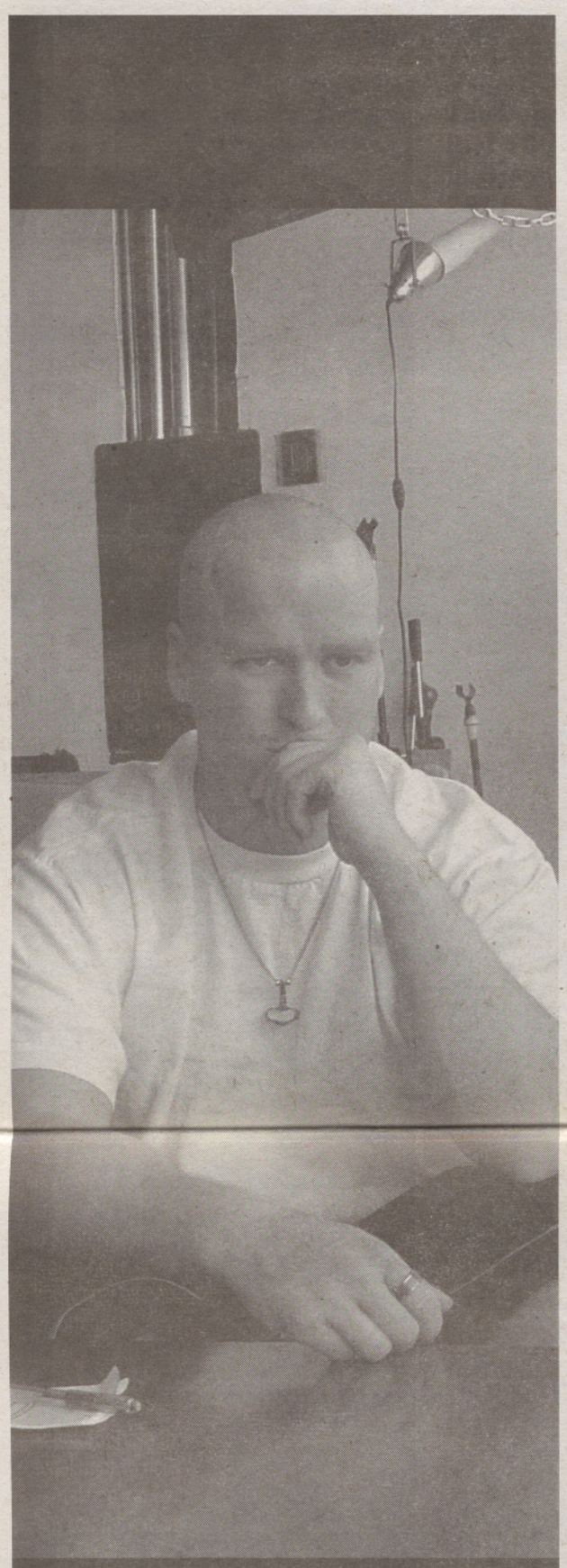

A fellow inmate took Matt Gollyhorn (above) aside when he was first incarcerated and talked to him about figuring out his life. "If it hadn't been for the one and a half minutes he took out of his time," says Gollyhorn, "I might not have changed." Who he was back then, he says, and who he is now are completely different people.

Out and down

After serving time, many former inmates find that the real trial begins upon release

BY SEAN MEAGHER, RORY PATTISON, SUSAN MILER AND REBECCA BUHL
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Matt Gollyhorn remembers it well: sitting uncomfortably on a bench and waiting for the bus – a ride that he had anticipated for almost eight years. The sun reflects off his shiny head, and he stares blankly in front of him. A half empty box of knickknacks sags beside the folds of his undersized sweat suit, and he kicks at gravel with shoes that are two sizes too big. "What am I gonna do now?" He asks aloud, fingering the $220 check in his pocket.

It was all he had to his name after seven and a half years in prison.

According to Jeff Duncan, a research analyst for The Department of Corrections, 52 percent of released offenders in Oregon had no home to go to in 2008. In 2009 alone, says Duncan, 4,461 inmates are scheduled for release. For these individuals, the transition from incarceration into society is difficult, especially for those without family support.

