

Stories of Transition: Men and Women in the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative's Reentry Program



Photo by Margaret Stanley, Allegheny County photographer, September 2012

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The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) is dedicated to meeting the human services needs of county residents, particularly the county's most vulnerable populations, through an extensive range of prevention, intervention, crisis management and after-care services.

This report was prepared by the Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation (DARE), an office within DHS. DARE supports and publishes research related to the activities of DHS in a number of categories, including: Aging; Basic Needs; Behavioral Health and Disabilities; Child Development and Education; Children, Youth and Families; Crime and Justice; and Innovation, Reform and Policy.

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INTRODUCTION

The Allegheny County Jail's Reentry Program is one of a set of initiatives of the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative, a partnership among the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, the Allegheny County Jail, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services, the Allegheny County Health Department, community organizations and civic leaders. The Jail Collaborative was created in 2000 in an effort to identify creative ways to improve public safety and reduce recidivism. The Reentry Program was implemented in 2010 with funds from the U.S. Department of Justice, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a group of local foundations and the Inmate Welfare Fund. More information about the Reentry Program is available at the end of this report.

More than 200 people have completed the Reentry Program since its start in 2010, and the Jail Collaborative knows from the outcomes that the program is reducing recidivism. Sophisticated evaluations will tell us more about why it is working and what we can do to make the program better.

But all of that information is in the abstract. The Jail Collaborative wants to understand what the experience of reentry is like for the people behind the statistics — the men and women who are in the midst of their transition from jail. It needs to hear their stories, including the struggles, their reflections and their advice for others.

To do this, the Jail Collaborative commissioned award-winning journalist Bill Moushey to interview participants in the Reentry Program and write their stories of transition. Moushey, who was an investigative reporter for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and winner of the National Press Club's Freedom of Information Award, agreed to this assignment on one condition: that he be permitted to write in his unvarnished way.

These are the first two of Bill Moushey's reports about men and women in transition. Their memories of their experiences in jail are still fresh, and they spoke openly with Moushey about the help they received and the challenges they faced during jail and since their release. Their names have been changed to protect their privacy.

SAMUEL R.

As 53-year-old Samuel R. sat in the Allegheny County Jail in the summer of 2010, at long last he decided the almost non-stop drug-induced revolving door in and out of jails that had destroyed almost everything he treasured had to end.

This time, he was charged with robbery and related crimes for stealing scrap metal in plain view of its owner. Sitting in jail, Samuel considered the latest boneheaded theft and the fact that it was the 43rd time he was locked up, including two stints in state prisons.

"I was at the bottom of bottoms. I knew in my heart if I didn't do something, I was going to die," he said.

He decided to immediately embrace change during the 11½–23 month sentence he accepted for the theft. That's when he found his way to the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative's new Reentry Program.

A veteran of drug and alcohol programs in and out of jails during his 30 years of abuse, he quickly learned the Reentry Program was unlike others he'd encountered, where con artist addicts and alcoholics like him used treatment programs to shorten sentences.

"They taught me all the basic things I need to understand that I don't have to continue that lifestyle, that I can move forward."

Samuel was told the day he signed up for the Reentry Program that it would not result in less jail time. He was told if he really wanted to change, the Reentry Program would give him that opportunity.

Unlike any of his past imprisonments, he was amazed to learn it also offered specific support on his release.

Two years later, he has remained free of drugs and is working daily to keep his mind free of the compulsion to use.

He credits the Reentry Program with giving him direction, providing him with essentials that afforded him the opportunity to embrace programming inside and outside of jail, and, for the first time in his life, providing a foundation for successfully finding sobriety.

"They taught me all the basic things I need to understand that I don't have to continue that lifestyle, that I can move forward," he said.

One of 15 kids from working-class Brookline, Samuel was just 18 years old when he married his pregnant girlfriend. The four-and-a-half-year marriage produced a daughter, now 38, before it ended in divorce. He also has a son.

Samuel did not take the breakup well, plunging into the drug culture that started with smoking marijuana and quickly degenerating to pills and eventually cocaine, heroin and a variety of other “bad choices that before I knew it, I was involved [with drugs] on a daily basis,” he said.

A long list of non-violent arrests started in 1979 when he went to jail on burglary charges. Over the years, he was locked up in prison twice, along with many shorter sentences in county lockups all over the country. He knew his problems were rooted in drug abuse, but his problems were so acute “that it took control of my thinking.”

