

A purposeful life

Tyrone Rucker reflects on taking volunteer work to another level

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In a sterile hospital room in the depths of Oregon Health and Science University, Tyrone Rucker sat with one of his patients and shared a big greasy pizza. They only had a few days left, and Rucker knew that he wanted to make it meaningful.

The reality of Rucker's job as the Integrated Health and Recovery Treatment case manager at Central City Concern, or CCC, is that some patients will pass away. It is a difficult aspect of the job, but it also

happens to be one of great importance to Rucker.

Being able to bring comfort and company to those who are sick or dying gives him hope. "There are so many times where I sit back and think,

that's why I love working here," said Rucker. "They might not have anything, but they have us."

It takes a profound sense of empathy to do the job, but for Rucker it seems to come naturally. This may be because he was once on the other side of the patient and case manager relationship. He was once that patient reaching out for help. That experience imparted on him a deeper understanding of what it means to be a good case manager.

Rucker first came to Portland in 2009 after moving from Los Angeles in search of something new. Portland was a change of setting, a new way of life and a chance to start over.

He didn't have a plan when he boarded the Greyhound bus, but with a positive attitude and a sense of hopefulness nothing else really mattered. He didn't know who or what was in his future but said that he just needed to remind himself to stay positive, then the rest would fall into place. "If you're on a positive frequency the universe will shift itself for you," said Rucker.

His first experience with CCC was through its mentor program. He had just moved to Portland and it was just what he needed to get himself on a better path. Through his mentor, he was connected with the Community Volunteer Corps program, but admits that he had some initial hesitations. Going out into the rain to clean up graffiti wasn't how he had planned on spending his time, but before long he found himself enjoying the work.

Community Volunteer Corps offers work experience and community service opportunities to help improve participants lives, whether it be helping them overcome addiction or move off of the streets. The program was founded in 2009 and has since helped hundreds of people. The program recently reached the milestone of 100,000 hours of community service.

Over the span of several months participants of the program complete 80 volunteer hours with organizations such as the Oregon Food Bank, Free Geek or Habitat for Humanity. Once completed, graduates receive a certificate of completion, a letter of recommendation and a small stipend.

Working with a team, problem solving and building good work habits are just a few of the skills gained through community volunteering that help prepare graduates to find permanent employment.

At a graduation celebration for the most recent CVC cohort, graduates were given the opportunity to make a brief speech as they received their certificates. The common thread between those who spoke was the deep gratitude for CVC. Whether they had been struggling with addiction or living on the streets, each person had a story to tell about how their lives had changed for the better.

Like these new graduates, CVC had a profound impact on Rucker's life. It taught him the skills he needed to find employment and make a better life for himself and his young son. More than anything, it gave him a renewed sense of self-confidence and understanding of what he is capable of achieving. "When I graduated that was my boost. I knew I could complete something," said Rucker.

The saving grace for him was the fact that he was never pressured into doing more than he could handle. "They know that for some people it's their first time doing anything, and there was an agreement that maybe you can't work four hours but how about two," said Rucker.

The skills he gained through CVC eventually lead him to his current job at CCC as a member of the Integrated Health and Recovery Treatment team. It is his job to coordinate care between a variety of health services and get people the care they need to get better, whether that means transporting them to appointments or giving them a haircut.

As a single father, finding a balance can sometimes be difficult. Between the

Tyrone Rucker

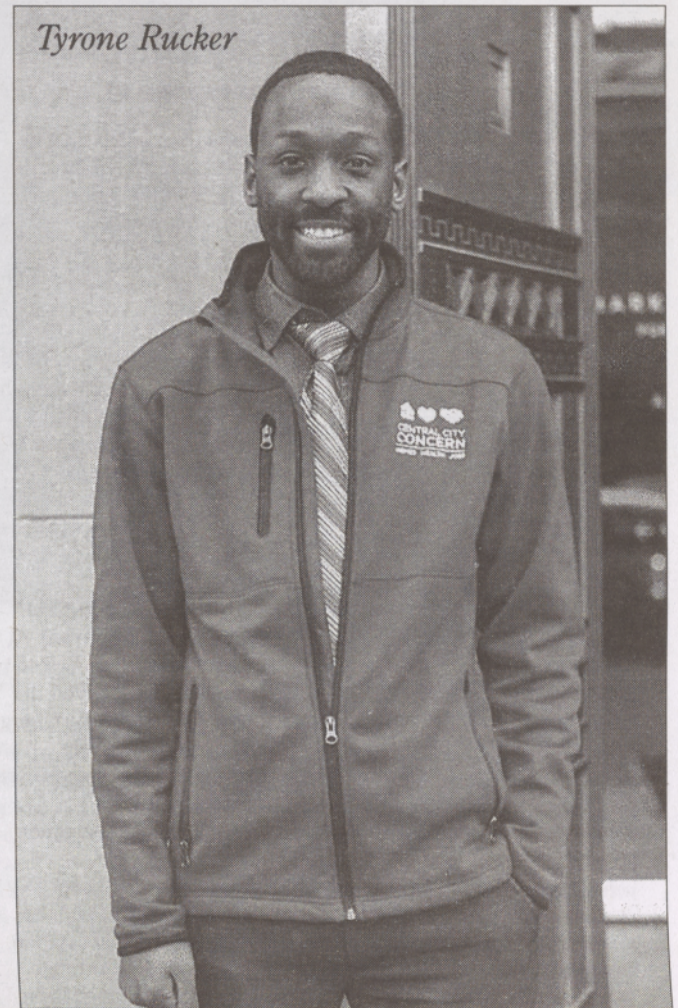


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demands of work and school, Rucker's main priority is making sure that his son receives as much love as possible. Meshach, who is nearly 2 years old, completely changed things for Rucker.

"Things are different now. I see that he copies things that I do so I'm trying to be an example for him," said Rucker. "It took me out of me - it's not about me now, it's about the kid."

Rucker is currently in his second year at Warner Pacific College where he is working on a bachelor's degree in health care administration. He plans to stay there and get his master's degree in human services. After that, his ultimate goal is to work on the quality management team at CCC because he enjoys working in the background and making sure that everyone is getting fair and equal care.

For those still in CVC or considering joining, Rucker said it is a worthy commitment. Even if the work does seem easy or the outcome doesn't seem worth it, the benefits are numerous.

"Sacrifice yourself for a few months to get this work done, because then you're going to be a priority when it comes to hiring," said Rucker.

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Dignity



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