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## VOICES OF REENTRY

### Catalyzing Change with Madd Love and Respectful Curiosity

*Voices of Reentry is a series of profiles of people making good on second chances after they return from incarceration. Articles in the series tell individual stories to highlight the impact of programs funded under federal Improved Reentry Education grants.*

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### Introduction

UTEC, Inc., has been part of Randy Hell's life since he was 11, pretending to be 13 so he could join activities at UTEC's youth drop-in center. That deep connection to the community is a hallmark of UTEC's model and one of the drivers of its success in reaching the most disconnected, highest-risk young people in Lowell, Massachusetts, and surrounding communities. For almost a decade, Randy was a regular at UTEC's drop-in center, where he played games, socialized, and participated sporadically in other programs. But during that time he also got in-



*Randy Hell with Streetworker Johnny Chheng (in orange shirt).  
Photo credit: UTEC.*

involved with gangs and spent time in jail. Now 24, he's back at UTEC, where he knows everyone. "I've been around longer than a lot of the staff," Randy observes with pride.

UTEC Streetworkers were there to pick Randy up when he got paroled after his most recent stint at Middlesex House of Correction. "They took me out to eat, then to Target, to get some stuff I needed, and then dropped me off at home. Next day, they brought me to the mattress factory, and I been here ever since." Outreach is at the core of UTEC's model. A corps of Streetworkers, many of whom have their own lived experience of gang involvement and incarceration, spend their days building relationships with the community. They visit young people at home, hang

out in parks talking with folks, and offer services and support to anyone who needs them. Most of all, they show UTEC’s “madd love” (the creative spelling distinguishes from “angry”) to all. Streetworkers also visit local jails and prisons on a regular schedule, connecting with young people, building relationships, and laying the groundwork for engagement with UTEC’s programming after release.



*Young adults learn to craft a variety of items in UTEC’s social enterprise woodshop.*

Randy was released in January 2017, and in July 2018 he was still participating in programming at UTEC, working toward his High School Equivalency Test (HiSET), and awaiting an assignment in one of UTEC’s social enterprises—the commercial kitchen or the woodshop- after returning from a period of “reflection.” Randy had been working in UTEC’s commercial kitchen, which he enjoyed, but after a string of absences, was “put on reflection”—a temporary disengagement from onsite programming that still includes staff support. After completing a series of requirements, with support from his Transitional Coach (TC), Randy was invited to return to UTEC, where he participates in the educational portion of the program and waits for a vocational program placement, since his spot in the kitchen was filled in his absence.

## UTEC’s Values

**UTEC is a family:** We **assume goodness** behind everyone’s actions. We show **madd love**, unconditionally accepting each person. We offer everyone a **clean slate, never giving up**. We carry out **respectful curiosity**, always seeking out moments to connect. **We are sponges**, actively seeking feedback. We embody **contagious passion** in all we do.

**UTEC is a catalyst:** We **think big** about what we can achieve. We continually **chip away**, demonstrating relentlessness in our pursuit of positive change. We **plant seeds of peace** and cultivate trust. We **see beyond the mask**, knowing there’s always more beneath the surface. We **ignite social justice**. And we **spark sustainability** – for our young people, our enterprises, and our physical environment.

“Reflection” is one of the many ways language is used at UTEC to express its core values of “offering everyone a clean slate” and “never giving up” on its young people, while still holding them accountable for their decisions and behavior. The young adults UTEC serves face the most significant barriers—they typically have a history of incarceration or criminal justice involvement, are gang involved, are pregnant or parenting, and most lack a high school credential. They are also full of potential, but they face multiple barriers to changing their narrative and becoming productive members of society. UTEC’s mission is to remove those barriers.



