

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

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STEPHEN'S TABLE NEWSLETTER

AN OPEN TABLE OUTREACH

We use quite a bit of poetry at Chattanooga Endeavors – but not from poets who are typically well known. A favorite of ours is Etheridge Knight (1931-1991). While mostly overlooked by the mainstream, Knight is one of the most naturally gifted American poets of the late last century. He also served eight years in prison on a robbery conviction — which is where he learned to write poetry.

As part of the New Black Aesthetic, Knight stands against anything that separates him from his community or his readers. Therefore, you won't find him using needlessly complicated language or unrelatable experiences....

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CHATTANOOGA ENDEAVORS

We are striving for a day when legitimate second chances are accessible to all former offenders and their loved ones in the Chattanooga area.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Chattanooga Endeavors

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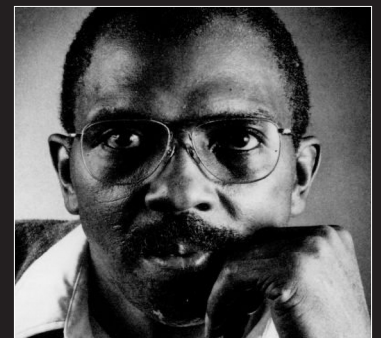
If you're from the Chattanooga area

REQUEST A FREE COPY OF OUR

- ☐ Chattanooga Area Services Directory
- ☐ Reentry Checklist
- ☐ Job Seekers Worksheet
- ☐ Prisoner Resources Directory

SIGN UP FOR

- ☐ Pen Pal
- ☐ Reentry Planning
- ☐ Employment Assistance



Etheridge Knight, Poet

WELCOME TO OUR FIRST EDITION

After a few false starts, we've settled on a format for keeping in touch with you and other Chattanooga area residents who have contacted us through Stephen's Table. Our objective hasn't changed. We remain committed to matching everyone we can with a community volunteer to exchange letters with. However, while you're waiting (if you're waiting) we want to do our part to start (or support) that exchange with a correspondence of our own. Either way, we hope that what we write will be of some interest to you and that it will give you a taste of how we operate our program in Chattanooga — with extraordinary respect and a focus on committed action in service of what matters to you. With that in mind, it's my pleasure to welcome you to our first monthly installment of Community Connections. Please let us know what you think.

~ Timothy Dempsey, Founding Director



*William Stafford (January 17, 1914 – August 28, 1993) was an American poet and pacifist. His first major volume, *Traveling Through the Dark*, came late in life. Nevertheless, he wrote more than 22,000 poems and published more than 3,000. The morning of his death he had written a poem containing the lines: "You don't have to / prove anything," my mother said. "Just be ready / for what God sends."*

THE WAY IT IS

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

~ William Stafford



THE HOUSE OF REFUGE



The House of Refuge is listed as a "Christ-centered residential and work program breaking the cycle of addiction, poverty and incarceration for Chattanooga area families." The program is for men and lasts 12 months.

COMMUNITY SERVICE UPDATE

The House of Refuge was recently added to the TDOC list of approved transitional housing programs — making it the first program in Chattanooga to be included on this list in almost twenty years. The facility is operated by St. Elmo-based Church of the First Born. This non-denominational church describes its membership as "believers and followers of the Scriptural True Messiah, who is our example & our threshold unto our Heavenly Father!" To learn more about what the House of Refuge has to offer and to find out if you are eligible, please get in touch with:

The House of Refuge
3418 Saint Elmo Avenue
Chattanooga, Tennessee 37409
(423) 756-5919

CHATTANOOGA ENDEAVORS UPDATE

Established in 1988 as a chapter of Dismas House, Chattanooga Endeavors provides advocacy, training, and support services to access the resources needed for a second chance, learn the skills needed to succeed in the workforce, and live a life in service of what matters.

We were recently funded to re-establish our employment program at Chattanooga Endeavors. This means that, if you're from the area, there will be a place waiting to help you find a job when you come home. In addition, we're now able to help with your reentry plan while you're still incarcerated. And soon we'll be able to connect you with area employers through paid work-training assignments.

Any Tennessee prisoner from Hamilton County is eligible for our reentry planning — if within four months of getting out. Those who are able to work also qualify for our employment program. If you believe you are eligible and would like to know more, please use the enclosed envelope to send us a letter explaining your circumstances and how we can help.

BLOG POST SECOND CHANCES

MAKING STEREOTYPES WORK FOR YOU (FROM OUR BLOG)

If you were to serve time in Philadelphia in the early 1800s, you'd be assigned to a single cell and given its number to use as your name while there. You'd still be a number. But just temporarily. When you got out, officials reasoned, you'd leave your prison identity behind with your cell. A fresh start — unencumbered by the stigma that comes with incarceration. Well, okay then!

