Shortly after his incarceration for what he called "a dumbass move," he learned that his girlfriend, who also is drug addicted, was pregnant.

While he was facing as many as 20 years in prison for a long list of probation violations, he decided he was going to straighten himself out to be there for his child, no matter when that was.

While he had nonchalantly been through numerous programs inside and out of jail that had failed to get through to him, this time he was serious when he learned about the jail's Reentry Program. He initially figured it wouldn't hurt to do things in jail to "make it look good for the judge" who could literally lock him up and throw away the key.

He enrolled in the Reentry Program's drug and alcohol classes as well as its parenting program.

Earnest soon found that early release was not one of its goals, and that it was different from the others he'd endured.

"They actually cared," the mystified serial county prisoner said. It caused him to take the programs seriously for the first time.

Now that he had a child on the way, the program also helped him realize that "it's not about me anymore, not me, me, me," he said. He said all of the folks managing the Reentry Program became invested in him once they realized his commitment was real.

In the parenting program, he said, he learned a lot of nuts and bolts things about what to expect (since he is a first-time parent at age 42), but he learned that the key was "patience. I need a lot of it."

"They don't seem like they're here for a paycheck. They are here to help people... make a difference," he said

Earnest was locked up when his son was born on July 7, 2011.

The blond-haired, blue-eyed child was born addicted and had to undergo 20 days of detoxification at birth. He was removed from his mother and placed in foster care.

Because Earnest was in the Reentry Program, he found it easier to talk with doctors, foster parents and others about his son's health.

"It was iffy for awhile [his son's health], but eventually I learned he'd be all right," he said. It was during that time that he says he became even more committed to overcoming his demons to raise his only child.

He credited Murphy with being particularly interested in his progress, which astonished him.

"These people really cared about what happened to me," he said.

While things were going well in the Reentry Program, Earnest's legal problems were many because he had violated a long list of probationary sentences.

Despite that, he hoped his new-found determination would persuade his judge to let him serve his sentence at the county jail, since he had never been sent "up state," or to a penitentiary.

As his sentencing date approached, Amy Kroll, director of the Reentry Program, called the judge to tell him that Earnest would do much better with a county jail sentence because the program was set up to allow family visits, and that his treatment was going well.

Despite her pleas, while Earnest could have received a 20-year sentence, Allegheny County Common Pleas Judge Joseph Williams III decided the long-term addict needed a one- to two-year lesson in a state prison.

"It does seriously help people who care. I think they should grow the program, fund it and keep doing what they're doing, get more families involved, because the more involvement folks have with these things, the closer they might come to reaching a turning point in life."

So he was shipped down to the State Correctional Institution at Pittsburgh to serve his time without the help of the Reentry Program, which only serves the county jail. It limited his meetings with his newborn son.

"I still have guilt about it," he said of the sentence.

He was released in 2012, and eventually was given custody of his son because the mother is incarcerated.

Earnest has had custody of his son for a year now, and has found a job working on a crew that does stucco work on houses. His family members help with child care.

While Earnest admittedly has a long way to go, he credits the folks in the Reentry Program with helping him change the direction of his life.

"It does seriously help people who care. I think they should grow the program, fund it and keep doing what they're doing, get more families involved, because the more involvement folks have with these things, the closer they might come to reaching a turning point in life," he said.