*Young adults work in UTEC's commercial kitchen, which supports a retail café and catering business.  
Photo credit: UTEC*

## Who UTEC Serves

Of the 136 young adults (ages 17-25) who participated in UTEC’s enrollment program in 2017,

**93% had a criminal record**

**72% were gang involved**

**69% had no high school credential**

**36% were pregnant or parenting.**

**More than 90% of young people met more than one of these risk criteria, including some who had all four risk factors.**

*750+ additional young adults served by Streetworker engagement, enrichment, and other events.*

## Building Trust in the Community

Started by teens in 1999 as a response to gang violence in Lowell, UTEC's deep roots in the community and its model of engagement and outreach via Streetworkers create bridges that young adults can cross when they're ready. UTEC's Streetworkers are the first line of engagement between the organization and the young people it hopes to serve. Carlos Collazo, 39, has been a Streetworker for 7 years, including his time at UTEC. After serving a long sentence, "everyone thought I'd go right back to prison," Carlos explains. But "I got an opportunity to get involved with a grant to help young brothers get work in the community; to do outreach, give them supports—and I been off and running ever since." Since joining UTEC, Carlos feels that he has "a bigger toolkit to solve problems. I got resources." Streetworkers' deep familiarity with the local actors and understanding of the dynamics that lead young people to gang involvement give them credibility. Their steady presence on the streets and obvious commitment to helping young people builds trust. It's the same model of trust building when young people are incarcerated. The Streetworkers come to them, visiting regularly, connecting young people to reentry programs and services, and offering to meet them when they are paroled. Randy's observation that "I didn't expect them to really be there when I got out," is a common sentiment. Living up to your promises and showing up are fundamental to UTEC's success in reaching young adults who often have had few trusted adults in their lives. Carlos describes that crucial bridge into reentry support that he and other Streetworkers provide: "Our job is to have a clear path for brothers coming out of the institutions; when you come out you're dealing with very little resources—we step in with resources; we have a place for you; we guarantee you a job slot. We're goin' to show you love."

Filix Nieves' favorite thing about UTEC is the love. "No matter what your background is, there's a lot of love" he says. Filix, 21, started to feel UTEC's "madd love" while he was serving a two and-a-half year sentence. He got to know the Streetworkers through their regular check-in visits to the jail, with weekly meetings at the library, where they run a group for young adults. After his release, Filix quickly enrolled at UTEC because, he said: "I don't want to go jail no more; I been twice. You have to be ready to accept change. For me, there's no going back to the streets; I'm tired of dealing with it." Being ready to accept change is a necessary first step, and UTEC knows that, practically speaking, it is just a beginning. To support Filix in his determination not to go back to jail, UTEC's structured program provides education, job training, enrichment classes, and wrap around services that address some of the logistical, mental health, and social-emotional needs of young adults."



*Filix Nieves. Photo credit: UTEC.*

## UTEC Program Overview

*The Streetworker outreach is distinct from UTEC's formal programming. It is ongoing, community-based engagement designed to reach and support people of all ages and levels of need. Streetworkers identify young adults who are candidates for UTEC and help them find a way to engage with programming, which is offered by a team of transitional coaches and educators based at UTEC's Lowell campus and in the mattress recycling facility.*

**Transformational Beginnings:** Six-to-ten week orientation period. All young adults work at UTEC's mattress recycling social enterprise, are paid a stipend, and receive intensive support designed to help them stabilize immediately after returning from incarceration.

**Intensive Programming:** Averages 18-24 months of enrollment in a full-time program model. Education and meaningful employment in one of UTEC's social enterprises (woodworking or catering). Employment includes on-the-job training, access to ServSafe Food Handler and OSHA-10 certifications, and transitional coaching. Education programming includes HiSET preparation, enrichment classes, and dual enrollment opportunities.

**Wraparound Supports:** Transitional coaches support young adults with a wide range of logistical and social-emotional needs.

**Career Pathways:** Assistance with internship and external employment placements. Continued follow up services for 2 years after young adults secure employment outside UTEC.

