Former Parolee Advises Others

by Sarah Chaffee

A Q&A with Clark Porter

Clark Porter's childhood was rocky. As a teenager, he took to the streets. After robbing a post office at gunpoint, he received a 35-year sentence. He served 15 years, mostly in 22-hour-a-day supermax lockdown.

Clark turned to Christ to change his life, and when he was released, he had a plan to make it in the free world. “When I left prison, my mindset was not to go back,” he says. “I worked on three areas: faith, becoming a model, and helping others.”

At community college, Clark’s writing class caught the attention of a professor, who showed his work to a dean at Washington University in St. Louis. Clark received a scholarship and graduated with honors in 2006. He went on to complete a master’s program in social work and graduated with honors in 2008.

Clark is now a certified social worker and program specialist at the St. Louis Federal Probation Office. Clark presented about Program Re-Direct at a national probation officer conference. Recently Clark got on the phone with IJ to give insight to our readers who might be anticipating their own release date.

I: What is important knowledge for someone just released?

Clark: Once someone is out, my first objective is to work on three areas: employment, training, and college. They need to overcome obstacles in the way of these three things. You aren’t going to get anything without education. You’re not competitive unless you are a qualified employee. Recently-released people often think, “I’m going to get a job and all is well. You minimize disadvantages by getting certified… training is important, education is important because we don’t want them to just have a job at McDonald’s. We want to get them a job with medical and dental benefits, to get them into careers. We want to get them educated and send them back to college.

II: What advice would you give to prisoners preparing for reentry?

Clark: Be willing to invest. As much time as you spent in prison, invest that time to grow. If you spent five years in prison, spend five years trying to get your life on track. What do you want your life to look like? You’ve got to invest in those visions. You can’t come out of prison looking for immediate gratification. Take advantage of training programs, even if you think they are inferior. Keep yourself occupied and focused on learning…

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Dealing With Grief

I’ll never forget when my mom called me to say that my dad had just died. It was like someone had thrown a bucket of ice water over my head. It was just the first step in a long journey of grief.

When someone you love dies, there are so many emotions to face: shock, sadness, anger, loneliness, and perhaps feelings of guilt or regret about the relationship you had with that person. The grieving process can be even more complicated and intense when you are away behind bars – unable to say goodbye, attend the funeral, or receive comfort from your friends and family. Many prisoners say their greatest fear is that someone they love will die before they can get out and go home.

How can you cope if this happens to you? It can help to understand that grieving is a journey everyone must go through. According to “On Death and Dying,” a popular 1969 book by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, grief has several stages, including: denial (“Maybe there’s been a mistake”), bargaining (“If only I had...”).

A Second Chance

David had finally hit rock bottom, going from underage drinking and smoking pot to a hard-core prison inmate. But God hadn’t given up on him. When someone you love dies, you can keep up the pace. But David’s life began to change as he started attending church. He started evangelism, as well as visiting prisons. While on probation, he was sentenced to five years of prison time. With mentoring, accountability, and faith, David’s dependence on speed led to his first serious prison time. With mentoring, accountability, and faith, he’s been clean and sober for nine years.

David’s dad blamed himself for his son’s death and started drinking heavily. He became bitter. Forty years later, he would try to kill himself the same way his son had.

Finding Christ Through Meadowlark

Everything would change for David on Christmas Eve, 1984. By chance, he tuned his TV to a religious channel hosted by Harlem Globetrotter basketball star Meadowlark Lemon.

David notes, “On that program, I saw such joy on everyone’s face. I called in and accepted Jesus over the phone while talking with a prayer partner.”

David’s life began to change through the power of Jesus Christ. Gone were the drugs and alcohol. David returned to church and went “full-speed ahead” with Jesus. He started a Bible fellowship in his home. Next, he began street witnessing and ministry to prisoners. He became a missionary, traveling through the United States, Mexico, and Chile. “We did child evangelism, dramas, street ministry, door-to-door evangelism, as well as visiting with prisoners.”

After several years as a street missionary, David decided he needed more education. He began attending classes at DeVry University while holding down a job to pay his tuition and living costs. The stress was too much, and David tried some meth to keep up the pace. But David’s drug addiction had been one step behind him, and now it came roaring back. Soon, he was shooting heroin.

