



Greg Perry's experience at Goodwill motivated him to get a second job at a pizza parlor. He loves it.

PRISONER TO PARTNER

Workforce Re-Entry Rebuilds Lives

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

Greg Perry loves driving his forklift.

His vehicle is his pride and joy.

"It's what I do all day every day, so you're definitely in for a treat!" he declares, leaping up from his seat at Goodwill Commercial Services (GCS) in Indianapolis and heading to the production floor.



GCS provides advanced, outsourced supply chain and logistics, packaging and assembly, and manufacturing solutions. Among its clients are Covance, Allison Transmission, Global Plastics and Endangered Species Chocolate.

“The first time ever driving a forklift was June of 2018 (at GCS) and I fell in love with it!” Perry confides. “I did so good on the forklift that they didn’t want to take me off it. Before I knew it, they came to me with a proposition and they hired me. That’s what I am – a full-time forklift operator.”

His job is also his pride and joy.

Perry is a graduate of Goodwill of Central & Southern Indiana’s (GCSI) New Beginnings program, which helps ex-offenders successfully re-enter society.

“Goodwill itself employs a lot of people with criminal backgrounds, but this is a specific program that works with individuals that have recently been incarcerated,” explains president and CEO Kent Kramer. “For all of us in this business, the best way to reduce recidivism rates is to get folks full-time employment.”

New Beginnings is a six-month program that combines on-the-job manufacturing experience and classroom learning (e.g., securing stable housing, financial literacy, professional development).

“We also make sure that they have a personal support system in place,” Kramer explains.

The goal is to ultimately place participants in permanent full-time employment at Goodwill or with area employers.

Northern success

New Beginnings is one of many prisoner re-entry programs throughout the state. The South Bend Community Re-Entry Center (SBCRC), a residential facility for men who are within 24 months of completing their prison sentence, also partners with employers.

As employers struggle to find talent in the new era of near full employment, the stigma associated with hiring people with a criminal background is diminishing.

Elkhart Plastics, a roto-molding manufacturer, has partnered with SBCRC since 2016.

“I want to be clear,” asserts human resources manager Susan Droptiny. “In the beginning, it was just about ‘we needed people,’ right? I don’t want it to sound more noble than it actually was.

“But what’s happened over time is that it’s turned out to be one of our strongest recruiting avenues. They do a great job for us. We’re getting great workers out of the program. It’s not like we’re having to sacrifice the quality or productivity of our



Trusted Mentors: James (left), a RecycleForce employee, talks with his mentor. Outside the workplace, they discuss goals and life skills.



Susan Droptiny of Elkhart Plastics praises employees recruited from the South Bend Community Re-Entry Center (SBCRC): “It’s been very positive. Most of the guys really enjoy working here. We don’t treat them any differently than anybody else and they like that.”



Through a partnership with the Indiana Department of Corrections, approximately 40 SBCRC residents have participated in Ivy Tech Community College’s welding and computerized numerical control programs.

processes. They’re some of the strongest employees we have.”

Building connections, confidence

Perry had limited computer experience prior to joining the New Beginnings program, but he says it doesn’t compare to his knowledge

today. Completing online job applications. Resumé wording. It was all a new world.

A program manager helps keep individuals on track. One component involves interacting with others.

“Being in prison, being around men 24/7/365 days a year – it can take a toll on



Next act: Men from the South Bend Community Re-Entry Center lend their talents at South Bend Civic Theatre. In January, some of them performed in a production of *A Few Good Men*.



you,” he shares. “It mentally puts up a block in your mind. Like, you don’t really want to deal with people. You stay clammed up and shut off because you’re dealing with so much in there and you always have to be on your toes.

“Coming out here is different because you’re dealing with so many different types of people in this work environment. So it (New Beginnings) also taught me how to be able to work with people.”

Additional assistance

Trusted Mentors, located in Indianapolis, connects trained volunteer mentors with at-risk adults to assist people in maintaining housing and staying out of prison.

“They focus on relationships and getting back into the community – especially if they’ve been incarcerated for long periods of time,” describes founder and executive director Jeri Warner.

Conversations revolve around basic skills: punctuality, working hard and conflict resolution. Often, friendships are forged as mentees build a support system.

“People re-entering can be terrific, loyal employees,” Warner stresses. “When someone’s served their sentence, they’ve technically paid back (society) for the crime that was committed. Employment and housing allow folks to move forward who are ready to move forward.”

