

With the ugly truth of the reentry process being told, it's important to also highlight the beautiful parts of these guys' reentry process while in the Indiana Department of Corrections.

Andre: All of these things have been beneficial, you know, as a resourceful situation for me, and as well as not just in the reentry center, but once I get out, you know.

Jerome: I definitely believe it's [reentry] doing what it should be doing, which they offer us the tools. Now it's up to us whether or not we use them. It was very simple but the most prolific thing anybody told me since I've been in the reentry center is, "It's what you make of it." Like they say in Narcotics Anonymous, it works if you work it.

Finding purpose in what you do is a universal goal, and against all the odds, these men find their purpose – in education, in work, in volunteering, and the arts – thanks to the opportunities at South Bend Reentry Center.

None of these guys have a problem finding the motivation to take advantage of the programs available – they're eager to take advantage of every opportunity to grow.

Andre: Even with the programs, you know, just certain people come in and teach you about finances. Certain people come in and teach you about, like, if you want to further your education. These are all resources; some are tangible to the point that they can help you improve your life if you take the time out to utilize the opportunity.

Andre: And one of the things, like with a lot of guys, some guys like Haji and Wilder [Jason], they wanna further their education. They wanna do more that's like barbering, one wanna do legal. You know, for me I wanna get my CDLs and I wanna get my realtor's license.

These educational opportunities make it easier to get a job, which is one of the most important things to have during the reentry process. Chris is one of the guys who had the most to say about the freedom a job brings, and funny enough the movie *Avatar* reminded him of the process.

Chris: [Avatar convo] I watched it last night, just because that's how I feel right now. You know, when Sully was going back from out of his avatar and then going back, and he was in a wheelchair, and he's like, man, I feel like this is the real world and this is the pretend world. And being at the reentry facility is the pretend world, you know, it's certain things where you're just like, ok, I'm still locked up. At the end of the day it's not a big deal, but it's just reminders, you know, that you locked up. Then when you go to work, you're free, man. Like, eat what you want... I look at it like man, they're paying me to be free.

Chris got the opportunity to work with Crossroads Solar, a solar panel production company whose goal is "to produce top quality solar panels with people who have made mistakes, creating second chances and a greener earth one panel at a time."

The company has been able to reach the local prison population because of the founders' connection to Westville Prison.

Chris: It was started by a Notre Dame professor named Pat Regan and then I don't know if Marty is his friend or not or just the money behind the thing – but I guess he was teaching classes inside Westville or something like that. And they was like, "Yeah, it's all good and well you coming here and you teaching classes and doing stuff like that, but you would never hire somebody like me." So he decided, I don't know how he decided to do solar panels over there, I mean, he drives a Tesla so he's environmentally friendly, but he decided to start a company with all felons.

Patrick Regan and Martin Whalen, Crossroads president and vice president respectively, had been teaching as part of the Westville Prison Moreau College initiative for several years before founding the company.

Chris: And so, everybody at my job, except for him and Marty, which is the owner and co-owner, the plant manager and everybody down is a convicted felon.

Chris: It's just a great place to work. There were other places I could have worked and made more money, but the vibe wouldn't have been the same.

During their teaching experience at Westville, they were able to not only understand just how tough reentry is, but see what they could actively do to help. They aim to break the cycle of unemployment and recidivism by actively involving their employees in the business and creating an offender-friendly environment.

Chris: Like, it was cool for me the first day I went in there and got an interview, and I talked to every workstation, and I talked to these 2 specific girls who had ankle bracelets, and they was just, because like it wasn't a fear that I had but I was like, "Well, if I get modification then they gonna put me on house arrest but I'll be able to go to the gym, I'll be able to do this," and I was like, "Well, I'm gonna be wearing like joggers or sweatpants to be covering up my band," and she was like, "Don't cover it up!" I'm like, "Man, I don't really want everybody knowing I was locked up," and she's like, "What for?"

Chris: And it's like, these girls work with their ankle bracelets, and I'm like, "Yo, when'd you get out?" They like, "April!" I'm like, "I just got out in December!" And so it was just like, the joy that they have for life, you know, so it was like, they look forward to going to work everyday, and I still do look forward to going to work.

They are also offender-friendly financially – they believe that the income hierarchy between the top of the company and the bottom should be close to flat. As such, the President's salary remains within 5% of what an employee on the factory floor makes. The financial profits are shared across their workforce.

Chris: I really like that job. I love the people, and it's fun! It's fun right now, it's something that eventually, after my 90 day probation, we get to buy in stock shares or something like that, and eventually he wants the employees to own the company... [That's awesome]

Not only do they empower employees financially, they also empower them educationally.

Chris: And it's like, 4 of us is going to school right now to get certified in solar.

Chris: I'm manufacturing solar panels, so I'm learning about the future. And they just gave me a scholarship to go to school to get certified in solar, so it's like, I'm winning.

Jerome has had a similar positive experience with Goodwill, the popular resale company.