## Skill, Not Will

Immediately after release, often the very next day, young adults get a ride to “the warehouse,” UTEC's mattress recycling social enterprise in Lawrence, MA. Here, new participants typically spend 6-10 weeks in Transformational Beginnings, an orientation and acclimation period. Moving quickly to get the young adults into the program is essential, since the first few days after release are an overwhelming time when old patterns and friendships reassert themselves, and it's all too easy to lose sight of a determination to change. During their time in Transformational Beginnings, UTEC's young adults are paid a stipend and expected to show up daily, communicate with the managers if they are going to be absent, establish a safe place to live in the community, and, with support from transitional coaches, attend to the logistics of daily life—open a

bank account, get a driver's license if they're eligible, meet their parole or probation requirements, and whatever else they need in order to stabilize. These activities and behaviors are part of what Tressa Stazinski, Senior Director of Programs at UTEC, calls "change contemplation"—taking the steps needed to move from the intention to make change to the action steps that allow a young adult to move forward on that path.



*UTEC's mattress recycling social enterprise in Lawrence, MA  
Photo credit: Peg Shanahan*

Moving from intention to action is the central challenge facing UTEC's young adults, who have the will to change, but lack the life skills to put that desire into practice. "Skill not will" is shorthand that captures UTEC's core value of "assuming good behind every action." Because the young adults typically lack supportive relationships with caring adults, most have never been shown how to manage conflict, regulate their emotions, admit that they don't know how to do something, explore alternative methods for accomplishing a task, plan for the future, or work toward a goal. They've learned how to survive by behaving in ways that are effective in the moment, assuming a mask of toughness or unconcern. At Transitional Beginnings and throughout UTEC's programming, caring adults model the behaviors that young adults need to be successful: reliability, respect, open communications, willingness to own mistakes, the ability to apologize, and other social-emotional skills. The belief that young adults lack skill, not will, and the assumption that everyone is doing the best they can with what they have, encapsulated in UTEC's value of "assume goodness," create space for change.

Through trial and error, UTEC staff discovered that mattress recycling provides an excellent platform for the kind of "change contemplation" that young adults undertake when they decide to participate in UTEC's program. Recycling mattresses entails ripping them apart into their component parts. It's a job any young adult can do successfully, the work lends itself to setting goals and attaining them, and daily progress is both measurable and visible. The tasks must be done in groups, requiring collaboration and communication, and the work is fundamentally flexible. If the managers decide on any given day that spending time in a talking circle to process a particular event or circumstance is what's needed, the work can wait. Unlike UTEC's commercial kitchen, which feeds all the program participants and supports a retail café, no one is waiting anxiously for a mattress to be recycled.

## Transitional Coaches for Life

Throughout the Transformational Beginnings period, transitional coaches (TCs) work intensively with young adults on the logistics of stabilization after returning from incarceration. TC Liz Brown explains: “My job is to remove any barriers that young adults have; anything that would keep them from being successful. We help with everything—getting an ID, talking to lawyer, going to court. We talk to their family, their girlfriends. We do whatever we need to do to get them to be here and be successful.” Like all TCs, Liz is on call 24/7; her portfolio includes 26 young adults, all of whom have her cell phone number. “My phone rings all the time,” Liz observes. “But setting limits is important. I’m available to help with anything, but unless it’s an emergency, I’m not going to give someone a ride on a Sunday morning.” Each TC has their own approach. Liz is known for providing lots of emotional support and for helping her young adults navigate the public transportation system. Although TCs regularly drive young adults to and from UTEC and to appointments of all kinds, they also work to instill independence. “If I’d wanted to be a taxi driver, I’d have gone to work for Uber,” Liz tells her young adults.

That tension between providing unlimited love and support and pushing young adults to take responsibility for themselves is reflected in Andrae Rincon’s account of his determination to change and the many challenges he faces, among them homelessness. A New York City native, Andrae and his family moved to Lowell two years ago after “some bad things happened.” Now 25, Andrae hadn’t been incarcerated before moving to Massachusetts, despite having “done a lot of stupid stuff.” Since arriving in Lowell he’s been in and out of jail five times, and he struggles to stay in programming at UTEC:

I’m working on the math HiSET exam; it’s the hardest one—I’m trying to get it out of the way. But I’m struggling. I don’t have friends out here; my family—they’re all scattered around—we don’t really get along; I have to find where I’m going to rest my head at night; that’s giving me the motivation and drive to do what I got to do before time’s up because if not, sorry to say, but it’s the truth—I’ll be lookin’ like one of those guys, outside, who don’t got nothing; I don’t want to see myself like that; so I just got to push myself; I can’t let nothin’ get in my way.



