

ENTREPRENEURS, from page 10

new crime, but rather violating terms of parole or falling back into old habits.

One of her clients calls it the difference of opportunity, she said.

"The opportunity for me to become a drug addict is much lower than someone who has a network in that environment already," Skvarla said. "I don't have (opportunity). I would have to decide that I wanted to do that, I would have to seek it out, I would have to find it and do it. Whereas if you're living in a place where people are doing that all the time, the opportunity is always there."

Ryan Wallner started stealing when he was a 6-year-old. Today, he has 13 felonies in his criminal history. He's now serving his third sentence in prison with about a year to go.

"I call it problem-solving class," Wallner said of A Social Ignition. "I'm trying to do stuff differently in my life."

In addition to the class, Wallner has become an education tutor in the prison and helps others get their GEDs. He is working to be accountable, "to himself and his brothers and sisters," he said. But he feels disconnected.

"I just want to be free," he said. "I really just want to be free."

Wallner's project with other students is developing an apartment complex that will house people in need – people with a criminal record who can't find landlords who will accept them as tenants. Wallner knows the situation personally. The previous times he was released from prison, he said, he had no place to go.

"Safe housing is huge," Skvarla said. "I knew it was an issue. I didn't realize how intense that would be."

Part of Skvarla's motivation is her belief in diversity – not just in terms of color or ethnicity, but diversity in background and thought.

"If we exclude people from the discussion, we are excluding a wealth of creative solutions."

Skvarla works one-on-one with the students throughout the course, and

beyond. She's quite clear that this work is personal, and there is a connection between herself and the course mentors, and each of her students.

"We're in it for the long haul," Skvarla said. "We know there are going to be ups and downs. Trust is so important in business. It's all about trust."

As a small staff, Skvarla and her team are at capacity with 35 students having gone through the program to date. But she's working with administrators with other business programs that teach in prison to improve their programs with the personal development, vetting and pitching process used by Skvarla.

And the Oregon Department of Corrections has asked the organization to take on new students from elsewhere in the state – transferring inmates to the Columbia River Correctional Institution specifically to take the class. The guidance doesn't end when students leave prison, regardless of whether they intend to start a business or not. The organization's Long Haul program provides individual and small group coaching on specific goals to focus support toward release and beyond.

"They really are just the same as any of us out here," Skvarla said. "The experiences are much more dramatic but the heart and soul are the same."

Jamal Gardner has served more than 10 years for a domestic violence assault. He is 37, and plans to go to business school. "To be the venture capitalist I feel like I was born to be," he said with a smile.

Like others in the class, Gardner is acutely aware of the challenges he faces for jobs and housing upon his release, but he understands that the difference will be made in baby steps, he said, all leading toward empowerment. He completed his term and was released Dec. 4.

"We can do things," he said. "If I want to change the view of society about felons, I have the power to do that. It is a huge step in empowerment. You're never going to have all of the answers, but you go out and find them."

More information about A Social Ignition's programs is available at asocialignition.com. Joanne Zuhl is the managing editor of Street Roots. joanne@streetroots.org

A Blind Society

by Daniel Cox

Life now flows with a sense of over-convenience, to make modern lives unproductive and over-privileged, allowing us to drown as we rest upon our laurels. We demand things instead of earning and learning. Greed has replaced creed.

Caution thrown in the wind as we rush to our doom. Where seeing how the altruistic system, falling like a machine prone to break down from lack of maintenance, an empire is not brought down by outside forces, but from within.



#OregoniansGive



Albina Community Bank

Hello Oregonians! Invest in Street Roots vendors on #GiveTuesday!

Give a donation at giveguide.org or oregoniansgive.org

Visit with Street Roots staff, vendors and sponsors at Albina Community Bank (430 NW 10th Ave.) on #GivingTuesday, Dec. 1 in the Pearl from 9a.m.-5p.m.



VOODOO DOUGHNUT

THE MAGIC IS IN THE HOLE!

22 SW 3RD
& BURNSIDE

1501 NE DAVIS

OPEN
24/7!SUPPORTING STREET
ROOTS SINCE 2003

Are you a
Veteran
experiencing
or at risk of
becoming
homeless?

Transition
ProjectsPlease call 855.425.5544
or visit 650 NW Irving Street