

STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS MAGAZINE

March 2005

The Road to Re-entry: Fighting Recidivism by Preparing for Success (Part 1 of 3) by Libby Walters

Would you hire an ex-felon? We found two companies that would—and do.

Although accurate national recidivism rates are hard to come by, the U.S. Department of Justice conducted a 15-state recidivism study in 2002, comparing the rate at which released prisoners were re-arrested within three years of their release. The study revealed an increased recidivism rate from 1983 to 1994 in all four offense categories:

- Property offender recidivism jumped nearly six percent.
- Drug offender re-arrests increased over 16 percent.
- Public order offender re-arrests climbed above seven percent.
- Violent offender recidivism raised slightly to two percent.

[Source: www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/reentry/recidivism.htm]

The overall re-arrest rate of released prisoners climbed from 62.5 percent in 1983 to 67.5 percent in 1994. The shocking reality of this statistic is not the increase in the re-arrest rate, but that over two-thirds of the nation's prisoners are re-arrested within just three years of their release. The following article and its subsequent series will examine the factors that contribute to recidivism, reveal what businesses in the component industry are doing to reduce the rate, and feature the stories of offenders who were given the opportunity to turn their lives around and become living proof that recidivism in the United States can be conquered.

STARK TRUSS COMPANY

If you ever visit Ohio, you'll be in the Buckeye State, with a healthy offering of tourist delights for the pop culture enthusiast like the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (rock on, Cleveland), the Pro Football Hall of Fame (congrats, Dan Marino), and some of the most elaborate roadside convenience stores in the nation (note to self: hot dogs are a breakfast food). What you would likely not consider is Ohio's prison population and the state's—as well as Stark Truss Company's—commitment to fighting recidivism.

For many years, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC), which runs the state prisons as well as the agency that provides post-release supervision, has been examining prisoner re-entry in Ohio, developing recommendations to move the department towards a more holistic and systematic approach to helping released prisoners successfully reintegrate into their communities. Ohio Penal Industries (OPI) is a division of ODCR and is dedicated to preparing prisoners for life after incarceration by providing industrial training and instilling positive work habits. Many states have similar divisions.

If you've heard anything about the Stark Truss family, you've probably heard of Abner Yoder, the owner and patriarch of the 41-year-old company. It was Abner's strong belief in the capability of the human heart to change that drove him to offer the incarcerated not only a job to occupy their time while in prison, but a chance to prove themselves and learn a valuable skill to apply upon their release. Stark Truss VP of Operations Don Groom recalled Abner's mission to grant second chances. "He believed that human beings weren't born to go to prison; they are here for a specific purpose and it was Abner's mission to find their natural ability and talent and then give them a second chance to be successful in this life," said Groom.

In early 1996 Abner and Don teamed up with OPI to iron out the details of their partnership. Red tape, logistics, politics and just about any other obstacle you can think of came between them and their ultimate goal. "The original idea was to find a space in one of the correctional facilities for the inmates to manufacture trusses," Don remembered. OPI predicted a logistics nightmare in getting lumber into the prison and were equally concerned about how to store and ship the finished trusses.

Plan B seemed far less complicated: create a design office for inmates to train as truss technicians. "We weren't looking to give them busy work while they served time. The goal was to give them the opportunity to learn a valuable skill to use after they are released," Don said, "The industry has a chronic shortage of technicians, so setting up a design department was the perfect solution."

Mike Lucas, OPI's Enterprise Resource Planning, recruits private businesses to join the cause. "Our aim is to help the inmates develop basic work habits and teach them skills to hopefully reduce their possibility of returning to prison," he said. Don agreed with OPI's assessment of the challenges prisoners face during the re-entry process: "[Felons] can change their hearts, stop drinking, and stop abusing drugs; but once they walk out that door, they have no job, no where to go and no skills. With those odds, they are likely to fall back into the trap and end up in prison."

He's right, and there is a 68 percent recidivism rate to prove it. OPI hopes to contribute to lowering that rate significantly. In fact, OPI program participants are 18 percent less likely to re-offend than inmates who don't participate, said Robin Knab, Chief of Correctional Industries. Mike noted, "Some people don't have any habits except bad ones. Unfortunately, environment frequently overrides and people aren't given the opportunity to prove their skills. We teach them good habits, and bring out their skills and abilities." Robin pointed out, "When they're [at their OPI job], inmates are able to remove themselves from 'prison life' and learn a skill. It makes them a better inmate, which in turn makes them a better citizen when they are released."