*Andrae Rincon. Photo credit: UTEC*

He's determined not to end up "like one of those guys...who don't got nothing," but he's also been asked to "go on reflection"—take a break from programming because he wasn't meeting the minimum requirements for participation—multiple times. He describes some of the circumstances that have led to those reflection periods:

I worked in the woodshop—didn't like it—it's dusty—I sneezed nonstop because of my allergies. I made an excuse to not be in the woodshop, but it didn't work, it backfired. Things happened, and I had to do half days—and now I'm fighting to get my full day spot back. I have to be realistic—sometimes people just look at what I'm doing wrong. For example—coming in not prepared; wearing the wrong clothes, messing up the dress code. I have to explain myself even though they know what I'm going through. I don't have the same luxuries as other people—no place to sleep and shower every morning. During the day I keep my stuff in a hiding place. I don't want to walk around carryin' no bags.

Andrae's excuses didn't get him out of work in the woodshop; and the fact that he's homeless doesn't exempt him from the dress code requirement (no gang colors). As he speaks, tears stream down Andrae's face. He apologizes for his emotion, but then observes, "it's good for me to learn to talk about it." That willingness to show weakness in front of others, and his ability to take responsibility for his actions are measures of Andrae's growth. He still has work to do, and UTEC will be there for him for him as long as he stays engaged with the TCs and continues to work toward accomplishing his goals. "We're TCs for life," Liz observes. Even after her young adults complete the intensive programming and move into the two-year follow up portion of the program, with a different staff liaison, "they still call me when they really need something." And Liz still answers that call.



## A 2-Gen Approach

UTECH recently opened an early childhood education center that is licensed for up to 35 slots for children ages 0-5. The 2-Gen Center is open to children of UTECH's young adults and to families from the community. The center is an important part of UTECH's wrap around supports because close to 40% of UTECH's young adults are parenting or pregnant, and a much larger percentage do not have supportive parents in their lives. The 2-Gen center not only provides childcare and curriculum-based early childhood education, it will create opportunities to extend the core value of "skill, not will" by teaching parenting strategies that UTECH's young people may not have experienced in their own families.

Randy Hell was 18 when his dad died in 2012. "Ever since then, everything went downhill," he says. Randy is now a father himself—his girlfriend has two children from another relationship, whom he is helping to parent, and she is pregnant with Randy's child. The responsibility of fatherhood is top of mind for Randy. Describing his recent period of reflection and the effort it took him to return to programming, Randy observes "I've got a kid on the way—I've got to stick with it." During our visit, Randy toured the 2-Gen center with us, visiting the preschool room, which opened in fall 2017 and the infant room that opened in summer 2018. Looking around the cheerful space Randy said, as much to himself as to us, "I'm up for it—the responsibility of being a dad." The 2-Gen Center is designed to help all of UTECH's young adults learn the skills they need to live up to the responsibility of being parents, and thus to help break the intergenerational patterns of poverty and, sometimes, violence.

## "I Just Stopped Going"

Like most of the young adults at UTECH, Randy dropped out of high school. "I had too many problems, so I just stopped going [to school]," Randy explains. "I signed up for adult ed at the library, stopped going to that too." So what keeps him coming back to UTECH? "The vibe," Randy explains. "It's all respect; all love." One of the ways that respect and love manifest is in the highly individualized education program that allows each young adult to move through the HiSET preparation course at their own pace. Obtaining a high school credential and enrolling young adults in community college is the long-term goal of UTECH's education program, and the staff recognize that each young adult's timeline for accomplishing those goals is different. Another measure of the love and respect Randy so appreciates is the thoughtful way that educators customize the HiSET curriculum to the material, so it speaks to the young people's experiences and interests, with a special emphasis on "igniting social justice"—another of UTECH's values—as both

a subject of study and an outcome of young adults' education and growth.