“I was ignorant as to what recovery had to offer, so I continued to ignore it,” he said.

Along the way, he said he overdosed on drugs five times, went through at least four stints in drug rehabilitation, and has been through so many detoxification programs he can't keep count. Jobs came and went, almost always because of his personal demons.

“I was an absolute maniac,” he said of his life of menial crime to satisfy his addictions. In fact, he remains surprised that a series of judges didn't sentence him to a long prison term as a serial offender.

“They knew I was a person with a problem. They gave me many opportunities to get my life right. I just couldn't get it through my head,” he said.

By 2010, his prescription drug abuse had become so severe that he was living in isolation, his life totally consumed with drugs.

“I was waiting for the bitter end,” he said.

When he learned a warrant was issued for his arrest for stealing scrap metal in Brookline to get money for dope, he submitted himself for what proved to be his last detoxification program and then turned himself in.

“Before I went in [to jail] I told myself this is the last time. I'd said that before, but this time it was different,” he said.

A few days after he'd agreed to a plea to do about a year in the county jail for the theft, a brother, who also had a history of drug abuse, died. Samuel couldn't get out for the funeral. A niece disappeared, never to be seen again. The helpless feelings steeled his resolve to get well.

When he learned about the new Reentry Program at the jail, he enrolled and quickly found the comprehensive programs were nothing like anything he'd encountered before.

Instead of group meetings where inmates listened to vague preaching about the dangers of drugs and booze, this all-day program enabled him to take a hard look at himself, as harrowing as it might be.

It offered Samuel unprecedented comprehensive drug and alcohol treatment, and helped set up aftercare on his release. While he had secured his GED during a prison stint, the new program provided a wide assortment of tools in basic literacy, computer skills and other educational opportunities. There was also guidance on how to repair relationships with family. He would spend most days moving from one class to another at the jail.

"It helped me get my focus, get clarity of what I needed when I got out," he said.

Among the tutorials he values is the guidance he received on how to repair relationships with his family, which had been torn asunder during his years of abuse.

"They helped me to understand that I need to better myself in order to be there for them. I learned no matter what I did in the past, there is a future," he said.

The counseling gave him specific tools to use in rebuilding bonds with his children, "...to reconnect with them, and allow them to reconnect with me."

"I really believed it this time, because I did not have a lot of choices. It was either continue to be the way I was and die, or start working on myself."

Samuel said he also began undergoing a spiritual re-awakening in jail and afterwards.

"I really believed it this time, because I did not have a lot of choices. It was either continue to be the way I was and die, or start working on myself," he said.

He said he was recognized with certificates after the completion of every program. Overall, the uplifting nature of the Reentry Program helped him create a positive attitude about the future.

"I was able to stop beating myself up, start listening to the people who wanted to help me, and start doing some work in order to get better."

What's more, he said the officials working in the Reentry Program were invested in it.

"They seemed to be very sincere about their work and that helped me to be sincere. It was their job, but they were actually trying to reach and help people, and I noticed that," he said.

He says caseworker Caryn Mustakas was his rock, starting when he was still locked up and continuing for over a year.

After his many other incarcerations, Samuel said services (other than dealing with probation and parole officers) normally ended at the jail gate unless he took great pains to seek help.

He not only peered into his own psyche during the programs, but worked with the social worker to devise a very specific and focused plan for success when he was freed.

"I realized I'm not that bad a guy, and maybe I can turn this around with the help of these people. It has been a great process."

In the past, Samuel believes, a lack of help and guidance after incarceration enabled him to drift back into his long-standing, drug-addled existence.

This time when he walked out of jail, he said Mustakas and other Reentry Program personnel provided him with bus passes, a few months' rent, and other basic necessities until he got settled. They also helped him find and enroll in aftercare programs such as Narcotics Anonymous, as well as others where he could deal with health issues and begin the process of reuniting with his family. He has attended hundreds of meetings, which he says have also continued to help him.

Along the way, Mustakas was only a phone call away when any issues arose.

"It was critical for me. It was such a huge steppingstone to go back into society with a different view of me. I knew I wasn't alone," he said.

The most important element of the Reentry Program was that it "gave me hope and helped me map out a plan for success."

