



A second chance, provided with compassion and support, can make a world of difference to prison inmates during their incarceration *and* after their release.



Tony, Mike and Todd are grateful for the opportunity and support Stark Truss gave them to rebuild their lives after completing their terms at Marion Correctional Institution in Ohio.

at a glance

- ❑ There are a number of factors that contribute to the recidivism rate in the U.S.
- ❑ Stark and Bluegrass Truss battle the recidivism rate by providing felons with the support they need after leaving prison.
- ❑ Read the personal accounts of a number of former inmates who have found success on the outside.

In Part One of this series, we learned that recidivism is an offender's relapse into crime after he or she has been released from prison. We also found out that recidivism in the United States is high—67.5 percent, to be exact—and rising. Here is a summary of what factors likely contribute to the heightened number:

- **Lack of skills or training.** Without adequate skills to put on a résumé or job application, a felon's only option for employment are low-end, low-skill jobs that may not be enough to sustain them financially. At that point, the choice to steal, sell drugs, or behave violently becomes an attractive option versus putting their time in to learn a skill and prove their work ethic.
- **Lack of emotional support or structure.** Inmates who, when released from prison, do not have the support of their families, friends and community have difficulty reintegrating. When they do not feel supported by the world around them, their tendency is to relapse into old behaviors. The result is often re-arrest, followed by another period of incarceration.
- **Lack of desire to change their lives.** Just because an offender has served a 20-year prison sentence does not mean that they've magically learned right from wrong. And it's widely known that to change your lifestyle, you have to change your friends or your environment. Inmates who aren't prepared to face that reality will have difficulty making good choices as they face reintegration.
- **Lack of community/society acceptance.** More often than not, offenders face adversity from the community. This can be manifested in many ways: employers who have policies against hiring felons, landlords who refuse to house ex-cons, and others who may fear them based on prejudice or lack of trust.

There may be additional causes for the prevalence of recidivism in our nation; the four examples above give a solid basis in which to frame Part Two of "The Road to Re-entry." We'll now follow the paths of felons who have escaped that haunting recidivism rate. Their stories are real, touching, devastating, tragic and triumphant.

Tony

Tony was convicted of vehicular homicide and received a sentence of three to ten years in an Ohio state prison. He had been drinking one night, got in his car and hit a man on the side of the road. The man was rushed to the hospital, but died three days later from the injuries he sustained from the crash.

Tony was sent to the Marion Correctional Institute (MCI) where he would serve the full ten years of his sentence. "Vehicular homicide is a serious offense. And you're going to pay the price," he acknowledged. Tony likened his stay at MCI to a 1993 movie starring Bill Murray. "It was like *Groundhog Day*: you live the same day over and over again. Nothing ever changes," he said.

Then something did change. Through the prison grapevine, Tony learned about Stark Truss Company's truss design office and became persistent about getting a position. "[They] finally said yes. From the first day I was accepted in the program, I put in a lot of hard work." At first, the Stark program was very popular, everyone wanted to work there. In time, it became known the work was tough, Tony said. "There were deadlines. There were customers," he explained. He said the routine of getting up and reporting for a job every day prepared him to remember what real life was like. Most importantly, it passed the time.

Looking back on his release date, Tony said, "I wanted a job when I left that building. We saw so many people who came back to that prison because they didn't have a job or support." Despite years of working for Stark at MCI, Tony was skeptical that Stark would offer him a job. "The other inmates and I, we would joke that

this was too good to be true. 'Are they really going to hire us? Or will they leave us hanging when we get out?'" From Stark's perspective, they needed Tony as much as he needed the job. In fact, Tony joked about not getting vacation following his release. "I had three days off between my release and when I started to work for Stark," he smiled. The parameters of Tony's parole required that he work from his home in lower Michigan. "I met Sam [Steward] in the MCI parking lot. He loaded a computer, a printer and a pile of plans into my trunk. I set myself up at home and got to work."

Todd

Todd's story is one that many of us can relate to. After graduating from high school, he admitted he was "directionless." Lack of direction led him down a dangerous path, and he eventually stole some merchandise from a convenience store. Like Tony, he was not arrested on the scene, but drove to the police station and turned himself in. Todd was charged with aggravated robbery and was sentenced to six years in state prison. He arrived at MCI in March 1997.