In addition to the academics, UTEC offers daily Bonus Blocks. Educators use these blocks in a number of ways: they can provide offerings at different academic levels and blend educational competencies with young adults' interests, and they offer a wide array of enrichment classes, from creative writing to parenting to financial literacy. Like many of UTEC's young adults, Randy is an aspiring musician and songwriter. One of his favorite Bonus Block offerings is Sounds Studio—a class in music and music production that connects songwriting and poetry to academic skills. Like Randy, Andrae Rincon chooses Sound Studio, where he works on his original songs and is eager to learn about the business side of music production. But the value goes far beyond the specifics of the class, Andrae explains: the opportunity to choose an enrichment classes, from “a whole list of different things...it brings out the characteristics in a person—help them do something they like; to be better.”

## Creating a Pathway to College

When asked about what the future holds, most of UTEC's young adults keep their eyes firmly on the task at hand—“I'm just focusing on the math HiSET right now” is a common response. Refusing to speculate about the future is a sensible posture for young people who have experienced trauma and intergenerational poverty and have little experience planning for the future. But UTEC's education programming lays the groundwork for a more future-focused mindset. For UTEC's young adults, enrolling in postsecondary education is a rarity. A small number (2-4) matriculate each year, but few have completed more than one or two semesters. In an effort to reduce the barriers to college enrollment and completion that its young adults face, UTEC has been experimenting with a dual-enrollment model, which eliminates the scheduling and cost barriers to enrolling in college and provides students with additional support during the first levels of college coursework.

UTEC's first offering, Composition 101, is a portfolio-based writing class that offers dual enrollment credit opportunities with Middlesex Community College. This class allows young adults to experience college level work at UTEC and earn credit toward eventual enrollment. Currently offered as a Bonus Block class to just four students, UTEC is working toward making the class available in the regular schedule, so it can be offered to more young adults. The dual enrollment program is in its infancy, but it reflects UTEC's commitment to creating pathways to postsecondary education for its young adults.

## Starting Over Each Day

Each day at UTEC's cheerful campus begins with Fresh Inspirations—a morning circle where everyone shares challenges, goals, and “snaps” of support and pride in one another's accomplishments. These daily circles are an opportunity to reset and start each day with the clean slate that is one of UTEC's core values. Unlike in street life, where grudges are nursed and anger

simmers, at UTEC each day offers a fresh opportunity to relentlessly pursue positive change. The results are astounding: 90% of young people served by UTEC were not rearrested within the last year, compared to 49% statewide, and 78% of young adults were employed two years after completing UTEC programming, compared to 40% statewide (see Box for UTEC’s Outcomes and Impact). Asked what he would like to say to people unfamiliar with UTEC, Andrae doesn’t hesitate:

Give us a chance. Look at what we’re doing....It’s really a big thing. [UTEC] is changing lives. It’s a real thing....People are comin’ out of this place, and they’re becoming something bigger than what they was before they started UTEC. I seen it myself. I seen so many kids come in anxious, whatever the case is, and now they got vocabulary—now they’re smart—now they can say things and do things better and feel better about themselves; instead of feeling like they have to be part of something negative to feel loved and appreciated.

UTEC provides countless tangible supports, but this vocabulary, which allows them to “say things and do things better and feel better about themselves,” may be the greatest asset that young adults develop at UTEC.

UTEC Outcomes (FY17)	MA and US Outcomes
90% of young adults served were not arrested during the year, and 99% were not convicted.	49% of 18-24 year-olds incarcerated to county facilities in Massachusetts are not re-arraigned within 1 year.
78% of young adults who left UTEC programming were employed 2 years later.	40% of MA 18-24 year olds with a history of incarceration are employed
32% of young adults engaged in HiSET classes obtained a high school credential within the last year.	<20% of 18-24 year old incarcerated males nationally have obtained at least a high school diploma or GED

Source: UTEC Outcomes Snapshot 2017, <https://www.utec-lowell.org/impact>

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