

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/dispatches-from-t-r-u-e/dream-chasers>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Shyquinn is a basketball player at the University of Maine in Presque Isle, where he is pursuing a bachelor's degree in sociology. He is also a former mentee at the TRUE unit in the Cheshire Correctional Institution in Connecticut.

The beginning of my incarceration was tough.

It was my first time in prison. I was a 22-year-old kid, scared and confused. I realized I couldn't go home. I didn't really understand how real it was going to be for me at first. I felt sick and thought about giving up on my life multiple times. Being in general population is a whole different world. You have every type of criminal around you.

It's difficult to have a different type of strength, a sense of hope to navigate around the pessimistic rhythms that go on daily.

The TRUE program relieved me of that soon, as I heard we weren't going to be in the cell 23 hours a day.

I immediately signed up just for that reason only. I didn't care about anything else. My mind was extremely warped. I felt like correctional officers were cops just in prison and that's all. Staff didn't care about us as incarcerated people. They looked down on us and maybe even considered us scum.

When I got to TRUE, the energy in the air was different. I am big on the whole energy thing. When I say I didn't feel a negative vibe, I mean it.

It felt weird in that block. I walked out of my cell and a correctional officer came up to me and said, Wassup, good morning brother!!! Man, I didn't respond. I thought I was tripping. Then he said it again and said, Have a good day. Welcome to TRUE.

His name was Vassar. I just looked him up and down and kept on moving. But on the inside, I'm not going to lie, it made me smile. I felt like it was genuine, no sarcasm, no nothing. Everyday this same correctional officer, I saw him talking to everybody. He was always talking, interacting with everybody like he was happy to be at work.

I've never seen a correctional officer who loved coming to work and interacting with incarcerated people. That's different. I don't care what anybody says. That alone speaks volumes about his character; in general population, it always seemed dull and full of bad energy. A lot of the times the officers came off miserable and took their frustrations out on incarcerated people. It seemed like a power and control thing.

Then after a week of being in TRUE, I remember I was in the cell and Vassar came up to me and said, If you want a second chance take this opportunity serious. I still didn't believe him. But he was so consistent with everyone I had to give it a shot.

I was in TRUE for one year before I was released, and I went through a lot during that year. Vassar never showed another side. He stayed on me every day and made sure I was good mentally. The funny part is that we barely talked about basketball. But one day we were in the block in discussion group and a college coach walked in!!! It was the most emotional day of my life!!

I swear I thought Vassar was selling me a dream. Why would he want to help me? He's a cop and gets paid to lock me up basically. Man, when I saw that coach's face and he walked up to me and shook my hand, words can't explain how I felt. It was as if a 10-million-pound rock fell off my shoulder. I still put in the work with my fellow mentees and the help of the mentors and staff from TRUE. I was able to obtain the opportunity of a lifetime college.

There were other coaches that showed interest during my time at TRUE. But this one coach, Coach Dan Kane from University of Maine at Presque Isle (UMPI), came to visit me. He asked me to tell him about Shy before prison. Before I started really explaining my story, he stopped me and said, I don't judge. I don't judge people off of their interactions with other people, just the interactions they have with me.

I've seen Vassar help so many people in TRUE. One day somebody is going to bless that dude. Now that I'm home (thanks to TRUE, Vera, and UMPI Coach Dan Kane), I am well-equipped and prepared for any obstacle thrown my way. My experience in the TRUE program taught me a lot, but most importantly it taught me to never judge anybody based on their past or perception. That alone speaks on character. Change is hard, but it's worth the struggle.

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