Based on available space and staffing, OPI placed the new Stark design office at the Marion Correctional Institution (MCI), 40 miles north of Columbus. Stark would share the space at MCI with several other OPI graphic arts training programs. The OPI contract specified that Stark would pay a fee per month for a maximum of ten inmates. In addition, Stark was responsible for providing computers and training materials for each inmate who would participate.

Setting the foundation for the OPI/Stark partnership was just the first of many more gritty details that Don and Abner would have to work through before the program took flight. Staffing

the department with someone who had a heart for helping people change their lives was the next order of business. Where would Don find such a person? The timing couldn't have more perfect for then Washington Court House, OH Plant Manager Sam Steward to plant the seeds for a job change. "Just around the time we started working with OPI, Sam had mentioned in passing that he was interested in moving out of his position. We needed someone full time to train the inmates, and Sam was a perfect fit for the job," said Don.

Sam recalled, "When Don asked me if I was interested, I accepted without hesitation. Don knew of my background as a teacher, and he also knew my heart. I had a passion for reaching out to those who could use a hand." With Sam on board to serve as the liaison and inmate training coordinator, the "Stark Marion" division was official.

From the Stark Marion's infancy, it was known among inmates as a very elite program. "It's a great privilege for inmates to work in the Marion office. OPI does a great job of bringing the cream of the prison crop into this program," said Sam. "The standard we set for the inmates to follow is very high," Mike said, noting that the sole criteria for entrance in the OPI program is participants must have a high school diploma or be working toward a GED.

Getting Stark employees and customers on board with the idea was another hurdle Don faced. "My initial instinct was to be as quiet as possible about it. We thought customers would view this as hiring cheap prison labor. But as word slipped out, every single customer wanted to know more about it. I've not had one customer complain about it, had nothing but positive feedback," he explained.

Rich Ackley of Stark's Sherman, TX plant spoke of his own reservations about the program. "When I first heard of the program, I wondered why we wouldn't hire a man off the street to do the same job? Why would we help an inmate?" Don experienced similar resistance from employees who were reluctant to accept management's decision to work with inmates. However, a great majority of his employees supported the program from the start. "I remember getting challenged quite a bit from employees who didn't support our program. From their perspective, we were giving jobs away to prisoners that should have gone to deserving citizens. I explained that the inmates are people just like you and me who made an unfortunate mistake and now they're hungry for opportunity."

Before long, Rich also saw the value in such a program, "I discovered very quickly that [the inmates] view this as an opportunity to function in society. There is a fine line between us and them. They have been judged and are serving time, and I believe they deserve a second chance in this life."

BLUEGRASS TRUSS COMPANY

Similar to Stark's goal, Bluegrass Truss Company aims to bridge the gap between release and reintegration into society, giving felons an environment in which to develop new goals and experience a fresh start. The difference in their program is that they become involved with offenders after their prison release. We'll now look at what re-entry is like through the eyes of a man who has just been released from prison.

In Lexington, Kentucky, a halfway house was admitting one more "client." On a Friday in January 1999 at Dismas Charities, a halfway house, the recently released offender was taking his first tentative steps back into society. This convicted drug offender would travel a long and difficult road to re-entry. He'd have to start on the ladder's bottom rung, proving his stability, trustworthiness and ability to choose right instead of wrong with every step. An intake counselor instructed him to find a job. With no transportation and very little money, he set out to look for work. He was unsuccessful at his first two choices for work.

I wondered out loud, "Didn't you have any friends or family to help you find a job?"

"That was one of those brutally enlightening experiences when I got out of prison. Two of my buddies had written me while I was in prison and offered me jobs, but when I showed up, they turned me away. Most people won't hire a felon," he admitted. He is right: most people won't take a chance on an ex-con.

He ended up at Bluegrass Truss Company, which was a short walk away from the Dismas House. Ray Johnson, Production Manager, said he knows Dismas well and offered him a job in the shop. He will start on Monday, 7 a.m.

All baggage from his former life of crime and drugs aside, he will be one of the most motivated, optimistic and eager employees Bluegrass has seen in a long time. In fact, he is the current General Manager of Bluegrass Truss Company, Mike Cobb.