Now he realizes that while his one year of aftercare has ended, he needs to continue to use the tools the program has offered to stay clean of drugs and alcohol and away from crime, he said, noting he has been out of jail without incident since Aug. 29, 2011. He still considers his new life a daily work in progress.

"If I can do it, anyone can do it. I'm a miracle. I should've been dead," he said.

NOREEN S.

As Noreen S. was led from a courtroom to the Allegheny County Jail in 2012 on a felony drug conviction, she peered at the tearful, forlorn faces of her three minor children and was overcome with guilt.

Here was a 36-year-old single woman who had risen from the projects and a life in the child welfare system to earn an associate's degree and a well-paying job until she went back to the streets for money when a child's disability forced her out of work.

Sentenced to jail for the first time in her life for felony possession of crack cocaine, and a small amount of marijuana and pills, Noreen didn't dwell on her plight. Instead, she agonized over what she had done to her children.

As she was led away to do a maximum six months in jail, she felt extreme sadness and angst that she had broken a central promise she had made to her children. She always told them she would never let them go into the child welfare system that she had narrowly escaped. As the handcuffs were shackled to her wrists on that June 2012 day, she realized her kids were headed to foster and group homes because of her actions.

She felt helpless.

"If I hadn't made the stupid choices I made, they would not have been in that predicament," she lamented about the ordeal.

Just a few days after she was locked up, Amy McNicholas Kroll, administrator of the Allegheny County Jail's Reentry Program, visited her pod looking for inmates who sought real and lasting changes in their lives through the program inside the lockup and after release.

Noreen learned it not only offered training in parenting and employment possibilities, but a variety of other topics aimed at reducing recidivism. While she was interested in these introspective programs, she was sold on it once she learned successful participants may receive opportunities to talk with their children on the telephone, and actually have contact visits with them.

"When they said I could have contact with my children, I decided that's what I was going to do," she said.

By the time she started the Reentry Program, Noreen had spent a lifetime overcoming daunting odds. She was abandoned as a baby and didn't learn the woman who raised her was not her mother until she was a teenager. Living in the Broadhead Manor housing project in the city's West End, which has since been razed, she lived by the rules of the street where only the strong survive. Many of her peers ended up dead or in prison. As an angry, parentless teen who constantly got into fights and other trouble, she earned her placement into Three Rivers Youth organization's at-risk child program until she became emancipated from the system while still a teenager. She dropped out of school and worked a succession of jobs starting at age 15. She was 20 years old when she had the first of her three children, who are now 16, 14 and 12.

Her children motivated her to educate herself, in part to provide for them, but also to show them that it is possible to rise above poverty through hard work.

Eventually she got her General Equivalency Diploma and in 2006 an associate's degree in medical records administration from Kaplan School.

The degree earned her a job making a good living, which gave them enough money to rent a house of their own in Mt. Oliver.

Most important, she wanted her children to understand they could rise above their circumstances, especially if they qualify for the Pittsburgh Promise college scholarship program for city kids.

"They saw me graduate [from Kaplan]. I wanted them to see it's not how you start the race, but how you finish," she said.

Then her middle child became disabled from an accident that degenerated into a vascular disease. Then a house fire in December 2010 not only "took me into a tailspin," but left them homeless.

She found another rental in McKeesport. She enrolled her disabled child in a rehabilitation program, and decided under the circumstances that she had to home-school her.

"There was no way for me to work," she said.

That didn't mean the bills weren't piling up, so she made a fateful decision.

"Rent was due, I didn't see any outs, so I took it upon myself to sell drugs. I thought there was nothing else I could do."

Then one night a car in which she was riding was pulled over. The police found a package of drugs in her purse.

She could have been sentenced to a state prison for as long as six years. Eventually, a judge agreed to a maximum six-month sentence in exchange for a guilty plea because she did not have an extensive criminal history.

She went to jail on July 21, 2012. Because none of their fathers are in their lives, and no one else was available to care for them, her children entered the child welfare system. Her guilt about that grew by the day.

"It just helped me deal with things. You have to parent so differently [in jail]. I'm not there every moment when things are good and bad in the child's life."

While she was interested in several of the reentry programs, her short sentence only gave her time to take the parenting classes, which started with the dynamics of incarcerated parents dealing with their children. The Reentry Program's Family Support Specialist, Amanda Ludwig, was her mentor and rock who focused her on dealing with her situation.