Still, David stuck to his classes and graduated magna cum laude with a 3.84 grade point average and a bachelor’s degree in computer information systems. That led to a job with a major company, and the money rolled in. But so did the cops, eventually nabbing David on possession of speed. He was sentenced to five years of supervised probation. While on probation, he gained a master’s degree in information systems management. But that changed to two years of prison time when David violated his probation. For the first time in his life, David found himself behind some serious prison bars, at the Estes Unit in Venus, Texas.

A Second Chance

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Parolee Advice

Get your GED and take all the education programs, because you don’t know what you’re going to need once you’re out. I didn’t know that my writing was going to help me. I invested a lot of time in writing while I was in prison. And I didn’t know that my GED would help me to get into community college.

Heads should oranges the prison? What helped you get out and go home.

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How should an ex-prisoner go about repairing relationships with family?

Clark: Sometimes you have to limit your relationships... Your family had the problems they had before you came out of prison. All of those problems were there the whole time you were in prison. Focus on getting you together.

How does one form a strong relationship with their parole/parole officer?

Clark: You have got to make the relationship collaborative, or you’re going to lose out. You’ve got to treat them well. Keep them out of your face. Follow the standard conditions of parole/probation ...

Aparolee advice

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How can you cope if this happens to you? It can help to understand that grieving is a journey everyone must go through. According to “On Death and Dying,” a popular 1969 book by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, grief has several stages, including: denial (“Maybe there’s been a mistake”), bargaining (“If only I had...”), and finally, acceptance (“I will always miss this person, but I am able to move on”).

Grieving takes a lot of time, and it can be different for everyone. But - especially with help - you can get through it and come out the other side.

Grief can also bring us unexpected gifts. It can help us not to take things for granted, and instead appreciate the beauty and joy of the smallest things. It can help us think carefully about how brief and fragile life is, and how we can spend our days on things that will matter after our lives in this world are over.

Have you experienced the loss of a loved one who incarcerated? What helped you cope? What's your advice for others? Write to us at: Letters to the Editor, Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1, 790, Ashburn, VA 20176.

Sincerely,

A.R. Quinn
Editor
Feeling All Tied Up?

by Zach Sewell

A

friend of mine recently used an illustration to explain how difficult it can be for people who have been released from prison. He asked me to stand in the middle of a group and hold a ball of yarn. I was supposed to represent an ex-prisoner. He asked those standing in the circle to mention challenges ex-prisoners face. When the first person spoke up, I held the end of the yarn and gave the roll to them. They held onto the yarn and tossed the ball to the next person, who named a different challenge.

By the time they were done, I was all wrapped up. I felt suf-
focated by all the pressures they brought up: housing, parole fees, paying for an ankle bracelet, child support payments, medication costs, temptation, addictions, judgment, relationship issues, instability, family stress, the struggle to find employment. . . When all of these challenges stack up, they’re overwhelming.

Freedom for ex-prisoners is not the same as freedom for most people. Freedom is an obstacle course for ex-prisoners, with a high rate of failure. This is not a new reality. The world has always been hard on former inmates. Thousands of years ago, God broke the chains of imprisonment from their parents and threw them into the river. God sent Moses, a survivor of the infant genocide who had escaped Egypt as an adult, to demand the release of the Israelites. When the leaders of Egypt didn’t listen to Moses, God sent devastating plagues on the Egyptians until their top official could no longer take it and told Moses to gather the prisoners and leave. But freedom wasn’t a walk in the park. The newly freed group was vulnerable in many ways. Shelter was an ongoing challenge. For years, they were on the move and didn’t have a stable housing situation. There were also concerns about food, and people started to compare their food to the filing meals they had while they were enslaved (Exodus 16:3). There was also a threat of violence (Numbers 14:3–4). The men were afraid that other groups would kill them and take their wives and children as prize.

The group’s morale sank. Just as many ex-prisoners struggle in the days after release, the former slaves began to grumble and resent the uncertainties of freedom in the wilderness. Perhaps the most discouraging point for Moses came when he heard someone say: “Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” (Numbers 14:3).

The pressures of living free were so overwhelming that they wanted to go back. They were willing to sacrifice liberty and freedom for familiarity and certainty. They were willing to return to hard labor, abuse, ridicule, chains, lashing, and living in the heat.

Does this sound familiar? Has the difficulty of trying to stay on the right track convinced you to give up? Have you or a friend ever been released from prison — only to catch yourself wondering if there’s something you could do to get back behind bars, the only place that feels safe and familiar to you now?