Mike recalled his arrest: "It was a day you never want to relive—just like a scene out of a movie," he said. Mike was arrested by a SWAT team and charged with possession of cocaine with the intent to sell. He talked about his addiction. "The lure of that drug is very powerful. I never imagined I could give up that lifestyle, the money and the power over those addicted to the drug. In my few sober moments, I had the best of intentions."

Out of jail on bond, Mike entered Beta, a drug rehabilitation program. "In rehab, I was taught the principles of Narcotics Anonymous and I've been clean ever since."

Mike put himself in the position of an employer, "If I would have had to judge me when I got out of prison, and all I had to go on was my past, I wouldn't trust me. I always tell people, 'you don't get to prison by singing too loud in the choir.'"

"What allowed you to be so successful in life after incarceration," I asked.

"Structure and support. Some people don't have any support coming out of prison. If they have a good support network, they'll do okay. If not, they have a tough time assimilating into society," he explained. After serving a 46-month sentence for a felony drug conviction at FPC Manchester, Mike was ready to start anew. "After a few months in prison, I realized I didn't fit in there and decided never to go back. The people who do well out of prison have to be consistent with the theme of 'I never want to go back.' We are all products of our choices," he admitted.

Mr. Johnson is well aware of offenders' need for structure and support. In fact, the Dismas/Bluegrass relationship was built on this solid foundation. Former Dismas federal district coordinator Carol Martin said, "There were several employers that worked with us who became very lax about some questionable behavior. The unique thing with the relationship with Bluegrass is that I trusted them to alert us right away if they saw something suspicious." Dismas staff checks in with Bluegrass supervisors for a daily status report. The function of Dismas and other halfway houses is to serve as a very structured transition place for someone coming out of prison.

Mike welcomed the structure, knowing it was his only chance to stay on the straight and narrow. "Being out on my own was very uncomfortable. It's a little like walking into WalMart and being confronted with all the choices—there are just too many. You feel very vulnerable. You have your freedom back, but reality reminds you that you're always one step away from making another bad decision."

Even with structure and support, Mike's re-entry wasn't without struggle. After five months at Dismas, he was officially on supervised release for four years with an appointed officer. "It's intrusive and embarrassing, but it's necessary in my opinion," he said. Mike also had to face the reality of starting at the bottom of the pay scale at Bluegrass—a hard pill to swallow for a guy who used to own his own construction company and made several thousand dollars each week selling drugs. "When I was offered the job and they told me how much I'd make working in the shop, it was demoralizing."

Mike finally feels at peace with his life, now that probation is behind him and his career has taken off. "I lived looking through the rearview mirror for those red and blue lights for ten years. I've been fortunate to put it all behind me. I have the best job in the world, working with Mr. Johnson and the rest of Bluegrass Truss staff." Mike isn't the only success story to have risen from the Dismas/Bluegrass partnership. There are many more who came to Bluegrass in search of something we all seek at some point in our lives: a second chance.

It's important to recognize that programs like the ones I've described above generally come at a significant cost (of both money and time). While the challenges are plentiful, the payback is often well worth the investment. A quick Internet search on the keywords "felon," "hire" and "prison" returns entire blogs (web + log) created by desperate ex-felons and their families asking for advice on where to turn to find an employer who will hire them despite their conviction, a landlord who will not conduct a criminal background check, or encouragement to not let their hearts harden as they face rejection. If these blogs reflect reality, it seems as though the number of ex-cons in the United States far outnumbers the amount of second chances society is willing to grant. In the next two articles in this series, I'll take a closer look into the lives of former inmates who, with the assistance of Stark and Bluegrass Truss, have stayed on the straight and narrow during their period of reintegration.

A heartfelt thanks to Clyde Bartlett, Don Groom and their respective staff members at Bluegrass Truss and Stark Truss for their willingness to share these stories with the industry.

SBC HOME PAGE

Copyright © 2005 by Truss Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. For permission to reprint materials from SBC Magazine, call 608/310-6706 or email editor@sbcmag.info.

The mission of Structural Building Components Magazine (SBC) is to increase the knowledge of and to promote the common interests of those engaged in manufacturing and distributing of structural building components to ensure growth and continuity, and to be the information conduit by staying abreast of leading-edge issues. SBC will take a leadership role on behalf of the component industry in disseminating technical and marketplace information, and will maintain advisory committees consisting of the most knowledgeable professionals in the industry. The opinions expressed in SBC are those of the authors and those quoted solely, and are not necessarily the opinions of any of the affiliated associations (SBCC, WTCA, SCDA & STCA).