"I had a premonition"

On a spring night in 1999, while he and his older brother waited outside a Portland McDonald's, Gollyhorn, then 18, had a premonition: he knew that if they went through with their plan they would get caught.

Instead of trusting his instincts, they went ahead and attempted to rob the McDonald's. They also got caught. Gollyhorn was charged under Oregon's Measure 11 with three counts of armed robbery, criminal conspiracy and second-degree kidnapping.

Raised in "Felony Flats," the SE 82nd and Duke area, he recalled growing up around white supremacy and biker bars, and knowing only one black family in the area. He was surrounded by addiction, as well, with both of his parents hooked on narcotics. After being picked on as a young child, Gollyhorn started fighting back. He continued fighting and, consequently, was kicked out of five Portland high schools.

A fellow inmate took him aside when he was first incarcerated and talked to him about figuring out his life. "If it hadn't been for the one and a half minutes he took out of his time," says Gollyhorn, "I might not have changed." Who he was back then, he says, and who he is now are completely different people.

He lost the need to fight, as well as the hatred that he says took so much energy out of him.

Gollyhorn was also able to use his time as best he could. He spent a fair amount of his sentence on a wildland firework crew, where he relearned how to trust, how to appreciate a full day's work, and how to interact with the outside world.

Nonetheless, re-entering society, he says, was like stepping into a foreign country.

"I'd never paid a bill in my life," he says. Nor had he used a cell phone or the Internet prior to entering prison. If not for his friends at Sisters of the Road and an ex-con acquaintance who showed him the ropes of Portland's social services, Gollyhorn might easily have slipped back into a violent lifestyle.

Living For Destiny

The bustling noise of the busy café crowd carries on around Destiny, but the 3-month-old wrapped in a blanket remains oblivious to it, comfortably sleeping in her stroller. The clattering sounds emanating from the counter only 20 feet away do nothing to disturb her, nor does the emotionally charged tale of her mother, Alicia McGinnis, 25, who sits by her.

Destiny has no idea what her mother has gone through the previous 7 years, a time during which McGinnis was incarcerated for 3 1/2 years in Washington for robbery, and then again for 13 months in Oregon's Coffee Creek Corrections Facility in Wilsonville for first-degree burglary.

Destiny has been well fed and has a roof over her head, something McGinnis is able to provide through Section 8 housing and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families income she receives. These are better days for McGinnis, much different than the many years she spent homeless on and off throughout her life. According to McGinnis, many nights as a child were spent sleeping under the steering wheel in the cab of a truck, her parents, brother and family dog all crammed in beside her.

On another spring night in 1999, McGinnis awoke in a friend's car to discover that two of her buddies had followed a man from a gas station and had robbed him. According to McGinnis, because she had woken up at the time, it was determined by the police that she was aware of what was transpiring. She was charged as an accessory to robbery and given 3 1/2 years.

"I had just lost custody of my son a couple days before this," says McGinnis, recalling a situation that she blames in part on her mother, whom she described as a drug addict who regularly caused problems for her and her son. McGinnis remembers her mental state after losing custody of her first child: "I just didn't care about anything anymore."

Still, she managed to get her GED while in prison. Her second incarceration came later when she and two other friends entered an abandoned building and stole $35 worth of tools. She was given a 13-month sentence based on being a repeat offender.

"You're out of luck"

Art Rios, a member of the Civic Action Group at Sisters Of The Road Cafe, discussed his experiences in and out of prison. A native of Sacramento, Calif., his struggles to return to society after serving more than 4 years at San Quenton Penitentiary for stabbing a man

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In 2007, Oregon had a rate 59 percent higher than the national average number of parolees per 100,000 people.

In a city-wide study found that one year after their release, 60 percent of former inmates were not employed in a legitimate job. In the same study it was found that 65 percent of employers in major U.S. cities said they would not knowingly hire an ex-offender.

Landlords have the legal right to deny a rental applicant who has committed any crime against a person or property. This includes more than 87 percent of the current inmate population, according to the Oregon Department of Correction.