

VOICES OF REENTRY *Seizing the Opportunity of a Lifetime*

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.

By the time he was 30, Jordan Holter had been in and out of jail more than 20 times, not including his stays in juvenile facilities.¹ He had a long history of drug and alcohol addiction, had been out of school for over a decade, and had held only low-skill, low-wage jobs. Before turning 32, Jordan will graduate from Western Technical College with an associate's degree in manufacturing systems maintenance and a full-time job in the industrial electrical maintenance department at the Wisconsin manufacturing facility of [Great Lakes Cheese](#). Overcoming any one of these obstacles to earn a college degree is a significant accomplishment. Overcoming all of them, especially a long history of repeated incarceration, is remarkable.

A TURNING POINT

Jordan is acutely conscious of the change in his life, and he points to the source of his success without hesitation: Project Proven and its dedicated staff, led by Coordinator Tonya Van Tol.

When Jordan connected with Project Proven in the La Crosse county jail in 2014, he was ready to make a change in his life. He had already sought treatment for his addiction to drugs and alcohol and was well on his way to being "clean," as he puts it. But the next step was hard: Jordan didn't know where to start putting his life back together. He didn't know what resources were available, or what he was eligible for. He didn't know he could go to school for free. And even if he had known, he didn't have the faintest idea how to complete the necessary paperwork to enroll. Perhaps hardest of all, he couldn't imagine himself as college student.

Many Project Proven graduates have a long history of negative experiences in school, Tonya explains: "These are smart people, who have experienced a lot of trauma: unkind teachers, bullying, all kinds of terrible experiences. They see themselves as different—not as students." Revising that self-conception is a central challenge, but Jordan did exactly that. "He's an excellent student," Tonya observes, "he's developed strong relationships with his teachers, and they have all supported him through some challenges."



EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND CRIMINAL HISTORY

Jordan had completed high school, which put him ahead of many people with a criminal history. The vast majority of people who are incarcerated have low levels of educational attainment:

- 30 percent of all inmates have less than a high school diploma²
- 60 percent of state prison inmates have only a high school diploma³
- 94 percent of adults coming out of prisons cite education as their primary need to successful reentry and reintegration into their communities.⁴

Without a high school diploma or access to postsecondary education, people with a criminal history have limited employment options and are likely to continue to commit offenses, which lead to further incarceration and reduced educational and economic opportunities.

HOLISTIC, COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT

Jordan’s path toward the job at Great Lakes Cheese began with a four-hour orientation to Western Technical College that is offered inside La Crosse County Jail. This is the first part of the Project Proven program. In the orientation, inmates explore various careers, learn about labor market information and job opportunities, and get an assessment of their academic skills. Once they complete the orientation, inmates are automatically enrolled at Western. And that, says Stephanie Gauger, Project Proven instructor, “is very empowering” for people who had never imagined themselves as college students. “They’re in the education system,” instead of feeling like outsiders.

Once they’re in the program, students take a series of job-readiness support courses to build their employability skills, create a résumé, and learn interview skills. Structured support for résumé-writing and interview skills are crucial for anyone who has an uneven employment history and a criminal history. Jordan had worked in customer service, fast food restaurants, and in some “monotonous factory jobs,” but he didn’t have an employment history that showcased his skills and abilities. In addition to helping Jordan write a resume that highlighted his strengths, Tonya helped him write his “conviction statement”—a short essay that explains returning citizen’s history and describes their commitment to making change in their lives. But the support didn’t end there; in fact, it was just beginning.

Educational Attainment for Correctional Population vs. General Population

Educational Attainment	Incarcerated	General Population
Some High School or Less (no diploma)	30%	14%
High School Diploma	64%	50%
Associate’s Degree	4%	9%
Bachelor’s Degree	1%	17%

Source: http://www.seattlejobsinitiative.com/wp-content/uploads/BeyondHeadlines_FEB2012.pdf

PROJECT PROVEN AT A GLANCE

What: Project Proven offers a variety of job-preparedness courses designed to address the barriers to employment facing people with a criminal history. Adult Basic Education (ABE), High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED), and GED courses are also offered. Because stays in county jail are frequently short, and many people cycle in and out of jail repeatedly, all Project Proven courses are offered both in the La Crosse County jail and on campus, so students can continue to work towards the certificate without interruption. Students earn a Project Proven certificate, which local employers recognize and value as evidence that Proven graduates are responsible, trustworthy employees.