Captivity (whether it’s physical captivity or captivity to a particular sin) might feel safer than freedom sometimes, but God made you for freedom, with all of its responsibilities and uncertainties. In fact, God loves it when a prisoner is set free. This is best illustrated in Psalm 107:10–16, a word-painting that describes God breaking apart shackles and prison bars for people who did wrong and then turned to God. The Bible describes His own Son as being on a mission to “proclaim freedom for the prisoners” (Luke 4:18). When someone is freed from any kind of bondage, God wants them to stay free.

God did immeasurably more for the Israelites than they could have hoped — even though things looked bad for a while. They didn’t go back to the prison of Egypt. They found the courage to focus on God and persevere. God showed them the path to a new home where they could start anew. He can do the same for you.

Zach Sewell is the author of “Prisoners in the Bible.”

Out of Egypt

There are many kinds of captivity. Your body can be held behind bars and walls, your mind can be held in shackles of ignorance, and your spirit can be a prisoner of darkness.

True freedom — open to all people — is found in knowing Jesus Christ, accepting God’s forgiveness for your sins, and living life the way He meant it to be lived since the beginning: in a whole, healthy, loving relationship with Him, with others, with the world, and with yourself.

You can find true freedom right now. It doesn’t matter who you are, where you are, or what you’ve done. You can leave your “Egypt” behind forever. A prayer like this may be a great start:

Dear God, I’ve been a prisoner in many ways, than one. I want to be free from my sins. I give my life to You and I accept Your forgive-

Learning to let God free you is a lifelong process that begins again each day.

If you’ve decided that you want to learn more about what it means to let God set you free, Inside Journal wants to help. Write to “Out of Egypt,” c/o Inside Journal, PO Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790. We’ll connect you with a partner that provides a free correspondence Bible study and a Bible, if you don’t already have access to one through your facility.

You can send God’s Word to your children! Try our FREE, age-appropriate Bible studies.

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Address __________________________
City __________________ State ______ Zip ______
☐ Needs Spanish Lesson

Name of child __________________ Age ______
Name of caregiver __________________
Address __________________________
City __________________ State ______ Zip ______
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Name of caregiver __________________
Address __________________________
City __________________ State ______ Zip ______
☐ Needs Spanish Lesson

You can enroll additional children, just write the information on a separate sheet of paper and send to us.

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City __________________ State ______ Zip ______

You can enroll in the Truth Chasers ClubSM, a ministry of CEF®, too! Just check the box below and we will send you your first lesson. Tell your kids that you have joined the Truth Chasers Club with them.

☐ Yes! I want to enroll in the Truth Chasers Club. ☐ Spanish

Have you ever placed your trust in Jesus Christ, asking Him to forgive your sins and make you His child? ______________ When? ______________

Please do not ask us to contact your child if there is a legal reason why you should not do so.

Send this completed form to:
CEF Truth Chasers Club
PO Box 190
Warrenton, MO 63383-9910
These Prisoners Are All Business

by A. R. Quinn

HARLOTTESVILLE, VA. — It all started with a letter. A few years ago, a prisoner at Pocahontas State Correctional Center sent a carefully typed message to the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia (UVA) in Charlottesville, asking what the famous university could do to help him find employment. The answer? Nothing.

But Robert F. Bruner, the dean of the business school, gave the letter to Gregory Fairchild, a UVA professor who was ranked as one of the Top Ten Business School Professors in the World by CNN/Forbes in 2012. Bruner asked Fairchild about the possibility of preparing a business curriculum for inmates. The idea intrigued Fairchild, who has always believed in the importance of reaching out to prisoners. “Matthew 25 is pretty clear,” Fairchild, who grew up attending church, said in an interview. “When we go to the prisoner, Jesus says that we are going to Him. So that was always a part of my perspective. I always knew that was important.”

Before long, Fairchild met with leaders in Richmond, Va., to obtain approval for a pilot entrepreneurship training program at Dillwyn Correctional Center in Virginia’s Buckingham County.

Commitment to Learning

The pilot program, which began in April 2012, brings together groups of dedicated inmate students at Dillwyn, a men’s prison, and Fluvanna, a women’s prison. Three times a week, students participate in courses facilitated by UVA business school professors and graduate students, who teach using the Socratic method. The Socratic method emphasizes questions and answers instead of lecturing, so that students have an opportunity to share their own classroom experiences and knowledge.

