

BEATING THE ODDS

Inside his cell at the Allegheny County Jail, J'Quai Brown vowed—never again. Serving his third sentence for drug charges, he was tired of being separated from his six kids. He was fed up with being locked up in a tiny concrete block for 22 hours a day. He was worn out by life on the streets, the constant worry of getting arrested, robbed or even killed.

But for all his resolve, he was nervous about making a clean break from his old life. He had seen too many well-intentioned people leave the jail only to get rearrested.

“When they come home, they have a few job interviews and it doesn’t go right,” he said. “They give up and go back to what they know.”

But Mr. Brown escaped that cycle of jail–release–arrest because of a culinary training program called Community Kitchen Pittsburgh, which not only taught him kitchen skills, but also offered life skills and counseling for the tough re-entry process.

The 31-year-old now is a cook for Wilkinsburg-based Revival Chili. He worked on the company’s food truck before it was destroyed by fire this fall, which led to him taking Revival Chili on the road with a pop up tent and a table.

Programs in the Pittsburgh region that aim to reduce recidivism rates offer a range of strategies, from job training like Community Kitchen to educational support to youth development activities that focus on resilience and coping skills.

These efforts can provide valuable assistance to individuals who walk out of jail with

WITH A LITTLE HELP AND SUPPORT, INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE BEEN INCARCERATED IN THE PITTSBURGH REGION ARE FINDING WAYS TO TRANSFORM THEIR LIVES AND STAY ON THE RIGHT TRACK. BY CRISTINA ROUVALIS

the odds stacked against them. They have to check a box disclosing their criminal record on job applications, often an automatic disqualifier. Many lose their driving license due to their charges. Regardless of the life they lead after release, the stigma of being an ex-convict becomes a perpetual stalker.

Overwhelmed by the challenges of rebuilding, many end up back in jail. Of the 700,000 people released from federal and state prisons each year, about 40% will be rearrested within three years, according to the RAND Corporation. Job training, mental health support, addiction services, housing and other programs have proven effective in reducing the rate of recidivism. The rearrest rate for Community Kitchen Pittsburgh, for instance, is 5%.

“It’s helping to close the revolving door of those who cycle in, cycle out and cycle back in,” said Carmen Anderson, director of Equity and Social Justice for The Heinz Endowments, which supports Community Kitchen and other initiatives to address recidivism. “It lets people get on the right trajectory so they can reclaim their lives.”

The need for these programs also ties into the national discussion on mass incarceration and racial inequities in the criminal justice system.

“Our nation incarcerates more young people than any other developed country in the world. In Allegheny County, that translated in 2016 to about 3,300 young people referred to the juvenile justice system,” said Pittsburgh Foundation President and CEO Lisa Schroeder. “We are partnering with front-line organizations to develop solutions to reduce that population... Juveniles and adults who are in confinement are predominantly black and are being held for nonviolent offenses, such as failure to pay fines and fees.”

The Endowments has incorporated several recidivism reduction efforts, including the work of both existing and new grantees, into the continuum of programs comprising the foundation’s three-year, \$10 million criminal justice reform initiative, the Restoration Project. Community Kitchen Pittsburgh is one of several that are making a difference in the lives of all ages across the region.



Elan Mizrahi

For J'Quai Brown, the skills he learned at Community Kitchen Pittsburgh after release from jail enabled him to land a job with the Revival Chili company's food truck and its diner, Nancy's Revival, in Wilkesburg Borough.

Jasiri X, a rapper and activist, helps youth in Shuman Juvenile Detention Center develop artistic skills and find their voice through 1Hood Media Academy, which he co-founded.

1Hood Media Academy

When Pittsburgh rapper and activist Jasiri X goes into Shuman Juvenile Detention Center, he encourages the youth there to record their own rap songs, write lyrics or journal.

Jasiri X, who became a national hip-hop star with his hit song “Free the Jena 6,” has only one mandate for the multimedia and music workshops he runs: “Truth is our only rule.” That truth often centers around the violence and poverty in their neighborhoods, and the barriers of racism.

