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A business of second chances

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By **MATT CHANDLER**

mchandler@bizjournals.com | 716-541-1654

It's Monday morning at Bissonette House and volunteer Charles Henry is at the kitchen sink scrubbing dirty dishes with a big smile on his face.

Being elbow-deep in a pile of greasy pots and pans doesn't usually bring smiles, but for him, it's all about perspective. Henry, 40, has spent more than 16 years in prison on multiple robbery convictions. These days, however, he is enrolled in the culinary arts program at Erie Community College and looking to get his life on track.

He said he owes his new outlook in part to the staff and volunteers at Peaceprints Prison Ministries. They took him in when he left prison and showed him that it wasn't too late to turn his life around.

Peaceprints works with men who have been paroled, providing shelter, food, clothing and - for men like Henry - hope.

"I just want to give back for what was given to me," he said of his volunteer work with the program, from which he graduated. "They helped me get into school and I want to be able to help someone else by giving them opportunities."

He echoes a sentiment that is a core philosophy of the program. It isn't easy to reintegrate back into society after a lengthy prison stint, but programs such as Peaceprints have helped open doors for Henry and many others.

In his case, that meant advocating to get him an education to help reduce the chance he would follow the statistics and someday return to prison.

"They (the colleges) really don't want to have ex-cons in college right away, so it is tough," Henry said. "It took a lot of work for me to get in and a lot of people had to extend themselves to help me. Now I want to pave the path and show the guys that you can do it."

Houses of hope

Sharon Spaker is executive director of Peaceprints Prison Ministries. She said she sees men who have made mistakes but genuinely want a chance to work hard and make amends as the rule, not the exception.

She leads a group of 17 staff members and 68 volunteers who annually assist about 130 men looking to remain free of the prison system.

"We are primarily providing transitional housing for people who otherwise don't have a place to go," Spaker said. "We provide comprehensive case-management services, anger-management programs and we work with the men to offer referrals on social-service programs, therapeutic services and those sorts of programs."

Peaceprints also operates weekly support groups in seven correctional facilities in Western New York and provides as many as 1,000 gift bags to inmates at



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Christmastime.

The numbers are grim for men who enter the prison system, and Spaker said that's one reason a program like Peaceprints is so vital to the community.

"The accepted recidivism rate nationally is between 65 and 75 percent," she said. "We calculate that our programs reduce that by 30 percent."

In a program filled with people convicted of every imaginable crime, from robbery to murder, what's behind the success of Peaceprints?

"I think whenever you meet people's needs, you will reduce the likelihood that they will return to prison," she said. "I know that if I just got off a bus with \$40 and no place to go, about the second thing I'm going to have to do is steal my lunch."

By the numbers

Peaceprints has four locations in Buffalo: the Bissonette House; the Peter and Paul House; Cephas House, for former inmates who have been locked up for a lengthy prison term; and a three-resident home in the city for men who are close to being independent but continue their transition.

The Peter and Paul property, on Smith Street, is undergoing a \$700,000 renovation that Spaker expects to be completed by Sept. 1. Earlier this year, the ministry purchased an adjoining vacant lot with hopes of expanding in the near future. It's all part of the effort to meet the needs of a group that is underserved.

Spaker and her team have an annual budget of \$500,000 that comes from a mix of state agencies, private donations and faith-based organizations.

"We just got awarded our first federal grant on Friday," she said. "The grant (\$200,000) will be used to provide case management, educational services and vocational training for 75 young people in the community."

One challenge in expanding this type of program is resistance from the community. Spaker said her group has received lots of support, but there will always be challenges from those who question the program or who don't want the residents living in their neighborhoods.

"I think what the general public needs to consider is this: 95 percent of the people who are incarcerated get released," Spaker said. "They come back to our communities and will be our neighbors. So who do we want as our neighbors, the desperate or those who have been able to transition back into the community as employed, productive, taxpaying citizens?"

Coming full circle

Dave Baker counts himself among the productive citizens who graduated from the Peaceprints program at Bissonette House. He served four years in prison and came to the ministry in 2008 with hopes of turning his life around. Today he is a married father in the process of shopping for a house. He works at Bissonette as the house manager.

"When I came here, I had two state bids on me, and I saw that the people here just wanted to help me and they didn't want anything," Baker said. "There is so much TLC here from the staff and the volunteers, I think that's what sets us apart from other programs."

When he was released from prison, he said he felt alone but expected to return to the community and do whatever it took to take care of himself. Shortly after arriving at Bissonette House, he realized he had a support system and a chance to make meaningful, lasting change in his life.

"My whole lifestyle has changed, from the streets to this," he said. "And it all began with people who cared and people who showed me that I could move forward and leave my past behind me."

Today, as house manager, Baker works closely with each of the residents as they navigate their own paths to reintegration.

On this day, he sat in the dining room with Kelly Gomas, who has been at the house for a month after serving three years on a burglary conviction. Baker is walking him through the process of creating a resume. Gomas, who spent his adult life working in

construction, said he never had his own resume before. Undeterred, Baker takes him through the process, including advice on how to address the three-year gap in employment when he was incarcerated.

"These guys know I've been where they are," Baker said. "So I tell them, 'Change can happen. If I can do this, you can do it.'"

Business backing

Spaker said it is those kinds of efforts that lead to former inmates landing jobs, earning back some of the self-respect that prison may have taken from them and ensuring that they don't return to past behaviors.

She said a common misconception is that it is difficult for ex-cons to find jobs because employers see them as liabilities. Peaceprints partners with many businesses that hire them, she said, and many of those hirings develop into long-term employment.

"We have over time built up a reputation of providing very good, solid employees," she said. "So we see much less resistance to hiring former offenders."

Many employers actually like to hire the parolees, Baker noted.

"They know that they are going to have an employee that is motivated to come to work and do a good job," he said. "They are guys who are trying to better themselves. And as a bonus, the employer knows they have a parole officer watching over them, so there is incentive to do good."

If the numbers alone aren't convincing enough that the program works, talking with current and former residents of the transitional living program shows the value of having post-prison options.

Michael Piscitello has been at Bissonette for nearly two months after serving three and a half years in the Orleans Correctional Facility for burglary. With no place to turn, he arrived at the door of Bissonette House.

The program was a game-changer, he said.

"They helped me with social services, so I knew I'd have some income," he said.

"They feed you, clothe you and get you going in the right direction as far as finding a job."

For Piscitello, that helped prepare him to eventually head out on his own.

"I'm leaving here today to go move into my residence," he said.

Spaker said success stories are out there and help break down some of the barriers that keep former convicts from making a smooth transition back into society.

"One of the things that this agency has done very well is educate the community," she said. "We have seen people change their attitudes about the possibility of people reintegrating successfully. We see the barriers come down and the prejudices fall away."

No discussion of Peaceprints would be complete without mentioning Sister Karen Klimczak, who in 1985 founded what was then called Hope House on Buffalo's East Side. Friends describe her as a tireless advocate for the men in the ministry she founded, as well as a proponent of working to curb the violence plaguing parts of the city.

"We work to respectfully maintain much of the philosophy that Sister Karen founded this program on," Spaker said.

Though she devoted her life to ending violence in Buffalo, her life came to a violent end in 2006 when a resident of Bissonette House murdered her.

Despite that, Spaker said the program has had "remarkable success" in working with the men who live there.

"They want to change; they want to move forward," she said. "We work to help them do that, any way we can."

Website: www.peaceprints.org Twitter: [@Peaceprints](https://twitter.com/Peaceprints)

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