

IMPROVED REENTRY EDUCATION

VOICES OF REENTRY *Building Trust to Rebuild Lives*

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.

“I almost cried when I heard that I passed the GED. It was a big relief. I accomplished something,”

Kalei Cheeks recounts. He remembers the exact day—August 4, 2016, two days before his 23rd birthday. “It was an early birthday present.” When Kalei came into the Bridging Reentry Opportunities for Workforce Navigation to Success (BROWNS) program in March 2016, he had taken portions of the GED exam but still needed to pass the test in two subjects. Adult Basic Education instructor Alicia Calleros told him he would probably be ready in a few months. But that wasn’t soon enough for Kalei—he had his sights set on enrolling at Essex County College (ECC) in September, and he needed a GED to do that. Alicia started calling around



Kalei Cheeks

to find where the test was being administered and then to arrange the logistics of getting Kalei to the test site in East Orange, New Jersey. Because Kalei is under court supervision and lives in a halfway house—an alternative to serving a prison sentence—he can’t simply hop on a bus and go take the test. He needs to be accompanied, and the house must give permission for him to travel. Kalei was determined, and Alicia made it happen.

Alicia is a remarkable woman, but the effort she put into making it possible for Kalei to take his GED exam in time is typical of the flexibility, creativity, and determination required of the staff who run the BROWNS program at ECC. The College’s Next Step program has a long history of supporting students with a criminal history who are eligible to enroll in college, but BROWNS, funded under the Improved Reentry Education grant, allows ECC to serve a much wider group: students who are still under court supervision and who may not be college ready. Providing postsecondary education within the court supervision system—in the shape of the halfway houses where all BROWNS students live for the first months after their release—presents a host of challenges and one distinct advantage: the structured environment helps students focus on school and avoid distractions that can derail their successful reentry. That’s why residence in the halfway house for the entire first semester is a requirement for participation in BROWNS.

WORKING UNDER SUPERVISION

Life in a halfway house is highly regimented and closely supervised. Residents progress through three phases and earn increasing freedom of movement. In the third and final phase, residents can leave the house to attend



“The structured environment [of the halfway house] helps students focus on school and avoid distractions that can derail their successful reentry.”

school or work, as long as they meet stringent reporting requirements. They must report where they're going, for how long, who they will be with, and how they're getting to their destination. Travel routes must be mapped and documented, and any deviation from pre-arranged transportation plans is considered a violation and can result in a resident's return to prison. This means that residents can't hop in a car with a friend who happens to be passing the bus stop and offers them a ride. Once at school or work, residents are required to check in a number of times each day by phone, and a missed check-in—whether because a resident forgot or because the house staffer who answered the phone didn't record the call—can land a resident back in prison.

Because of these restrictions, BROWNS students' schedules need to be carefully crafted to ensure that academic classes, mentoring meetings, tutoring, and study time in the computer lab can all be squeezed into two days on campus. Building study time into the schedule is important, since most homework needs to be completed online and residents don't have Internet access at the house. Nor are there quiet spaces for study: residents live in rooms that house a minimum of 4 people and as many as 15. Some houses set aside rooms for residents who are working or in school, but the space is crowded and noisy.

BROWNS staff have strong working relationships with their counterparts in nine halfway houses from which they draw students. Residents who express interest in going to school—whether to obtain a GED or attend college—are encouraged to apply to the BROWNS program. During the intake process, residents are interviewed by BROWNS staff, usually at the house. Next, staff conduct a needs assessment, administer academic placement tests, provide individualized career planning, and help students apply for federal financial aid. These steps all require coordination with house staff, since students must be physically present on campus to take the placement exams and complete financial aid paperwork,

but allowing students to leave the house before they are enrolled in school requires special permission. This challenge, and many others that students encounter, is a function of the inherent tensions between the objectives of the two partners in this relationship. The halfway house is tasked with meeting supervision requirements, while the BROWNS program goals are educational. But staff and students work closely together to overcome these challenges. Once students are enrolled, BROWNS staff regularly help students navigate both of the administrative systems they encounter. BROWNS student Sergio Vargas explains:

[The staff] help when you have problems with the college or with the house. They're kind of the mediator—that's a really important part. There's always issues with the halfway house—[the staff] fought for me on multiple occasions—and they help smooth out issues with the college, with financial aid.



Sergio Vargas



Alvin Reeves

SCHOOL, INTERRUPTED

Sergio (26) is working toward an associate’s degree in business administration and hopes to graduate next April. His current enrollment in college isn’t his first, or even his second attempt to go to college:

I was already in school in prison, but it was hard to stay in the program because they kept moving me around. . . . I was enrolled and had to stop four different semesters—once [because of] an administrative move; once [because] I got into trouble and got sent away; [and] another time they moved [me] to another facility to be part of another program.