Trusted Mentors partners with agencies such as RecycleForce (provides workforce training to formerly incarcerated individuals) and Craine House (a non-traditional work-release program for non-violent female ex-offenders).

“We don’t have direct job placement. It’s more around encouraging them to have the skills to find employment and remain employed so they can become self-sufficient in their own right,” Warner notes.

One of us

Assistance at SBCRC includes providing transportation to and from the workplace.

“All different shifts. All different hours,” remarks Charles Bowen, warden at the center.

“I have the pleasure of operating a facility where the men have all requested to be here. That means they’ve worked their way to this program. Many of these men have been locked up for quite some time. Let’s say they started at a higher-level security (setting) and sort of leveled their way down with good conduct, completion of programs and simply time getting closer to release.”

Elkhart Plastics partners with SBCRC at its Middlebury and South Bend locations.

Droptiny works at the Middlebury site. She estimates that at any

given time, 25 to 35 men from SBCRC are employed there.

“They’re regular, permanent employees,” she emphasizes. “They’re just like any other employee. One of the things that makes us a little different than some of the other employers that re-entry deals with is that our intention is always to have the guys stay with us after they transition out of the re-entry program. Sometimes that’s not possible. They have to go back to their county of origin (for example), but our retention rate with them is pretty good.”

South Bend Civic Theatre hosts SBCRC residents as volunteers.

Each week, they take part in construction projects, general maintenance and other tasks.

“Honestly – anything we ask, they’re so willing to help,” remarks executive director Aaron Nichols. “It’s been a joy to work with them. I will say, they are some of our best volunteers.

“They represent a full spectrum of the people at the re-entry center. The nice thing is, a lot of these guys have come from construction backgrounds – from the trades. They’re coming in with a better skill set than some of our standard volunteers that come in wanting to help, but not necessarily having those essential skills.”

Fighting chance

Perry served six years in prison. He was released in September 2017 and hired by GCS less than 10 days later. He graduated from the New Beginnings program in 2018.

“That was the highlight of my life,” he



South Bend Community Re-Entry Center emphasizes fatherhood, community, responsibility and spirituality. One example: Residents sing Christmas carols.

reflects. “I had people watching me, and I got up and said my speech. Just to let people hear my story and see where I come from. If I can do it, anybody can do it! At one time, I didn’t even think I was going to be living to see this day or to see that day. It’s definitely changed my life for the best and I wouldn’t take it back for nothing. I love it.”

It was time for a change.

“I’m 42 years old. It took a long time for me to realize that I want to do something different,” he comments. “Selling drugs and carrying guns all of my life – I got tired of that. I’ve been shot twice. I almost died twice. You know what I mean? I had to do something to change for me and my children.”

He grins broadly when expressing that he feels like a valuable asset.

Warehouse supervisor Steve Newburg is clearly proud of him. In an email, he praises Perry’s respectful and professional demeanor with internal and external customers.

He adds, “Greg understands that we are at our best when we work together as a team. He’s committed to meeting deadlines, providing a consistent, quality effort, and developing positive work relationships with co-workers. ... He continues to grow in his current position by being adaptable and willing to take on more responsibilities over time.”

Kramer is appreciative of organizations, businesses and leaders that will give somebody a second chance.

“I know it sometimes can be risky,” he acknowledges, “but we need people to be open to doing that because there’s some really good, talented folks out there that can be a solution to the skills gap that many of us talk about.”

Perry is appreciative too.

“When I didn’t care about me and I didn’t think anybody else cared, this was a program that showed me, ‘We care. We’re rooting for you! We know you can do this.’

“It changed me to know that people actually cared about me that wasn’t my family. And these people didn’t even really know me.

“Working here now – I love it because I’m depended on,” he adds. “Now, I couldn’t see nothing else but getting up and coming to work every day. It’s what I do and I love it. It’s changed my life.”



Goodwill Commercial Services has 200 employees. Many are ex-offenders.

RESOURCES: Kent Kramer, Goodwill of Central & Southern Indiana, at www.goodwillindy.org | Charles Bowen, South Bend Community Re-Entry Center, at www.in.gov/idoc/2394.htm | Susan Droptiny, Elkhart Plastics, at www.epi-roto.com | Aaron Nichols, South Bend Civic Theatre, at www.sbct.org | Jeri Warner, Trusted Mentors, at www.trustedmentors.org