

Former inmate helps prisoners prepare for new life

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Some 600,000 people leave U.S. prisons every year, only to encounter a series of roadblocks to reintegration.

Stanley Frankart knows. He was one of those people.



Stanley Frankart was under the legal system's supervision on and off for 18 years. (Courtesy photo)

Frankart's various forms of incarceration began at age 10, when he broke a schoolmate's jaw. He then cycled in and out of juvenile detention centers and correctional institutions on various drug charges. When he was 16, he shot someone in the face and got a 10-year sentence.

By the time he left prison in 2017, he had spent 18 years under the supervision of the legal system.

These days, Frankart goes back once a week to his old prison, Richland Correctional Institution in Mansfield, Ohio, to coach soon-to-be-released prisoners who are hoping to make a new life when they are released.

Through a nonprofit he founded in 2015 called Young Christian Professionals, the 32-year-old former prisoner teaches a blend of what he calls Christian character development and professional business practices to help incarcerated people prepare for life on the outside.

“It was just natural that I was here to minister and pastor individuals who come from where I come from,” said Frankart, who is married and the father of two girls.

Young Christian Professionals has a staff of 75, mostly volunteers, who run an eight-week curriculum in prisons across Ohio—with startups in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Illinois—followed up by one-on-one support for prisoners after they’re released.

The program pairs study of Christian principles with practical employment skills. It teaches prisoners how to shake someone’s hand, look them in the eye, tie a necktie and properly enunciate. Frankart calls this “business etiquette,” much of which he himself learned from books.

About 1,800 prisoners and their family members have gone through the program, which Frankart started while still in prison. Funding comes mostly from The Witness Foundation, which trains and funds Black Christian leaders.

Reentry into the free world is challenging



Stanley Frankart.
(Courtesy of The
Witness Foundation)

Frankart was part of the inaugural cohort of Witness Fellows and recently shared his story on a [“Footnotes” podcast with Jemar Tisby](#).

Reentry is a huge challenge for many formerly incarcerated, who encounter a combination of laws and rules that block them from jobs, housing and voting.

A report from the Brennan Center for Justice found “a prior criminal conviction all but ensures a lifetime straddling the poverty threshold.” Most employers conduct background screening on candidates for full-time positions.

Various state legislatures have enacted as many as 27,000 rules barring formerly incarcerated people from holding professional licenses. Public housing is often denied to people with a criminal record.

Those hardships disproportionately affect Black Americans. While Black Americans make up 13 percent of the population, they account for 38 percent of people in prisons and jails. They are incarcerated at five times the rate of whites.

When President Joe Biden designated April as “Second Chance Month” to bring awareness to these barriers and promote opportunities for former prisoners, he directed the federal Small Business Administration to offer more business startup loans to applicants with criminal records.

Frankart, who also leads a weekly “reentry worship” at Crossroads United Methodist Church in Canton, Ohio, believes church and parachurch ministries have not done a good enough job helping former prisoners reenter society.

“That connectivity piece that gets missed when people just come in for programs or Bible studies—there’s no relational component,” he said.

He describes leaving prison with a black plastic trash bag stuffed with his belongings and not even a ride to a halfway house in Mansfield, Ohio, where he was due to report later that day.

These days, he personally drives just-released prisoners to their destinations and often buys them their first meal.

“We get involved in whatever resources they may need. Maybe it’s housing, maybe it’s employment, maybe it’s expungement (of offenses), driver’s licenses. Whatever the case may be, we walk with them through that experience.”

More support needed for reentry

Harold Dean Trulear, national director for Healing Communities USA, an organization that trains congregations to help prisoners after their release, said there are many groups dedicated to offering support for those reentering society, but probably not enough.

“The sheer numbers of people coming home every year far exceeds the capacity of these organizations,” said Trulear, who is also associate

professor of applied theology at Howard University in Washington, D.C. “And that’s why there’s always room for more.”

Frankart’s own turnabout began on the floor of Richland one day in 2011, when he was 21 years old. Two gangs got in a fight, and Frankart found himself on the floor badly beaten, kicked and stabbed.

“I remember laying on the ground and realizing in that moment how powerless I was over my own life,” he told Tisby on the podcast. “And so through this process, I’m on the ground and I said, ‘God, Jesus, whoever you are, if you’re real, get me off of this ground.’”

That began a journey in which he attached himself to three Christian men in prison and began studying the Bible under their direction. He followed that up with self-study, including a 16-week Urban Ministry Institute capstone curriculum and a leadership role in the local prison chapter of Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

In 2015, he was sitting in the prison’s library studying when he saw what he called a ragtag group of men and started a conversation with them. It then dawned on him, “Your mission field is here.”

Young Christian Professionals was born.

Prisoners don’t have to be believers to enroll, and there’s no expectation that they profess a Christian faith when they leave. But they will be exposed to Christian teachings.

The best part of the program, Frankart said, is that many people who have reentered society successfully will go on to volunteer to help others.

“We kind of have what we call a replicable model,” Frankart said. “We raise up individuals who want to spearhead the initiative. We support them. We walk with them through that process.”