Fairchild and his wife, Tieme, an education expert who helps facilitate the classes at Fluvanna, have been impressed by the dedication of their students. Fairchild recalls how students made their own version of an Excel spreadsheet, carefully calculating figures by hand. Tieme was struck by the ingenuity of a woman who went from cell to cell, asking other inmates about what foods they liked and what they would be willing to pay for them, so that she could know what prices to charge for meals at a restaurant she wanted to open one day.

Inmates who successfully complete all of their classroom and math coursework, write a business plan, and pass a final exam are eligible for an entrepreneurship certificate from the prestigious business school. The Fairchilds hope this will make it easier for ex-prisoners to find jobs or start their own businesses instead of returning to prison. One of those inmates is Kirk Smith, a Virginia man now wrapping up a 20-year sentence, who was interviewed by the Darden Report for an article in 2012. “I’m still scared,” said Smith, who plans to use his new entrepreneurial skills to start a custom painting business. “At times, I was pulling my hair out. But now I have more confidence. Now I believe I can start this business. I know I would have failed miserably without this class.”

Even though the extra hours are sometimes long, the Fairchilds continue the program because they believe the entrepreneurship program can help ex-prisoners gain the confidence and skills they need to succeed. “I believe people can change,” Fairchild told the Darden Report.

A Growing Movement

The Fairchilds are not the first to believe that real-world entrepreneurial skills can help ex-offenders compete in the job market. Before launching the program, Gregory traveled to Texas to study its Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP), a nonprofit organization founded by a former Wall Street professional. PEP’s teaching model is based on the belief that inmates have hidden potential, and with business savvy shared by experts, they can craft plans for successful new ventures. Over the last decade, PEP graduates have enjoyed some of the best rehabilitation rates in the country. The vast majority never return to prison. It’s still too early to tell whether, like PEP, the Darden program will help its graduates pass the ultimate test by succeeding when they return to the community. But the Fairchilds are optimistic. They trust that employers will see what they have grown to see in their students: that they belong in a suit and tie instead of a prison jumpsuit.

Movement on Sentencing Reform

by Sarah Chaffee

In 2013, Paul and U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder proposed revisions to federal charging policies on mandatory minimum sentencing and expanded the criteria for compassionate release.

Flexibility on Mandatory Minimums

“Too many Americans go to too many prisons for too long, and for no truly good law enforcement reason,” Holder said to the American Bar Association in August, announcing changes in federal charging policy.

In the reforms introduced by the Department of Justice, “certain low-level, nonviolent drug offenders who have no ties to large-scale organizations, gangs, or cartels will no longer be charged with offenses that impose draconian mandatory minimum sentences,” Holder said.

This change is somewhat retroactive. “[The department has issued new guidance to apply our updated charging policy not only to new matters,” Holder said on September 19, “but also to pending cases where the defendant was charged before the policy was issued but is still awaiting adjudication of guilt.”

While most agree with releasing mandatory minimums, not all support Holder’s change. Congress – not the Department of Justice – should initiate reform, argued former Attorney General Michael Mukasey. “The way to do that [get rid of mandatory minimums] is to pass a law, not to simply say you’re going to disregard the law,” he explained to CNN. Mukasey may get his wish if Congress passes Paul’s and Senator Patrick Leahy’s (D-Vermont) Justice Safety Valve Act of 2013. This legislation would allow judges to sentence below mandatory minimums in all federal crimes, not just drug-related offenses.

Compassionate Release Eligibility Broadened

At the August meeting, Holder also announced “revised criteria for elderly inmates who did not commit violent crimes and who have served significant portions of their sentences.” According to the White House website, a federal inmate may apply for a reduction in their sentence if they face medical situations (terminal and non-terminal), situations where the caregiver for their child dies, situations where their spouse suffers serious medical/mental impairment, aging (certain circumstances). Normally, federal prisoners re-offend at a rate of 41 percent. But according to a Bureau of Prisons study, the three-year rate of recidivism under compassionate release reaches only 3.5 percent.

For the Department of Justice’s changes to compassionate-release and mandatory-minimum sentencing may ultimately mean shorter prison terms and more time with family – something John Homer would have enjoyed.