His cell mate told him of the OPI job opportunities. At the time, Todd was working toward his associate degree through a local technical college. Because OPI required that applicants not be enrolled in any education program, he decided to quit technical school and instead took a clerk job in the prison, hoping to climb the ranks and eventually land an OPI job. When there was finally an opening in the Stark Marion office, he jumped at the opportunity. He learned to design wall panels, roof and floor trusses. "I applied myself from the start because I was hungry for the chance to learn," he said.

The Stark management offered Todd a truss technician position in the months leading up to his release. His family toured Stark's facilities and met with the staff he would be working with. Todd's family served as an unconditional support system throughout his incarceration. His girlfriend stuck with him for the six-year duration. He said, "We planned to get married the day I got released." By 4:30 on his release date, they were married. "I don't look back on my incarceration with any regret," he said.

Mike

Mike's story starts on a family farm in the Ohio countryside. After finishing high school, he went to work at a trucking company. He got into a heated argument with a man and took his life. "I did not have a violent past," he said. "I had never been in a fight before." The police picked him up a few days later for questioning; it was then that he turned himself in.

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Mike received a murder conviction of 15 years to life. In 1986, he was sent to MCI. "I remember sitting by myself in the cell saying 'I got nothing,'" he recalled. He started working in the OPI welding shop. He eventually met Tony and switched to a maintenance job. When Stark Marion started up, there was an opening and Mike was offered a position. "At that point, I had no experience with computers," he said.

Mike spent seven years working at Stark Marion, before he was scheduled to go before the parole board. "The parole board gave me five more years. That was the hardest call I ever had to make to my parents," he said. Like Todd, Mike's family made every effort to provide continued support. "My family made the three-hour drive [to MCI] twice a month," he noted.

Mike said he would have likely gone back to a career in trucking without the opportunity to work for Stark after his release. "My parents went to meet Abner and Don at Stark in a gesture of thanks for their generosity," he remembered. "I am so grateful to Stark for this incredible opportunity."

The Learning Process & Communication

For people like Mike and Tony who started in the program's infancy, communicating with the outside world proved to be one of the greatest challenges they faced. Since Stark Marion would be designing components for Stark locations in Texas, face-to-face communication was an impossibility. Internet use on the part of the inmates is considered a breach of security. As well, incoming and outgoing phone calls must first be screened before an inmate has permission to talk to the caller. An additional distraction for both Stark Marion inmates and the outside world was the twice daily "count." Inmates were required to report to their cells for a physical

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head count. "It's so they know we are alive or didn't escape," one inmate said. With these restrictions in mind, you can imagine the communication hurdles faced by the inmates on a daily basis.

Rich Ackley Manager of Stark's Sherman, Texas plant commented on jumping the communication hurdles. "I learned rather quickly to be mindful of their timeframe. When you account for lunch, breaks and 'count,' they're working for about 6.5 hours per day," he said. "Initially, not being able to get in touch with them when it was convenient for me was frustrating," remarked Tim Willet, Plant Manager of Stark's operation in Hearne, TX. "I just had to learn to work around their schedule and be flexible."

State holidays and unannounced prison lock-downs would occasionally impede Stark Marion's ability to operate. Rich said, "One requirement is for a state guard to monitor [the inmates' activity] at all times. Because the guards get all state holidays off, the inmates can't work on those days." Rich recalled an incident early on in the program's existence that caused a mini-debacle: "There was an entire prison lock-down because of an alleged breach of security via the Internet. That meant there was no possibility of us reaching the Stark Marion guys." Rich said that the experience taught the inmates to notify him in the event of a lock-down.

On top of jumping through hoops to get to the outside world, the inmates' learning curve was another process to work through. Tony remembered the first few months of the program. "When we were learning, we were dangerous!" He

said one of the hardest things was to get used to talking in 3D over the phone. "Danny Conaway [Commercial Multifamily Salesman in Texas] taught us how to communicate efficiently over the phone to maximize the time we had to problem solve," Tony remembered. Tony, Todd and Mike credited Sam Steward for his unwavering patience and persistence to teach them truss design. "These are the ideal candidates to teach because their minds are so open to learning something new. We hit some rough spots in the beginning when the workload was a bit overwhelming. But they were able to take something away from every new experience," said Sam. "You can choose to be lazy in prison; you could do nothing all day if you wanted. But we made a choice to be productive and learn a skill at the same time. We did just that," Tony said proudly.