Alvin Reeves (48) had also begun taking college classes in prison. Indeed, he had researched his options before reporting to prison to serve his sentence, and he signed up for [NJ-STEP](#), affiliated with Rutgers University, as soon as he could. But when Alvin learned that he would have to choose between early release and completing the NJ-STEP program, he chose to be released to a halfway house, where he could be close to his family. “It was a hard choice,” Alvin says; “I’m used to starting over. I’ve done it a million times.” Before his incarceration, Alvin had been enrolled in a paralegal certificate course at an



Ivan Anderson

online, for-profit university. When he lost his job, and with it access to the computer he was using to take the class, he stopped making payments and ended up in default on a \$13,000 loan. Alvin has since resumed making payments and is no longer in default, but he is not eligible for loan forgiveness because the school he attended was for-profit.

They call him the gentle giant, and it’s an apt nickname. Ivan Anderson (48) lists his efforts to go to college in a quiet voice:

In 2011 I was living in Tully House; they came and did interviews for people who wanted to go to college, so I quit my job to go to school.¹ Then, in 2012, a chicken pox outbreak quarantined the house and messed up the semester. I couldn’t finish. [ECC staff] called for me to start the next semester in 2013, but then they [Tully House] found out I wasn’t eligible for the halfway house, after being there three years, and I was sent back to prison from 2013-2015. When I got back to Tully House, Next Step called for me. I’ve done one semester, and I’m trying to get another job so I can go back to school.

“ I’m used to starting over. I’ve done it a million times. ”

“Some of the staff are really hard on you, but for a good reason. They view you as a person—they actually want to encourage you to be in school.”

Ivan wants to be a social worker so he can work with young people like himself. He has spent most of his 48 years in prison. “If you can get to them while they’re young,” Ivan observes, “you’ll have less-messed up adults.” His current job as a flagger for the gas company requires long hours—he works seven to seven most days—leaving no time for school. In the meantime, Ivan is advancing toward his goal by volunteering at a program for young people with autism.

Ivan’s, Sergio’s, and Alvin’s stories are all too common. Enrolling in college is relatively easy. Staying in college is tremendously difficult for low-income students.² For students who have been incarcerated, the challenges are even greater. That’s why supporting students so they stay in school is central to the BROWNS program.

HARNESSING MEDIA TO TELL YOUR OWN STORY

Because of his prior debt, Alvin couldn’t enroll at ECC when he first entered the BROWNS program. So, as a “filler,” he signed up for one of the credential programs: multimedia production, which includes writing and editing scripts and audio and video production. Within four months, Cobblestone Productions had hired Alvin as an instructor. “I love media production. Media is powerful—it’s a form of communication that can be used negatively or positively. We have to voice things; we have to be able to communicate with other people.”

[Watch the video](#) produced by Alvin and the first cohort of students in the program. (Alvin is the tall man in a black V-neck shirt behind the console at 0:06.) The second cohort is still putting the finishing touches on their videos.

SO MUCH MORE THAN A BUS PASS

The education counselor at Tully House told me about the program, but I didn’t realize how much more there was. It’s not just a bus card. And they’re not only concerned with the academics; they make you think a lot about your life—pushing you to make the right decisions and to stay in school.

That’s Sergio, describing the wraparound services that BROWNS provides. Help navigating the various systems at the college is essential, but it’s the personal commitment and caring that make the difference for students. “We love these students,” Joana Ramos-Ribeiro, assistant to the dean of Community, Continuing Education, and Workforce Development, says, and they know it. That love is expressed in empathy, support, and help in overcoming obstacles, and it’s also expressed in honesty and high expectations. “I tell them what they need to do, just like I tell my son. They don’t always listen, but they know I’m looking out for them,” says Joana.

Bert Shockley, associate director of Business Services and Workforce Training, looks like a football player and sounds like James Earl Jones. He holds up a Darth Vader figurine and Sesame Street Bert doll. “Which Bert do you want to see?” he asks students. “My job is to help students; sometimes that means being warm and fuzzy; other times it requires being tough and demanding.”

That love and support make all the difference for the BROWNS students.

The staff is tremendous; you can feel it—you know when a person is all for you; they’re really backing you up,” says Alvin. He continues: “when they see you seeing something wrong, playing at the ‘risk café’—choosing from the menu of good and bad—they’re going to let you know if you’re making a bad choice; they say and do the right things to keep you motivated.

Sergio concurs: “Some of the staff are really hard on you, but for a good reason. They view you as a person—they actually want to encourage you to be in school.”

THE BROWNS PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

In addition to college classes, the BROWNS program offers certifications and noncredit programs, wraparound supports, mentoring, job placement assistance, and a variety of follow-up services.