The visits to Shuman Center are among the youth initiatives of 1Hood Media Academy, an Endowments grantee organization Jasiri X co-founded that helps high school students of color create their own media narratives, as opposed to the negative ones often found in newspapers and on TV. In addition to the Shuman program, for which The Pittsburgh Foundation is a funder, 1Hood Media Academy also works to prevent youth from being detained in the first place through Endowments-supported programs such as Take Action Mon Valley, which uses activism and organizing to address community violence.

As part of 1Hood’s Shuman work, students learn skills such as songwriting, structuring rap beats and music production. Jasiri X saves the finished pieces for each student on a flash drive. He also challenges the youth to analyze their own art, asking them, “What are you saying? Why are you saying it? Who are you speaking to?”



Joshua Franzos

Allegheny County Jail Collaborative

Each year, members of the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative identify some 400 jail inmates who face a high or medium risk of recidivism after release and would be eligible for the training classes run by the collaborative, a joint program of the county jail, courts, Department of Human Services and Health Department.

Inmates study subjects such as parenting, relationships and cognitive behavioral therapy. They learn how to fill out a job application online in a computer literacy course. They also can improve their math skills by several grades in preparation for tests often given to applicants in the trade industry.

“[Math is] crucial for passing a union test for trades like carpentry and bricklaying,” said Amy Kroll, director of Justice Related Services at the jail.

Even once men and women are out of jail, the Collaborative offers assistance so they don’t have to go it alone. In the post-release program, reentry service coordinators work closely with probation officers to facilitate access to housing, job training, drug and alcohol programs, and other services.

Jail Collaborative members continually tweak the model to make it more effective. So far, the one-year reincarceration rate for participants has dropped from 29% in 2014 to 22% in 2017.

“[Math is] crucial for passing a union test for trades like carpentry and bricklaying.”

Amy Kroll, director, Justice Related Services

Courtesy: Foundation of Hope



Foundation of HOPE

For Kathie Schade, the Allegheny County Jail was a dark and lonely place—except for one glimmer of hope.

She attended classes in 2018 through Foundation of HOPE, a nonprofit that offers inmates counseling and religious services, along with life skills, parenting, yoga and other classes.

“It makes your day brighter knowing that you’re going to interact with people who give you hope for whenever you get out,” she said. “They make you feel so much better about yourself because this world discriminates so much against being an addict and being incarcerated. They remind you that you are a decent human being.”

At any given time, about 20 women and 65 men participate in the program. One of the classes focuses on spirituality and is open to people of every faith.

“Many of the things that hurt us in our lives are really about looking at ourselves, where most faiths call us [to reach] out to other people and to something beyond ourselves,” said the Rev. Caitlin Werth, chaplain and program director at Foundation of HOPE. “You have the ability to broaden your worldview when you are looking at the spiritual.”

Ms. Schade said spirituality has helped her find her way. Now living in a halfway house, she participates in the aftercare program that is open to anyone who has ever been incarcerated. As part of her job search, she uses the computers at the nonprofit’s office.

Foundation of Hope also teams up with prosecutors, magistrates, police and schools on a diversion program for first-time offenders ages 12 to 26 who commit nonviolent offenses. Instead of being arrested or incarcerated, they can stay in the community and receive help.

Above: Foundation of Hope’s pre-release class helps incarcerated individuals, such as these women who are working on a group project, prepare for a life of freedom.

“Education is a powerful tool to reduce reincarceration.”

Dr. Amanda Klonsky

chief program officer, Petey Greene

Petey Greene Program

Students from Duquesne University and other area colleges are tutoring men and women in the Allegheny County Jail this school year.

It’s a mutual learning experience. Just as the incarcerated men and women will improve their math, writing and other skills, the 20 college students in the program each semester will get leadership training and learn about criminal justice issues.

They are part of a network of college tutors in the northeast who participate in the Petey Greene Program, a Princeton-based nonprofit devoted to educating incarcerated individuals and whose work in the Pittsburgh region is supported by the Endowments.

“Education is a powerful tool to reduce reincarceration,” said Dr. Amanda Klonsky, chief program officer for Petey Greene. “It helps people reach their goals and stay out of jails and prisons.

“University students who serve as volunteers often learn as much or more than incarcerated students. We want them to leave the experience with a commitment to work for social justice.”

Trade Institute of Pittsburgh

The first time Dorrian Crable picked up a trough, he just stared at the tool. “What do I do with this?” he thought.