"It just helped me deal with things. You have to parent so differently [in jail]. I'm not there every moment when things are good and bad in the child's life," Noreen said.

For instance, her son in the group home was confronted by a youth who threw hot cocoa in his face, causing him to suffer second- and third-degree burns.

The helplessness she felt was overwhelming until she spoke with Ludwig.

Ludwig helped her contact officials at the group home, caseworkers with the Allegheny County Department of Children, Youth and Families, and others to ensure he was getting adequate treatment.

"She was by my side, and gave me support to help me be able to speak to CYF and the director [of the group home], to reassure myself that my family was safe," she said.

"When you are completely powerless, she helped me not feel so powerless," Noreen said.

Ludwig helped her in many other ways.

"She helped me verbalize, she helped me channel that anxiety and angst into the proper way instead of reacting to it negatively, or holding onto it," Noreen said.

"When you hit these little bumps in the road, she was there to be, like, 'OK, now breathe... now what are we going to do?'" she'd say.

Noreen also learned through the program that one always needs a plan, or two.

First, Noreen said Ludwig impressed upon her that one thing she could control from jail was completion of the parenting program so she could prove in court her ability to care for her children so she could get them back.

First she had to overcome her own guilt-induced baggage.

"There was anger. I was upset about my kids in the system. I was angry at myself. My anger lies with myself and the choices I made. The best thing they taught me was while I might not forgive myself, I had to deal with reality," Noreen said.

She said Ludwig's rational approach changed her point of view.

"She'd say, 'OK, these are the circumstances, this is what you did, that's water under the bridge, now how can we move forward?'" Noreen said.

Noreen passed her first test by graduating from the parenting program.

"[Parenting] classes were 'just one step I didn't have to go through when I got out. I had a partner [Ludwig]. I believe my children would still be in group home and foster care settings if I didn't participate in the Reentry Program,'" she said.

During her parenting course in jail, she also delved into her own psyche to sort out why she made the choice to sell drugs instead of seeking other avenues to overcome financial despair.

"In my mind, it was perfectly OK to sell drugs because I saw it done so much. I grew up around it. It was so easy. It was easier to do that than get a job and then I could set my own hours, home school [and get care for] my child and still pay the rent," she said.

The intensive counseling from Ludwig and other counselors at the Re-entry Program also helped her develop a process of thinking through decisions in tough times based on living lawfully when things go bad.

Through the Reentry Program, she started to open her eyes to the deplorable choices she had made out of desperation.

"Most people wouldn't think, 'Oh my god, I can't afford the rent, I'll go sell drugs.' That would not be a normal reaction," she discovered.

The intensive counseling from Ludwig and other counselors at the Reentry Program also helped her develop a process of thinking through decisions in tough times based on living lawfully when things go bad.

"I learned to process things, to think things all the way through," she said.

The contact visits with her family in the Reentry Program's facilities at the jail were "positive, very, very positive," she said.

She said her children had already forgiven her by their first visit. She will never forget her teen-aged son telling her how they were going to turn the "negative into a positive" and that the adversity they faced would unite them more than ever.

Ludwig would monitor the conversations and offer suggestions before and after each session.

"We would talk about different scenarios, give our opinions. Then she would redirect us. 'Maybe if you try it this way. In the future, try this,'" Noreen said.

On December 16, 2012, a Sunday, she was called out of church in jail and told that her release had been granted.

Within a few days, she was contacted by Ludwig, who began the process of showing her how to find help in a variety of places.

There was a contact for housing, both short and long term. There were offers of rent subsidies and help with security deposits. She engaged CYF in a home services plan, so her kids "never have to enter into CYF again."

Three days later, she had a hearing in court to reclaim her children.

Ludwig was there and ready to testify about her completion of the parenting program. Since there were no parenting issues, other than her incarceration, the judge immediately reunited the family.

"She [Ludwig] didn't even have to testify. He [the judge] said his goal was to have these kids home to me by Christmas," Noreen said. They were.

In the Reentry Program while she was locked up, she focused on parenting and potential employment, which is interrelated. Once she got out with a felony on her record, the banal realities set in. She was not eligible for public housing, not that she wanted it anyway. Her former career was no longer viable either, due to her conviction. She had to find housing and reinvent herself.