Jerome: I'm working basically an entry-level position at Goodwill, but it's temporary, you know.

Goodwill Industries is the nation's largest nonprofit provider of job training services, which puts them in the unique position to lead in the successful reintegration of previously incarcerated individuals.¹

Jerome: And uh, they say "Despise not small beginnings," but really, it's not really small, it's really big for me.

Jerome: Because, you know, I think a lot of the time when people, they get a little too up and you gotta remember where you came from. Like, I just was in the joint. Like I was literally just locked up. Now, I call it portals to freedom, this is a portal to freedom and I'm grateful for it.

For some of the guys, their job experiences have granted them the freedom to explore the arts.

Chris: I usher at the South Bend Civic Theatre, being able to go see these plays and then also help people, you know, cause when you help anybody you help yourself. And then just, also being able to go see plays at the Morris Performing Arts Center, and these are like the Broadway plays – I'm from 31st and Broadway in Indianapolis, IN, which is maybe the Far Creek district, it's like one of the most notorious, crime-ridden, violent ghettos in Indianapolis, and it's like, I never woulda thought that I would be enjoying a Broadway play, just sitting here like, "Oh snap, this is really nice!" So to be able to go get that culture and not feel like any less of myself but feel like more of myself...

Some of the other men have volunteered at the theater.

Andre: I donate time, I spend time at the city center ushering when they have plays, like myself and other guys we donate time there.

¹ https://www.goodwill.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Road_to_ReIntegration_Exec_Summary.pdf

Chris: Anybody that's worth they salt wants to contribute. You don't just wanna sit back and just, what do they call it, lump on a log, whatever it is – you want to contribute and this allows you to contribute.

Chris specifically has found not only joy in volunteering and working in the community, but validation in how the community has responded and treated him.

Chris: Volunteering at, it was this thing called Shortcakes on a Blacktop. It was, like, Cathedral St. James, First Pres, and all these churches just going down there, being with those people, being in this tent, serving these shortcakes all day, and then just how they treated us – they treated us like, they was just so welcoming and just loving and just like, it's a term that people don't use for people these days, but just godlike. That's how those people were. They had no clue where we was from, at all. They didn't even ask. And then later on I think they might have found out where we was from, and they still didn't treat us any different.

Chris: And there was two women specifically, Deb and Ashley, they wrote the warden a letter just talking about, there was like 5 of us that went, like what we really brought, they worked the whole time, we had to make them take breaks, and just the overall joy that they brought to the day. Just the fact that they used a word like joy for some "hardened" quote unquote criminals – you know I've been locked up 20 years – for somebody to be like, "How do you have so much joy?" like that's a miracle.

Just being able to be out in the world versus behind prison walls is a blessing,

Chris: It's another place called Reins of Life, where they got this horseback riding community for kids that got autism. That's what I was doing before I got a job, like every Thursday, Friday, even some Saturdays when I didn't get a visit, like, that was like, I made that my job. I was out there, you know, quote unquote, they say it's manure but you're really out there shoveling shit (1:40 yeah yeah cut out? Or tune down) – but I didn't care because I was free, like man, you don't understand, like I was behind a wall, like I had only seen the top of trees for like 12 years of my life.

With all the good energy among the guys, they've been able to work together and share opportunities. For example, both Chris and Jerome express themselves musically.

Chris: Music is something that kept me alive, like writing, journaling, and then writing music, I had never wrote a song until I got locked up. And then, started playing the guitar maybe 6 years ago.

Jerome: [And you're a bassist?] I play the bass, guitar, and I can play the drums, but I'm not a drummer, DJ, all of it. But, right now I'm really more focused on the bass and songwriting. Like, I've written over 300 songs since I've been incarcerated.

They were able to collaborate musically while at South Bend Reentry Center.

Jerome: Just the other day ago, we were blessed to be able to go to the Unity Cafe to perform, Str8 Thang was able to perform.

Chris: Like I played a show Friday, at Sam's Unity Cafe, like that's the first public show I've ever played.

[\[Str8 Thang music\]](#)

Chris: And then, for Jerome to be, he knew Sam through the book club, he kept, he wasn't pestering all day, but just, shameless self promotion like, "Yeah, we come play shows yea yea yea" and so we probably played 4 or 5 songs before I took a break, and Sam was like, "Well I knew y'all was gonna be good but yall are for real! Like, that was beyond!" and I was like, "Yea Sam, like, this is what literally kept me alive," that's what kept me alive so you know, being able to meet people that give you a chance, give you a shot.

Being able to perform their music live, outside of prison walls, was meaningful for their reentry process.

Jerome: We passed by Westville, and that was like a reminder of where we came from. Like, you don't wanna go back to that, but not only that, being on the other side of the fence to help those in that situation, because you know what it's like, you know.

In the next episode, all of the guys tell us more about how they connected with each other, with friends, and with family through their time at South Bend Reentry Center.

This is Voices of Reentry.

[\[Str8 Thang music\]](#)

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