Intake Process

- Application and interview—usually at the halfway house
- Needs assessment
- Developing an individual career plan
- Test of Adult Basic Education toward earning a high school equivalency credential
- Free Application for Federal Student Aid completion

Connection to Support Services

- Counseling
- Social services referrals
- Legal services
- Housing
- Public assistance
- Referrals to community resources

Credentialed Career Pathways

- High school equivalency
- Associate degree / certificate programs
- Training Inc.—Microsoft Office certification
- Training Inc.—Supply Chain Management certification
- Garden State Urban Farms
- Cobblestone Media—multimedia production
- Eastwick College—welding

Mentor Support

- Development workshops
- Information workshops
- Legal workshops
- Essential skills workshops

Follow-Up Services

- Job retention
- Counseling
- Release support
- Mental health referrals
- Federal bonding
- Tax preparation services

THEY'VE GOT MY BACK 100 PERCENT

Trusting staff doesn't come easily to Alvin, Sergio, Kalei, or any of the other BROWNS students. "Learning to trust folks at ECC took time," Sergio says. "I thought they were looking for me to fall, make a mistake; after a while you realize that they're not looking to fail you, or set you up."

Why did Sergio assume everyone is looking to fail him or set him up? "In the prison system, everyone is making money off of you," he explains.

The people in the system don't have my best interest at heart; they don't really want to help you out—they just want to get you back so they can make more money. When you think like that, it's easier not to trust—you have been let down so many times, played so many times; it's easier to paint everyone with the same brush.

Ivan concurs. "The best thing about the Next Step program is the people. They're genuine. They really want to help; there are no hidden agendas."

The staff's only agenda—and it's out in the open—is helping students learn new ways of responding to situations and developing their cognitive skills so they can make better decisions.

“ The skit we did in the program helped me because it was exactly like the situation. I thought about it before I did it, and I made the right decision. ”

I OVER E

Support for cognitive and behavioral change is at the core of the mentoring component of the BROWNS program. Two evenings a week, students gather for a meeting with the two counselors, where they share their triumphs and challenges, learn how to think differently about the choices they make, and practice responding to situations they are likely to encounter, especially after they leave the halfway house. One of the counselors has a criminal history himself and serves as a role model for the power of behavioral change. The lessons that “Mr. Hill” and “Mr. Bert” impart are clearly being heard. Alvin says “I’m a big believer in ‘I over E’—intellect over emotion. Don’t let your emotion override your cognition.”

Kalei recounts a recent instance in which he applied “I over E”:

My friends were going out to celebrate a birthday. I was at the door, about to go out, but it triggered something for me; something clicked—I was seeing Mr. Hill, Mr. Shockley’s faces, Ms. Ramos, and I said, ‘nah, I’m not going with you. I love you, but I’m not goin’ out.’ The next day, they were locked up. The skit we did in the program helped me because it was exactly like the situation. I thought about it before I did it, and I made the right decision. Before Next Step, I wouldn’t have given it a second thought—I would have been arrested that night.

For Sergio, working with a counselor and a tutor who have a criminal history is important: “they see things the way we see things. They say, ‘I remember, I used to feel the same way—but you have to look at it this way.’” Learning from your mistakes and changing your way of thinking is analogous to developing a business, Sergio observes.

When [a business person] first starts out, they make a lot of mistakes they are able to learn from and become better. The same goes for us—we made a mistake, we want to learn from that. No one creates something the first time and, boom, you make money—you make a prototype, then another one—we are trying to do that with our lives.

Successful reentry requires determination, grit, and resilience, which BROWNS students have in abundance. It also requires access to educational opportunities, wraparound supports, and jobs, which the BROWNS team does everything in their power to provide. Finally, successful reentry requires the ability to make the right decisions, day in and day out. That is a team effort, with students and staff working together toward a shared goal.

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ENDNOTES

1. Tully House requires residents to choose between attending school and working. This means that students can't hold work-study jobs at ECC.
2. Over 10 million students enroll in community colleges each year, but only 20 percent graduate with an associate's degree within 3 years. Source: "Graduation rates by state," The Chronicle of Higher Education, <http://collegecompletion.chronicle.com/>; There is anecdotal evidence that students who stop out—take a break from school for any reason—have even lower graduation rates. And low-income students are most likely to stop out because they can't afford to attend school and support themselves and their families. Close to two-thirds of community college students work to support themselves and their families while in school, and may be facing homelessness and hunger. Many are single parents, and over a third are the first in their families to attend college—both factors that can pose major obstacles to graduation. Sources: "Fast Facts 2017," American Association of Community Colleges, <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Pages/fastfactsfactsheet.aspx>; Scott Jaschik, "Poverty and Community College Students," Inside Higher Ed, December 5, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2016/12/05/poverty-and-community-college-students>.