She said the folks at the Reentry Program pointed her to a place called Springboard Kitchens, a non-profit operated by Lutheran Social Services to employ and train ex-convicts in food service preparation and related professions. Once she and the children moved into her family home in the city's West End, the Reentry Program provided her with public agency contacts where she found help in furnishing her home, obtaining free bus passes for herself and her children, and a variety of other short-term needs.

"Whatever I need to make my family unit stay together, stay cohesive, they put me in contact with people who can help me do that," she said.

She also has been involved in a mentoring program for her kids. All of the preparation has given her a positive attitude about a future that was so bleak just a year earlier. In fact, just weeks after her release she found a part-time job working for a tax preparation firm, which she hopes is the first step in rebuilding her career.

Along with seeking full-time employment, she also relies on coping skills learned in the Reentry Program to lean on when she is stressed.

Along with seeking full-time employment, she also relies on coping skills learned in the Reentry Program to lean on when she is stressed. With Ludwig's help, she is building a support network of people and agencies to turn to when and if things go bad.

In the past, she admits, her pride wouldn't allow her to seek help. "My impression with my children was, 'I made them, I'll take care of them,'" she said.

Now, with the help of the Reentry Program, she knows there are other paths.

ABOUT THE REENTRY PROGRAM

The Allegheny County Jail Collaborative's Reentry Program has one simple aim: to reduce recidivism.

It is doing this by providing services in the jail that build clients' skills and family connections, change attitudes, and link them with jobs and housing so that they are prepared for successful reintegration.

The program pays special attention to planning the transition home — and for the 200 people a year who are part of the funded program, it continues for months after release, providing case management, services in the community, and support to the client and family.

The Reentry Program has five components:

- 1) Screening to identify eligible individuals (eligibility is based on risk of recidivism and whether a person is serving a county sentence)
- 2) Assessment of needs
- 3) Service coordination by case managers and probation, in and outside of the jail
- 4) Services that correspond with needs; services (within and outside of the jail) can include drug and alcohol treatment, "Thinking for a Change," housing assistance, family support, education, training and employment assistance
- 5) Residence on a designated "reentry" housing unit in the jail, which is a structured living environment that reinforces classes/treatment provided in the jail

Stories of Transition, Part 2: Men and Women in the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative's Reentry Program



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George Green disputes a few of the five drunken driving convictions that caused his incarceration in the past decade, but he does not argue about the benefits of a program at the Allegheny County Jail that helped him become a good father for his baby daughter.

"I know I've brought these problems on myself, and now I have to deal with that because I have a child who is with me for the long haul," said Green.

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After years of addiction, arrests, incarcerations and failed attempts at rehab, the birth of his son finally gave Dale Earnest the motivation to get and stay clean.

"For the first time, I said to myself, 'Well, I know what I got to do,'" he said.

These two men credit the Allegheny County Jail's Reentry Program with helping them sift through the rubble of their lives — during and after incarceration — to not only come to grips with their substance abuse and other problems, but for the first time to make an effort to care for something other than themselves.

BINGE DRINKING LEADS TO FIVE DUIS

If you believe Green, he was a social drinker who indulged in an occasional binge when he followed a path that led to five drunken driving charges in less than a decade.

For years, he continued to drink despite his arrests.

"I liked to drink. I'm a drinker," he would say, even as the convictions mounted.

He says two of the charges involved collisions caused by other people (when he had been drinking and driving), but the bottom line is that he had one DUI in 1998, then three more in a nine-month period in 2005–2006, which got him a state prison stint. His 2012 drunken driving conviction landed him in the county jail for a year, even though he continued to maintain that, while he was drunk, he was not behind the wheel of an auto.

While he enjoyed tossing a few back with his buddies, by the time he was locked up on his fifth conviction, he sought a real vehicle for change and found it in the jail's Reentry Program.

There has been a steep toll. Green already has lost several jobs, and potential employers cast him aside over his criminal record or because he is not eligible to get a license until after 2020.

He admits that his criminal record related to drunk driving "looks really, really bad on paper."

While he enjoyed tossing a few back with his buddies, by the time he was locked up on his fifth conviction, he sought a real vehicle for change and found it in the jail's Reentry Program.

He found it unlike other court-ordered drug and alcohol counseling programs he'd been through over the years, starting with the basic notion that if an inmate wasn't committed to the programs, they would not be admitted. If they didn't take things seriously, they would be asked to leave.