Rich talked about his greatest reward working with the inmates. "We've got men who have worked with us for so many years in MCI. Then they get out and are just filled with joy. They have such an impact on our company," he said. Like Rich, Tim Willet has been working with the Stark Marion technicians for five years. He commented on the friendships he has built with the inmates. "I have developed a bond with these people. I trust them implicitly, like I would a close friend," he said.

Stark Truss Vice President of Operations Don Groom strongly encourages any manufacturer or business considering a program similar to the Stark Marion operation to research possible state tax incentives. "Stark has been able to take advantage of tax breaks by hiring ex-offenders like Tony, Todd and Mike," he said. As for the cost investment associated with prisoner training, Don noted there is little difference between hiring someone off the street. "We've done a lot of number crunching only to find that our total cost of maintaining the program, and training inmates is no different than if we'd hire off the street," he said. "When they come to work for us, they are generally very loyal and thankful for the opportunity."

Where Are They Now?

Tony, Todd and Mike are still with Stark Truss, each grateful to be out of prison. Tony credited Abner Yoder and Don Groom with giving him a chance. "Not only did I learn a skill, I got a chance to put my life back together," he recalled. "In the end, all [Stark] wanted us to do was succeed. And I am grateful for the opportunity." He works from a new office in Lower Michigan, where he designs strictly multi-family proj-

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ects for Stark's Texas plants. "I'm farther ahead [in life] than most of my friends who didn't go to prison," Tony said.

Mike continues to design trusses for Stark Truss, working from his parent's home in northeastern Ohio and loving each and every day. Todd and his wife had their first child a few months ago, and he currently works out of Stark's Canton, OH location.

Sam Steward watched each inmate from the Stark Marion program walk out the door to freedom. "I walk them out and send them off. That has been such a reward for me. I say, 'so long, it's been fun; I've got to get back inside and help another guy get out,'" Sam said. Tim Willet said, "To see [the inmates] get out and succeed is an amazing experience. They have embraced the opportunity to stay with Stark; that's a hell of a reward."

Rich Ackley explained that their prison program addresses the chronic shortage of skilled technicians in the industry. "The bottom line is there are never enough skilled technicians in the industry. We're able to train a dozen men at a time from the ground up so they learn the right way to design the first time," he said. "The bottom line is that I see this not only as a business opportunity, but a ministry. To me that means to help and serve others."

From an in-house prison program to a half-way house, one theme is consistent: compassionate employers working hard to give people who have made a mistake a second chance. We'll now hear from employees at Bluegrass Truss Company who have changed their lives and their hearts thanks to opportunities provided by management.

Larry Watson, Outside Sales

Larry Watson was in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people. Although he didn't have any drugs on him, the friends he was with did. They were busted for cocaine possession, and because he was there, Larry was charged too. In hindsight, he said, "It was the best thing that ever happened to me. If my lifestyle hadn't changed, I would be dead right now." Addicted to cocaine, Larry went to rehab. "You have to hit rock bottom before you quit," he stated.

Larry was convicted of conspiracy to possess cocaine and sent to a Kentucky federal prison camp in February of 1997. There he served an 18-month sentence and was released to spend four months at Dismas halfway house. Like many others, Larry started in the Bluegrass wall panel shop. "I didn't necessarily want to pound nails into a wall. But you have to start from the bottom and work your way up," he stated. After about a year, he obtained his CDL license and became a delivery driver, which he did for 1-½ years. A salesperson left the company,

and Larry slid into a sales position, never looking back. "I had experience selling lumber, steel, windows and doors, so the transition to sales was very natural," he said.

Larry said about 80 percent of existing accounts know about his conviction and incarceration. "My new accounts don't know about my history. I wait for the right time to tell them. But I always tell them; I want them to hear it from me," he said.

Larry wears his loyalty for Bluegrass Truss on his sleeve. "I won't leave unless they close the door. [The management] here treats me with respect. Clyde Bartlett [President of Bluegrass Truss] is the best man I ever met. He holds nothing over your head, just wants you to do your job," he said. "This job keeps me busy; it's the reason I've stayed sober. That and not wanting to hurt my family again."

Larry said when people harbor judgmental feelings toward a felon, the challenge to stay sober is even greater. "People don't see that you're a real person who made a bad decision. I wish they would give us a second chance; we deserve a second chance," he noted.