Project Proven Courses:

- Barriers to Obtaining Employment
- Barriers to Keeping Employment
- Financial Literacy
- Conflict Resolution on the Job
- Communication on the Job
- The Do's and Don'ts of Applications
- Functional Resumes
- Cover Letter and Statement of Change
- Career Assessments: Finding Work that Fits Your Personality
- Networking Skill Building: How to Sell Your Skills to Get the Job
- Behavioral-Based Interviewing

In addition to offering employment preparedness, and GED, HSED, and ABE courses, Project Proven staff connect students to support services, help them navigate education and social service systems, support students in enrolling in college, and build relationships with local employers.

Career and College Pathways: After they complete the Proven courses, students who are ready and interested are encouraged to apply for college courses leading to a credential. The most popular degree pathways among Proven students are:

- Associate's degree in business
- Associate's degree in human services
- Associate's degree in industrial programming (welding, IT, manufacturing)

Proven staff support students through their entire time in the degree program: they might enroll a student who is still in jail, support a student who relapses and needs help getting textbooks and other materials into jail so she can keep up with her academic work, or provide encouragement and moral support when the challenges seem insurmountable. Proven staff also find funding to cover non-tuition expenses, arrange for job shadowing and other professional opportunities, and help with placement and employment while the student is enrolled and after graduation.

Who: Project Proven fits under Western Technical College's Learner Support and Transition Division. Its dedicated staff, all employed by the college, include:

- **Project coordinator**—oversees the entire program, works directly with students both in jail and on campus;
- **Instructors**—teaches ABE, GED, and HSED courses in jail and Project Proven courses in jail and on campus;
- **Business and community coordinator**—works with the business community to build relationships, raise awareness about reentry, and develop employment opportunities for Proven students; and
- **Case manager**—works directly with students to help them navigate systems and access needed services.

The entire team meets weekly to ensure that everyone stays informed about individual students, community relationships, and program operations.

*“ It was a really smooth transition [from jail to college].
I’ve done the circle—I’ve gotten out with nothing but what
I went to jail with; the pair of clothes I had—that’s it. ”*

Project Proven staff help with everything. No detail is too small and no problem is unimportant. Being there to support students over the inevitable bumps in the road is an essential aspect of the Proven approach. Tonya describes the work she and her team do as “trying to remove barriers that stem from life events that are bound to happen” to students who are poor and have unstable, complicated lives. “It’s not a linear path” for these students, Tonya observes. But perhaps most important is the personal connection and encouragement that Project Proven staff offer. “A lot of follow up; a lot of encouragement; confidence building; connecting with students on a personal level; a lot of cheerleading” is how Stephanie Gauger describes her job.

The support doesn’t end when a student gets a job or graduates from Project Proven. Tonya and her team check in on all their graduates regularly. All four of the participants interviewed for this project attributed their success to the program itself and to Tonya’s unstinting support and faith in them: “Tonya believes in me”; “Tonya cares about me”; “Tonya calls and checks up on me even though I’m not in the program anymore.” “Tonya is always there for me.” That level of caring, that ability to see students as individuals worthy of investment is what makes Project Proven so successful. Since Project Proven began operating in 2013, its participants have been 30 percent more successful, in measures of recidivism rates, compared to a comparison group. Thanks to a grant, Proven is expanding into neighboring Monroe and Trempealeau Counties.

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF INCARCERATION

The day after leaving jail for what he hoped would be the last time Jordan was enrolled at Western Technical College. “It was a really smooth transition,” Jordan explains—completely unlike the many other times he had left jail. “I’ve done the circle—I’ve gotten out with nothing but what I went to jail with; the pair of clothes I had—that’s it.”

Jordan describes his first day at Western this way: “Tonya handed me a pair of work boots, a welder’s mask, a pile of school books, and walked me to my first class.” Jordan already knew and trusted Tonya because they had met in the county jail. And Tonya had done the legwork necessary to get Jordan registered at Western Tech while he was still in jail.