For Green, the program's drug and alcohol awareness curricula caused him to look both back and forward in helping him see how alcohol was destroying his life. He confronted the demons of his past, documenting a long history of alcoholism in his family, including a grandfather who died from problems related to drinking.

As part of the program, Green built a portfolio of references that showed he was not only committed to ending alcohol abuse but also to addressing related issues, as he finally figured out what would happen if he continued to drink. "It's just going to put me in jail. That's why I don't mess with it," he said.

"It has totally affected my life," he said of his commitment to stay clean and sober.

The other issue he started to confront while he was locked up and in the Reentry Program was his relationship with his girlfriend and their baby girl. He participated in the parenting program, where he learned about working on the relationship and becoming a good father.

Green knew his relationship with his girlfriend was shaky at best, due to his latest incarceration and other issues that had simmered before, during and after he was jailed.

So he paid close attention to the parenting program, to not only learn basic skills, but to help him rebuild his family, which had been torn asunder while he was in jail.

Critical to that goal was the opportunity to earn personal family meetings as he successfully completed stages of the Reentry Program. Instead of the regular non-contact visits in the jail, family meetings are held in the Reentry Program's offices.

Unlike other inmates in the county jail, who are not permitted much physical contact, the Reentry Program participants get to meet with their children twice a month in a jailhouse room full of toys. They are allowed to "hold their kids, hug them," said Green.

In general, the 38-year-old learned through the program that "you can change your lifestyle and become a better father, and person," he said.

It started with basic things like being more passive instead of very strict with his two-year-old daughter. He learned that being very careful in doling out discipline is important because, otherwise, "your own kid won't like you," he said.

During his jail visits with his child and other family members, they'd create drawings and pictures, which he later could post on the walls of his cell.

"It made me have an easier time in jail," he said. "If you are down and out, this program is a Godsend. If you don't get yourself involved, there is no hope. This program gives you some hope."

Once Green showed the program's managers that he was buying into it, they were in his corner, whether it was help with something at the jail, in court or after incarceration.

Eventually, he graduated from the two programs. He received certificates and a small jail house party of chicken wings, hoagies and soda, which increased his sense of accomplishment.

He credits John Murphy, a counselor at Family Services of Western Pennsylvania who works with the Reentry Program, with helping him inside of jail and out. He said Murphy constantly schooled him on things to do to overcome his problems and to be a good father through changes in his lifestyle.

"I'm done with that stuff [booze]. I did my time, became a better person, adapted and changed and moved on. I am not going to do anything to get put back in jail," he said.

Green said that on his release, he took the knowledge gleaned from the Reentry Program with him. "I think it over when I have issues with my daughter... It makes me realize, don't be a screw-up, don't let myself get put in this situation... because I'm going to lose every time," he said.

While he has been out of jail for many months, he still gets an occasional call from Murphy, who recently helped him make his way through a custody agreement over his daughter after the relationship with his girlfriend ended.

After months of working day-labor jobs, Green was able to find a full-time job as a flagman on a bridge inspection crew.

Now Green just tries to take things one day at a time. He was willing to tell his story because he believes that the Reentry Program was very important for him, and that it should be expanded to benefit many others.

"It helped me realize I needed to change. I came to terms with that while I was in the program," he said.

CHILD OVER CRACK

Dale Earnest had his epiphany in the county jail while he was incarcerated on a probation violation over crack use and learned that his girlfriend was pregnant.

It led him to the Reentry Program where he not only seriously dealt head-on with his own addiction for the first time, but completed a parenting class so he would know how to care for his newborn child on his release.

But this time, after having suffered alone in a jail cell during the birth of his child, Earnest decided it was time to focus on something other than doing whatever he had to do to get money for his next hit on a crack pipe.

So far, that is what he has done, even though his son had to be treated for addiction because the mother used drugs during her pregnancy.

Earnest's own drug war has taken him to depths most don't survive. He's been through every rehabilitation program in the region at least twice. Nothing worked.

But this time, after having suffered alone in a jail cell during the birth of his child, Earnest decided it was time to focus on something other than doing whatever he had to do to get money for his next hit on a crack pipe.

"When he was born, that was the catalyst [for staying clean]... that's what made it real," he said.

During his life, Earnest, of the Southside, got involved in all types of non-violent crime to get drugs, ranging from thefts and receiving stolen property to burglary and other crimes.