Greg Cartmill, Truss Technician

Greg Cartmill owned a construction company prior to his arrest and conviction for cocaine possession. After entering an in-house drug treatment program and serving 18 months of his four-year sentence, he was released to live at Dismas. "I knew I couldn't go back to work for my former company," he said. He talked with Sonny at Dismas and decided to apply at Bluegrass Truss also. Greg was offered a job on the second shift as a truss builder and after five months he had shown his desire to work hard and advance himself. "Mr. Cobb offered me a job as a truss technician and I have been doing that for the last 3-½ years." Greg was recently let off probation and has committed to stay with Bluegrass. Of the management at Bluegrass Truss, Greg said, "They're real people who don't care what you've done in the past. They care about what you do in the future."

Jonathon Cromer, Truss Technician

Jonathon was 20 years old at the time of his arrest. In July 2000 Jonathon was sent to federal prison on a methamphetamine drug possession charge. He would serve 30-month sentence in prison and spent another six months at Dismas. Throughout the period of his incarceration, he participated in numerous rehabilitation programs including an intensive 500-hour drug program.

"I was scared to death when I got out of prison. I didn't have anything," he remembered. He looked for employment at a couple of places, but the employer had to be approved by Dismas. "A lumber company offered me a job, but I couldn't take it because there was no phone available. Dismas had no way to check up on me," he said. Dismas staff suggested that he try Bluegrass Truss. "I was hired to catch wood in the shop. Within four months they had an opening for a truss



L to R: Bluegrass Truss employees Johnathon Cromer, Greg Cartmill, Sonny Turner and Ray Johnson.

technician. I asked Mike [Cobb, GM] if he would consider me for the job. He gave me a 30-day trial." He picked up on truss design quickly and is still working in the department. In March, he passed the Level I Truss Technician Training Course with a score of 93.6 percent.

Jonathon feels fortunate to have found a support system at Bluegrass. "The important thing that I saw here was people

who had been where I'd been—in prison. They made the choice to change their lives. I've learned to follow their example," he said, noting that there weren't many people out there willing to give him a chance to prove his abilities. "I feel sorry for addicts who never get help; prison saved my life," he said.

Jonathon has a message for employers who may be guarded against hiring a felon: "I'd like people to know that just because someone is a felon doesn't mean they aren't a hard worker. Even to let someone in at a low, entry level position, you can see how motivated they are. If you never allow anyone in, you'd never know that. There are highly motivated felons out there—I'm proof."

Sonny Turner, Second Shift Supervisor

Sonny Turner was arrested in September 1998 for possession and trafficking of cocaine. He was sent to federal prison in West Virginia for a four-year sentence. He entered several different drug treatment programs to lessen his sentence. The day he was released, he looked for work at a number of different places. "Mr. Cobb hired me right away to work in the shop," he said. Before long, he was promoted to sawyer, then saw supervisor. Current Production Manager Ray Johnson will be retiring soon; Sonny is looking to take over Ray's position when he retires.

Sonny talked about how his job at Bluegrass has helped to restore his confidence. "It built my confidence up by working here because they gave me a chance, an opportunity," he said. "Being a convicted felon is a big strike against you. Just watching everyday people's reactions, you can imagine what a potential employer might think. People like me deserve second chances." He added that he would give anyone a second chance because he was given one.

Conclusion

Carol Martin, U.S. probation officer in eastern Kentucky, noted that it has been a pleasure to work with Bluegrass Truss and watch the ex-offenders grow through the reintegration process. "You're hoping that through the treatment and resources available they've decided to choose a new way of life and lead a productive lifestyle, without being involved in criminal activity," she stated. "The relationship that I have developed with Bluegrass puts me in the position to help the ex-offenders achieve their goals," Carol explained. "Not only does Bluegrass give people a second chance for employment, but they are understanding and wholly supportive," she added.

So it is with life, some make mistakes and need to pay a heavier price and others of us make mistakes with not nearly as severe a price tag, but they are all mistakes nonetheless. There is an innate yearning in every human being to be free and to be needed. With their respective re-entry programs, Stark and Bluegrass Truss take this natural yearning, add training with compassion and turn people back to the community with the self-respect and confidence they need to succeed. In return, ex-offenders have a pattern of developing unparalleled loyalty for the company and demonstrate a work ethic to be modeled by other employees. **SBC**

Don't miss Part 3 of this series, as we go inside Marion Correctional Institute and meet inmates currently enrolled in the Stark Truss design program.

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6300 Enterprise Lane • Suite 200 • Madison, WI 53719
608/310-6706 phone • 608/271-7006 fax
www.sbcmag.info • admgr@sbcmag.info