Whatever sliver of hope there might have been 200 years ago for a fresh start after prison, that time is long gone. Present realities make it impossible to escape your history and the incredibly strong stereotypes that come with a felony conviction. But that's not entirely bad. In fact, there are ways to make stereotypes work to your advantage when looking for a second chance. And it starts with first impressions.

No matter how untrue it should be -- the fact of the matter is that every time you show up for a job interview, you show up with a whole host of criminal stereotypes. Most people think that everyone who has been



convicted of a crime looks a certain way, talks a certain way, acts a certain way -- and, most importantly, thinks a certain way. Thinking like a criminal means you're untrustworthy. And no one hires untrustworthy candidates. Would you?

This unfortunate stereotype is fueled by the media, which — for good or bad...but mostly bad — takes advantage of a general fascination and fear of the unknown in order to peddle its narrative about crime and corrections. Although this narrative can sometimes be instructive, mostly it just dramatizes, glamorizes, and otherwise commercializes prison. This at the expense of second chances, which are harder to come by as a result.

So how do you make stereotypes work for you?

You break them! If you show up to an interview and you look, talk, and act like a criminal -- then the person reviewing your qualifications will assume that you also think like a criminal and recycle your application. On the other hand, if you show up for an interview and you don't look, talk and act like a criminal-- well, then, you have their attention.

As Americans, we have a natural affinity for underdogs. It's in our genes. And this affinity can work to your advantage. When you succeed in separating yourself from the criminal stereotype, you can cause a hiring manager to think that you just might be that underdog who comes from behind. It won't get you past being otherwise unqualified for a job -- or policies that prohibit hiring felons. However, it will help to level the competition. And ultimately, a level competition is what you seek.

REFLECTION

Each class at Chattanooga Endeavors receives a "fragment" to consider as part of our work-readiness training. They are fragments in that their meaning is incomplete. And their meaning remains incomplete until they are broken to the heart. Like Christian parables, Rabbinic allegories, or Zen koans, our fragments don't explain themselves. Instead, they invite deeper reflection.

Although you're missing the context (more on that in a future edition), you can still work with one of our fragments. Here's how: Over the next week or two let the words below be your companion. Keep them in the back of your mind as you go about your business. And as the opportunity arises, spend some time meditating on their meaning and searching yourself for how this relates to you.

*Your neighbor wishes he could trade his problems for yours.
You wish to oblige him.*

DEAR STEPHEN

One of our readers asked whether there is any truth to a memo he saw claiming that federal assistance is available to released prisoners because incarceration is a disabling experience. It includes the following advice:

Go immediately to the Social Security office and ask to speak to a counselor so that you can apply for Social Security Insurance Emergency Supplement Benefits of \$1,500.00. Explain that you are emotionally and mentally unprepared to hold a job. Show them your parole or release papers in order to prove that you are just out of prison.

Note: You should receive that check within 24 hours.

This memo has been around for at least 30 years — as long as Chattanooga Endeavors. Prisoners are warned that they need to follow the instructions exactly and refuse to take “no” for an answer.

Although incarceration can be debilitating, unfortunately it is not true that this qualifies you for SSI when released. But don’t let that stop you from applying, if you believe you have a qualifying disability.

In general, to qualify for SSI, you must have a medically determinable physical or mental impairment (including an emotional or learning problem) which: (1) results in the inability to do any substantial gainful activity; and (2) can be expected to result in death; or has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of not less than 12 months.

If you think you have a qualifying disability, contact us when you get out and we can put you in touch with someone who has been specially trained for increased approval rates.

ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

Continued from cover

He talks often about prison because the experience lived deeply in him. And because of that, his poems usually stir up lively discussions in our classes at Chattanooga Endeavors. Here is one where he strings together a group of haikus to make a musical sequence of prison scenes.

Note: A haiku is a traditional Japanese poem written in three lines of five, seven, then five syllables. They are meant to be pure image. However, you’ll notice in his sequence below, Knight slips in some commentary between the lines — and then totally breaks from the tradition in no. 9.

HAIKU

- 1 Eastern guard tower
glints in sunset; convicts rest
like lizards on rocks.
- 2 The piano man
is stingy, at 3 A.M.
his songs drop like plum.
- 3 Morning sun slants cell.
Drunks stagger like cripple flies
On jailhouse floor.
- 4 To write a blues song
is to regiment riots
and pluck gems from graves.

- 5 A bare pecan tree
slips a pencil shadow down
a moonlit snow slope.
- 6 The falling snow flakes
Cannot blunt the hard aches nor
Match the steel stillness.
- 7 Under moon shadows
A tall boy flashes knife and
Slices star bright ice.
- 8 In the August grass
Struck by the last rays of sun
The cracked teacup screams.
- 9 Making jazz swing in
Seventeen syllables AIN'T
No square poet's job.

CHATTANOOGA ENDEAVORS | SECOND CHANCES FOR FORMER OFFENDERS AND THEIR LOVED ONES

www.chattanoogaendeavors.org

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