The fact that Project Proven begins in jail and continues on the campus of Western Technical College is essential to its success: for reentrants, the transition between life inside jail and life outside is a tremendous challenge. Jordan’s feeling of being at a loss reflects how overwhelming it is to navigate all at once: getting a job, enrolling in school, finding a place to live, applying for benefits, and the myriad other steps that a reentrant must complete in order to create a stable, self-sustaining life. The tasks are overwhelming, but the Proven team helps smooth the way. Project Proven operates on a one-stop shop model: all the services a student needs are in one place, and staff help students with all the red tape, removing obstacles that, all too often, prove insurmountable. When Jordan arrived on campus the day after his release from jail, he was already enrolled at Western Technical College, so he didn’t have to navigate the registration or financial aid departments. He went to Tonya’s room, and she introduced him to his instructors, letting them know that Jordan had her support.

Mandy Church-Hoffman, associate dean of learner support and transition at Western, explains that although the transition from jail to college has been part of Proven from the outset, it took a while for the Proven team to recognize that this continuity is one of the more powerful pieces of the program. All the Project Proven classes are offered both in jail and at the college, so students can complete some of the program in jail and then pick up seamlessly where they left off. Having the same staff both in jail and on campus is also essential. When students arrive on campus and find familiar faces, people who welcome them by name, “[it] makes [students] feel included; it’s hard, intimidating to walk through those college doors; having the familiar faces is huge,” Mandy explains.

A GOOD JOB

Jordan discovered his mechanical aptitude through Proven’s career exploration and assessments. Jordan and Tonya also discussed which types of jobs are most in-demand in the local economy and most accessible to someone with a criminal history: “blue-collar work; work with my hands. I was OK with that,” Jordan says.

In the electrical industrial maintenance department of Great Lakes Cheese, where he started working in the spring of 2016, Jordan is a maintenance technician. He welds, fixes machines that break down on the factory floor, reprograms conveyor belt computers, rebuilds motors—whatever is required to keep the production line working. He is a self-described “jack of all trades.” Until a couple of years ago, Jordan had never worked on anything mechanical in his life. “I couldn’t even turn them on,” Jordan says about the machines he now repairs with confidence.

For the first year after he left jail, Jordan concentrated on school and meeting the requirements of drug court, which are quite time consuming. Recently, Jordan learned of an apprenticeship at Great Lakes Cheese. “I put my name in there, but didn’t think I was going to get it.” He did get the apprenticeship, and he attributes that success to the work of Keith Lease, Project Proven’s business and community coordinator, who builds relationships with local companies, helping them understand reentrants’ backgrounds and the potential they represent as motivated workers. Perhaps most importantly, Keith is “someone who has your back,” Jordan observes.

At Great Lakes Cheese, Jordan works 30 hours per week when he is in school, and more when he’s not. He remains eligible for benefits even when he works part time, and Great Lakes Cheese is paying for his degree. “I landed a perfect opportunity,” Jordan says—one that he had never had before.

EMPLOYMENT: A CRITICAL ASPECT OF REENTRY

A history of incarceration has significant negative impacts on a person’s employment prospects. Not only do people who have criminal histories tend to be poorly educated and have low skill levels, but employers can and do legally discriminate against them.⁵

For most people, reentry occurs between ages 25 and 54, the prime age for labor force participation. Although over 80 percent of 25-54 year-olds are employed across the general population, only 33 percent of all released inmates find employment within the first year, a number that tapers off in subsequent years.⁶

This is why the position of business and community coordinator, filled by Keith Lease, is critical to Project Proven. Keith builds long-term relationships with local employers in a variety of ways: he is a member of the chamber of commerce, the Rotary club, and human resources organizations, where he serves as an ambassador for Project Proven. He forges relationships with CEOs, hiring managers, and recruiters, gauging their beliefs about individuals with a criminal history, correcting misconceptions, and raising awareness about the untapped talent pool of people with a criminal history. He presents Project Proven’s work at venues throughout the community, and he gets to know local employers personally, building the trust that is essential for the kinds of difficult conversations that open doors to Project Proven students.

