



Reflections

"It Takes a Village": A Personal Account of Reentry Education and Becoming a Reentry Educator

David Garlock

Success after incarceration is not just attributed to the person returning but is a result of the village that one has. This correlates with the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." That same village is needed for a formerly incarcerated person to be successful. The village includes the person's family, community, employer, place of faith, and support groups. This provides a tight knit group of people who are speaking life into this individual, whereas the streets would speak harm into their life.

On April 1st, 2013, I was released from prison in Alabama after having served 13½ years of a 25-year sentence for murder after taking the life of my abuser. I went to prison as a 20-year-old and was released as a 33-year-old who had lost his mother, father, grandmother, and sister during this time. Walking out of prison into an unknown world, I had to do it without my actual family being there for me to assist me on this new journey.

Part of my village was created when I walked into the Equal Justice Initiative's (EJI) Post Release Education Program (PREP). EJI is an organization that was founded by Bryan Stevenson

Walking out of prison into an unknown world, I had to do it without my actual family being there for me to assist me on this new journey.

in 1989 to fight for those who had been sentenced to the Death Penalty. EJI has won over 160 exonerations for clients along with winning Supreme Court cases that deemed life without parole sentences for children were unconstitutional. EJI worked with both my brother and me, helping us both obtain parole and accepting us into their reentry program.

This program provided me with the necessary skills and understanding of society that the Alabama Department of Corrections did not give me upon my release. I went through the

ADOC's "reentry program", which was a 2-day class that only covered too-basic skills: how to write a resume, banking ins and outs, basic job interview skills (skills that I already possessed) and a list of reentry programs and organizations – half of which no longer existed or their number had been disconnected.

A key component of my success was the mock interviewing that I did with staff of EJI. I was coached on how to discuss my offense, how that it was to not be the "main thing" but what I learned from my time on the inside and my goals/objectives in life were my "main thing". This was something that the ADOC would have never shown or taught because they constantly defined us by the worst thing that we did and always dehumanized us.

This program provided me with the necessary skills and understanding of society that the Alabama Department of Corrections did not give me upon my release.

My employment history when I was released is two-fold. My first job, which I didn't obtain until I was out of prison for 1½ months, only lasted 1 day and 2 hours. It was not because I did anything wrong or because I failed to disclose my conviction. The GM told me I was being fired because the company had a policy prohibiting hiring people with a previous violent offense, but I found out later that was false, and it was just her personal opinion. While interviewing for my second job days later and using my skills acquired from my training through EJI's mock interviewing, I had the opportunity to explain the gap on my resume to the owner. I shared about what led me to prison, what I did while I was in prison, and the goals that I had created for myself. He told me that he had never hired anyone who had ever been incarcerated before, but because I was open and honest that he was going to hire me. I worked there and was even promoted once during the remaining 6 months I lived in Alabama.

The church that I attended upon my release was so supportive and accepting of me and consistent with their commitment to prison ministry, providing me with an opportunity to do 'reentry education' in a difference sense, educating young people while I was 'in reentry,' about harm and the criminal justice system. The first day I was there, I was even called up on stage to talk about the ministry and how it impacted my life. The congregation was so welcoming; I was one of the members and was never looked at or defined by the crime that sent me to prison. After 3 months, I began working with the youth group. Sharing my story with the youth was a meaningful opportunity to educate them about what could happen in their lives, but also about the redemption that is possible after hitting rock bottom and being in the miry pit.

My village had provided a foundation for me and spoke life into me. I knew that I was going to be able to accomplish my goals and make my dreams a reality. When I moved to Pennsylvania to begin my college studies, my goals shifted and I was nudged into doing criminal justice reform and reentry 'education' work. I was living out what Glenn E. Martin says: "Those who are closest to the problem are closest to the solution but are furthest from the resources." I decided to use my experiences to help others.

A new village was created when I walked onto the campus at Eastern University. The faculty was aware of my background and was very supportive of me being there to pursue my education and during my second week on campus my testimony was put in the school newspaper. I helped with the piece, so it was a way to connect with the students. So many students came up and shared their own experiences along with thanking me for being so open about my past. This article allowed me to be accepted by the whole campus where I didn't have to win people over on a one by one basis. I don't know if I was the only person who had a background on campus,

so having some type of group like Underground Scholars could have added to my time on campus. I found a strong community in our Prison Ministry as I was able to give a different perspective to the work that we were doing and how much it meant to those on the inside.

I didn't expect, though, to be pushed even further when interviewing for my first job after graduation. While I was finishing up my last semester, I applied to a Christian reentry organization. After my first interview, they shared that their organization primarily worked with people who had been convicted of a sexual offense. As a victim of child sexual abuse and someone who took the life of my abuser, could I work with this population? I immediately replied that I could, because I believed in grace, mercy and forgiveness. Bryan Stevenson always says, "You're not as bad as the worst thing you've ever done." It was my turn to be part of the village for these men getting out of prison who were going to feel isolated and cast out. I was able to encourage them and show them with my life how I was able to turn things around. I walked through the steps that the EJI staff went through with me. It was an opportunity to give to them what was so freely given to me.

As a victim of child sexual abuse and someone who took the life of my abuser, could I work with this population?

Early on in my time there I saw that employment was going to be a tremendous barrier for most of these men, so I created a way to circumvent this process. I went to the job fairs and found employers who were open to having a conversation about hiring men on the registry. I would share my story and data about those convicted of sexual offenses, and this helped employers see them as humans. They agreed to hire the men if they would be able to pass the necessary background checks relevant to their jobs. It was so incredible to be able to break down barriers for these men and know that they were going to be able to find employment and not looked down upon because of their offense.

It was my turn to be part of the village for these men getting out of prison who were going to feel isolated and cast out.

My village has grown over the years as life progressed and as a result of the work that I now do on a regional and national level. I am still connected with a lot of those individuals who provided that initial welcome home and help me in achieving my goals. My network continues to pour into me and challenges me to keep pressing on and

dream bigger. Likewise, I'm still in touch with some of my fellow returning citizens, cheering them on. My village is something that I will never take for granted.



David L. Garlock is a successful returning citizen, reentry professional, and criminal justice reform advocate. David enjoys educating the next generation of criminal justice professionals on rehabilitation and advocating in various spheres for an effective and equitable justice system. He is a writer, author and poet who shares his story in many written forms. He is on numerous non-profit boards, along with being a frequent speaker at colleges and universities, criminal and social justice conferences, and community events. He was in the movie *Just Mercy* in 2020 and presented at TEDx Arcadia in April of 2022.

To cite this article:

Garlock, D. (2023). "It Takes a Village": A Personal Account of Reentry Education and Becoming a Reentry Educator. *Dialogues in Social Justice*, 8 (2), Article R1659.