Mr. Crable, who had just been released from Allegheny County Jail after serving a three-year sentence on drug charges, didn’t know the first thing about masonry work. But by sticking with the 10-week training program at the Trade Institute of Pittsburgh, he learned skills that have landed him a \$22-an-hour union job, plus benefits. As part of the program, he participated in a daily ritual called The Circle. Steve Shelton, the founder and executive director, leads the exercise in which each trainee shares one thing they are grateful for that day.

“Most of the people had been incarcerated and been through the wringer,” said the 33-year-old Mr. Crable. “But all these people had a positive vibe. It was like a brotherhood. They wanted each other to succeed. It seriously changed my life. I look up to Mr. Steve. He’s a father figure to me.”

The Heinz Endowments supports the Trade Institute’s work to provide free job training, life skills instruction, and help with job placement. In 2018, 71 men and women graduated from the Trade Institute, with 93% landing jobs with an average starting wage of \$15.75 an hour. The one-year rearrest rate is 3%, compared to the statewide rate of 22%.

“We are starting to see positive results from these programs,” said Matt Barron, sustainability program officer for the Endowments. “Otherwise, people feel trapped and turn to the underground economy.”

Mr. Shelton described his program as often a last resort. “When you only have two options left in life—going back to jail or ending up dead—those are pretty grim options,” he said. “When they come here, they are fighting for their lives.”

Courtesy of The Trade Institute of Pittsburgh



The Trade Institute of Pittsburgh trains formerly incarcerated individuals in building trades skills and provides job placement assistance.

“We want them to see there is hope and different pathways to choose.”

Dr. Jacqueline Edmondson
chancellor and chief academic officer,
Penn State Greater Allegheny

PROJECT GAME

Penn State Greater Allegheny is a branch campus located in the heart of McKeesport, a depressed steel town. It is also the site of an innovative new program to help boys ages 10 to 18 who have gotten into legal trouble take a new path into the future, one that leads them to the workforce or secondary education instead of jail.

PROJECT GAME works with male youth leaving the Community Intensive Supervision Program (CISP), a community-based alternative to residential placement. CISP centers are in the Pittsburgh neighborhoods of Garfield, the Hill District, Homewood and the North Side, and in two towns outside of the city, McKeesport and Wilkinsburg.

As part of PROJECT GAME, which began this fall, staff at Penn State Allegheny offer 30 young men mentoring, life skills training and free legal advice to help them expunge their records. Dr. Jacqueline Edmondson, chancellor and chief academic officer at Penn State Greater Allegheny, studied other models nationwide, including Homeboy Industries, a Los Angeles program that has turned around the lives of former gang members.

Dr. Edmondson said that through PROJECT GAME, staff want young men in the program “to see there is hope and different pathways to choose.”

Felicia Savage Friedman, owner of YogaRoots on Location, takes her yoga practices on the road, including to Shuman Juvenile Detention Center where students use yoga to deal with trauma and stress.



Courtesy of Felicia Savage

Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh Foundation

When Felicia Savage Friedman leads a yoga class at Shuman Juvenile Detention Center, she teaches more than breathing and various poses.

She helps the youth there talk about their emotions and experiences. Ms. Friedman, owner of YogaRoots on Location, and other instructors from her studio create a safe place where the youth can work through trauma and stress.

The classes are part of a Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh Foundation program that teaches resilience, mindfulness and other skills. Ms. Friedman and the yogis she trained hold the classes at Shuman a few times a week.

“Any time you take a child out of their home, they are going through trauma. We put their humanity first,” she said in explaining the rationale for her classes. “They are given a sanctuary where they can be seen and heard. We don’t ask why they are there. We call them youth, not juveniles. Juveniles is such a violent term.”

Class participants discuss things such as institutional racism and racial disparities in education and health care. They are given a chart illustrating 72 different emotions. These tools can help them express themselves both at the center and later in life.

An Endowment’s grant also allows improved coordination of care for youth at Shuman and professional training for staff members so they can better cope with the stresses of the job and use positive approaches with the youth.

“These kids have been told over and over that they are bad and damaged,” said Dr. Elizabeth Miller, medical director at Shuman and director of the Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine at Children’s Hospital. “We want to recognize these young people as the jewels they are.” **h**