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For Female Ex-Cons, College Degrees and New Lives

Carolyn Weaver

"I never imagined I would end up in prison," says Vivian Nixon. "I was supposed to go to law school, or be in some other profession. But I don't consider it a mistake. I consider it the thing that pushed me onto the path I belonged on."

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Post-release program

"A lot of her students would move on, to another correctional facility, or go home, and the question in her mind was always, will they ever finish college without someone pushing them to do it?" says Nixon, now CCF's executive director, and an ordained minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. "And she was probably right to guess, no, they

wouldn't, because the demands one faces when coming home from prison are huge: Women have to reconnect with children who were in foster care, women have to work, find a place to live."

Most post-release programs focus on helping ex-prisoners with immediate needs like jobs or housing. In contrast, CCF matches women with the college programs that best suit their needs and goals, and helps them apply for admission and financial aid. And it offers ongoing counseling support for participants, most of whom juggle school with full-time jobs and family responsibilities. Funds to support the program - which spends about \$4,000 a year on each participant - come mainly from private groups and foundations.

Redemption

A former participant herself, Nixon entered the program soon after her release from prison in 2001. She had served three years for forging checks and falsifying documents, to support a drug habit. In prison, she tutored other inmates, and found a calling.

"What was missing for me, and what I think was missing in the world, was an organization that tapped into what was left of people's hopes and dreams, that said it's okay for you to want to be something," she says. "You don't have to accept just any job at a fast-food restaurant or cleaning up a hotel, or cleaning up the streets of New York City. You can still have desires and goals, and we're going to help you meet those desires and goals."

CCF holds regular get-togethers for its 270 current participants, with a social hour and lectures on things like financial literacy and career development. Each begins with the women updating the group on their educational progress. Many go on to graduate-level programs.

Selina Fulford, for example, is working on her second Masters degree, and - she told the group at a recent meeting - she is planning to go on to a PhD program. "And I'm also an adjunct professor at the College of New Rochelle, so anybody that goes to the college and needs some help, come and see me!" she said to applause.

Moving on

Vivian Nixon says all the women share a goal: building new lives and moving past the

shame of having been in prison.

"Even if we, looking from the outside, believe that someone has reached a point where there is no hope, and they are so broken and beaten down - there's always something left. And I believe in the potential of everybody," she says. "We're taking whoever comes to us, and we're using whatever they have left in them, to get them to a point where they can believe in themselves again."

Nationally, about one in three women who are released from prison are sent back again because of new convictions or parole violations. But among women who participate in CCF, the rate is close to zero.

"For me, the greatest result is that people are dreaming again, and having high hopes for themselves, high hopes for their children," Nixon says. "To the world, our greatest result is that our constituents don't go back to prison. It just doesn't happen."

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