“ I put my name in there, but didn’t think I was going to get [the apprenticeship]. I got it, because Keith is someone who has your back. ”

TRUST IS A TWO-WAY STREET

Opening up to the opportunity that Project Proven offers required a leap of faith for Jordan, too: “inmates are so distrusting of others; all we know is that if we trust someone we can get hurt, in trouble.... You’re thinking, are they part of the department of corrections? If you mess up, are they going to tell your parole officer?” And in fact, Jordan did “mess up”: shortly after he got out of jail, Jordan relapsed, finding himself back in jail in less than a month. Since he had already completed the in-jail portion of the program, Jordan was no longer eligible to participate in Proven, and his contact with Tonya was limited. Working “behind the scenes” on his behalf, his fiancée and Tonya made arrangements for Jordan to enroll in college and complete the remainder of Project Proven as soon as he was released. That commitment to supporting students through the inevitable setbacks of recovery and reentry is a hallmark of the Proven model.

Jordan is a vocal advocate for Project Proven:

If I was talking to another individual from jail, I would say that this program can work; it takes just as much work as what you were doing before to achieve the goals that you want to now, but it can happen. Don't give up on yourself. Utilize the people who are here trying to help you, 'cause they're not here to harm you; keep an open mind; closing your mind will end you back in jail; the people who are trying to help are genuine; they want to see other people succeed.

THE OPPORTUNITY OF A LIFETIME

Today, Jordan is sober, attends Western Technical College full time, works as an apprentice at Great Lakes Cheese, and has a one-year-old son and a fiancée, with whom he is parenting his son and her three children. Jordan’s son has never seen his father incarcerated, and Jordan aims to keep it that way. His days are filled with work, school, little league games, and nap schedules. It’s a lot to juggle, but he wouldn’t want it any other way.

For Jordan, Project Proven presented an opportunity he’d never been offered before:

I get how hard it is to come out [of jail] and not have anything; you feel like you're at a loss and you don't know what to do; but if you're given an opportunity to show that you can make a change and do something different within your own life... that's what you're looking for; that's what I was looking for.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Nomi Sofer is the author of this profile. She is deeply grateful to the four Project Proven graduates who shared their life stories with her: Jordan Holter, Natasha Lewandowski, Crystal Goodman, and Laura Osborne. Although this profile tells Jordan’s story, Sofer’s understanding of the impact of Project Proven was informed by conversations with all four graduates.

Special thanks to the Project Proven staff who were interviewed for this piece. Their dedication to the students they work with is palpable, as is their pride in those students’ achievements.

Erica Brien, graduate student at the Brandeis Heller School and intern at Jobs for the Future, provided invaluable research support.

Lucretia Murphy, project director at Jobs for the Future, helped to shape this profile and provided insightful feedback on multiple drafts.

This resource was prepared with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, under contract no. ED-ESE-15-A-0011/0001. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. This document is in the public domain and may be reproduced without permission.

ENDNOTES

1. The fact that Jordan had been in and out of jail repeatedly is typical of national trends. Of the 12 million annual jail admissions, estimates are 9 million are for unique individuals with 3 million admissions being individuals who have passed through the system more than once; Subramanian, R., R. Delaney, S. Roberts, N. Fishman, & P. McGarry. 2015. *Incarceration's Front Door: The Misuse of Jails in America*. New York, NY: Vera Institute of Justice. Available at: <http://archive.vera.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/incarcerations-front-door-report.pdf>
2. Rampey, B.D., et al. 2016. *Highlights from the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults: Their Skills, Work Experience, Education and Training*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Available at: https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/PIAAC_Prison_102816-Updated.pdf
3. Ibid.
4. Federal Interagency Reentry Council. 2013. *Education*. New York, NY: Author. Available at: https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/SnapShot_Education.pdf
5. Employers within 800 occupations ranging from barber shop to child care ban hiring those with a history of incarceration; over 30,000 state laws allow employers to discriminate against people with a criminal history; in the 1990s, only 32 percent of employers ran criminal offender record information (CORI) checks, while today over 90 percent of employers either regularly or always run CORIs. Raphael, S. 2010. *Improving Employment Prospects for Former Prison Inmates*. NBER Working Paper Series. Work Paper 15874. April 2010. Available at: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w15874.pdf>; National Research Council. 2014. *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press; Rodriguez, M.N. & M. Emsellem. 2011. *65 Million "Need Not Apply": The Case for Reforming Criminal Background Checks for Employment*. New York, NY: The National Law Employment Project.
6. Schmitt, J. & K. Warner. 2010. *Ex-offenders and the Labor Market*. Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research; Pager, D. 2007. *Marked: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.