

# Entrepreneurs on the inside

*With A Social Ignition, founder Sonja Skvarla uses the language of business to help people invest in themselves, even when no one else will*

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STAFF WRITER

Joshua Wright has a plan to help people, specifically young adults. His business plan is to create a mixed martial arts program for at-risk youths. The model would teach young adults the principles of discipline, honor and respect through a medium that appeals to their naturally adventurous side.

Wright is young, 26, but he doesn't have much time. He has cystic fibrosis, and was told he has a lifespan of 32 to 35 years, he said, a prognosis that resonates through our conversation. It's a different but not defeated perspective. Wright is calm and determined about his future.



Joshua Wright

"People don't need to be fixed. They need help," he said, sitting in a classroom where he is studying the techniques of a successful entrepreneur; learning how to connect with people and build a service for the common good.

More importantly, he said, he's learning that it's not just about running a business or making money. He's learning about investing in himself, for his future — whatever it might hold — and to tap into the difficult lessons of his past to make it work.

Because in three years, Wright will walk out of prison with a felony record, having served a six-year sentence for burglary with a firearm. And regardless of what he and his incarcerated classmates want to do to help people when they get out, they know they will be walking into a world that hates felons.

"Labeling people is the first step to dehumanizing people," he said. "If that's all you see of me, than I'm sorry for you because I'm so much more than that."

Wright is an inmate at Columbia River Correctional Institution and a student with A Social Ignition, a nonprofit organization that uses a curriculum of entrepreneurship and professional development to help people re-enter society after incarceration. There are the familiar business lessons in A Social Ignition's programs, but the overarching agenda is self-improvement, self-confidence, and taking advantage of the wealth of experience they already have to address problems in society.

"Entrepreneurship," said Sonja Skvarla, "is an emotional journey. It's the power of choice. What are good choices? What are bad choices? Who is making those decisions? All that is taken away from them in prison. You have to practice that."



Sonja Skvarla

PHOTO BY BEN BRINK

**"This is a population that — more than anyone else in our country — we throw away."**

— SONJA SKVARLA

Skvarla founded ASI in 2012 as a way to apply her multiple business degrees to a population that faces incredible odds against success. The focus isn't necessarily to create a new enterprise upon release, but having prisoners see themselves — their lives — as that enterprise — one that deals frankly with the obstacles and has the confidence and network to rise above them. And never return to prison again.

But nowhere is this about dismissing their past.

"We teach them to learn from their past, don't ignore it," she said. "Let's talk about it and move forward. Use it! To be whole, you have to embrace all of the moments of your life. It's not so much about second chances but that life is cumulative."

Students pay \$25 to attend the classes, which is a significant amount of a prisoner's nominal wage. It's an investment, Skvarla said. Other than that class fee, the program is funded entirely through donations and grants. It does not receive any money from the Oregon Department of Corrections.

Students are asked to develop a business model, which is vetted through the class and

mentors, and ultimately presented — inside the prison — in front of businessmen and entrepreneurs in the community. It's about having the confidence to "speak the language of business," Skvarla said.

Past professionals have included representatives from Nike, Intel and other local business owners, even Mayor Charlie Hales. It's a stark contrast to the inherent isolation of prison, where there is security in staying under the radar and keeping quiet.

"When you're asked to get in front of class and share your ideas out loud, it's very exposing," Skvarla said. "It's scary."

But it's those conversations about failure, the emotional experiences shared between entrepreneur and inmates, that is the magic of the class, Skvarla said.

"This is a population that — more than anyone else in our country — we throw away," she said. "We say, 'we don't want you.' I feel akin to that process. People feel like they're not worthy, that people don't want me. It's abuse."

Skvarla isn't naïve about offenders serving due time for an offense, she said.

"It's the systemic throwing away of humans that I can't get behind."

Curtis Gibson, 52, had a long career in real estate before committing the crime of theft by deception that landed him a 5-year prison sentence. He is halfway through completing his time in prison, and after 30 years being self-employed, he thought he knew it all when it came to running a business. But now, in Skvarla's class, he said he's focusing on how to use that knowledge to foster a business for change.

"Being in prison doesn't have to define you," Gibson said.

But for the more than 66 million Americans with felonies on their records, it often does.

The obstacles facing felons upon release are legion, including institutional barriers to employment and housing, with strict parameters around where people can live. Starting in January, as a result of the state's "ban the box" campaign, nonexempt employers in Oregon will be prohibited from inquiring about an applicant's criminal background in the initial stages of the application process. No such ban exists for housing, and the scarcity of affordable housing, combined by strict parole rules, and prohibitive eligibility requirements for federal assistance, add to the challenge for parolees.

Skvarla views the lack of safe, stable housing as one of the biggest obstacles to success upon release.

"When people have to declare they have a criminal record in housing, that generally means they only get to live in certain areas," Skvarla said. "And if we're talking about a revolving door of jail, a lot of people know people in those areas. And some people in the program have been able to negotiate with their parole officers to live someplace else because they had friends in another area that would be a safer environment. But not all have been able to do that because they don't have the social network."

There are currently more than 1.5 million people in state and federal prisons in this country. That's more than the populations of Portland and Seattle combined. Most will be released eventually. There are currently nearly 5 million people under community supervision across the country. Nationwide, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that approximately three-quarters will be rearrested within five years of their release, and more than half will be reconvicted. It's a business costing states more than \$48 billion a year, according to the bureau's latest figures from 2010.

Nationally, about 1 in 4 people released will return to prison. But statistically, recidivism often is less about committing a