He now realizes that "there's nothing right about taking someone's shit."

His escalating drug abuse, he says, wasn't a daily regimen. Sometimes he'd quit for a few days, a week or a month, but once he started smoking crack cocaine, he literally couldn't stop.

"Sometimes for days. Sometimes for weeks. Sometime for months. Once I started, I couldn't stop. I've done some awful things. I've stolen from my own family," he said.

In court over the years, Earnest was able to escape state prison sentences because his crimes were all addiction-related, and he was able to cull some sympathy from a succession of judges, who gave him chance after chance to get straight.

In 2010, while on probation for a burglary charge for stealing a television from a neighbor, he was driving without a license, pulled over by police and jailed. Eventually, most of the traffic offenses he'd received were dropped, and he was released.

He had been straight for almost a year, but for some reason he immediately went and scored some crack. The next day, his probation officer learned of his arrest. Because Earnest hadn't immediately reported it, he was ordered to surrender a urine specimen. When it was dirty for crack cocaine, he was jailed again, and held for about eight months until a probation violation hearing was held.

Shortly after his incarceration for what he called "a dumbass move," he learned that his girlfriend, who also is drug addicted, was pregnant.

While he was facing as many as 20 years in prison for a long list of probation violations, he decided he was going to straighten himself out to be there for his child, no matter when that was.

While he had nonchalantly been through numerous programs inside and out of jail that had failed to get through to him, this time he was serious when he learned about the jail's Reentry Program. He initially figured it wouldn't hurt to do things in jail to "make it look good for the judge" who could literally lock him up and throw away the key.

He enrolled in the Reentry Program's drug and alcohol classes as well as its parenting program.

Earnest soon found that early release was not one of its goals, and that it was different from the others he'd endured.

"They actually cared," the mystified serial county prisoner said. It caused him to take the programs seriously for the first time.

Now that he had a child on the way, the program also helped him realize that "it's not about me anymore, not me, me, me," he said. He said all of the folks managing the Reentry Program became invested in him once they realized his commitment was real.

In the parenting program, he said, he learned a lot of nuts and bolts things about what to expect (since he is a first-time parent at age 42), but he learned that the key was "patience. I need a lot of it."

"They don't seem like they're here for a paycheck. They are here to help people... make a difference," he said

Earnest was locked up when his son was born on July 7, 2011.

The blond-haired, blue-eyed child was born addicted and had to undergo 20 days of detoxification at birth. He was removed from his mother and placed in foster care.

Because Earnest was in the Reentry Program, he found it easier to talk with doctors, foster parents and others about his son's health.

"It was iffy for awhile [his son's health], but eventually I learned he'd be all right," he said. It was during that time that he says he became even more committed to overcoming his demons to raise his only child.

He credited Murphy with being particularly interested in his progress, which astonished him.

"These people really cared about what happened to me," he said.

While things were going well in the Reentry Program, Earnest's legal problems were many because he had violated a long list of probationary sentences.

Despite that, he hoped his new-found determination would persuade his judge to let him serve his sentence at the county jail, since he had never been sent "up state," or to a penitentiary.

As his sentencing date approached, Amy Kroll, director of the Reentry Program, called the judge to tell him that Earnest would do much better with a county jail sentence because the program was set up to allow family visits, and that his treatment was going well.

Despite her pleas, while Earnest could have received a 20-year sentence, Allegheny County Common Pleas Judge Joseph Williams III decided the long-term addict needed a one- to two-year lesson in a state prison.

"It does seriously help people who care. I think they should grow the program, fund it and keep doing what they're doing, get more families involved, because the more involvement folks have with these things, the closer they might come to reaching a turning point in life."

So he was shipped down to the State Correctional Institution at Pittsburgh to serve his time without the help of the Reentry Program, which only serves the county jail. It limited his meetings with his newborn son.

"I still have guilt about it," he said of the sentence.

He was released in 2012, and eventually was given custody of his son because the mother is incarcerated.

Earnest has had custody of his son for a year now, and has found a job working on a crew that does stucco work on houses. His family members help with child care.

While Earnest admittedly has a long way to go, he credits the folks in the Reentry Program with helping him change the direction of his life.

"It does seriously help people who care. I think they should grow the program, fund it and keep doing what they're doing, get more families involved, because the more involvement folks have with these things, the closer they might come to reaching a turning point in life," he said.