

**RE-ENTRY, from page 10**

become the father of her three children. Together they manufactured and distributed drugs, amassing wealth and assets together. Yet despite her criminality, she had until that point kept true to her promise to herself as a child and had never used hard drugs.

She was enraged when she discovered that her partner was using cocaine. But eventually, he persuaded her to try it.

"I was a dope fiend from that point forward," Whitt said.

A series of events, including betrayal from her partner, led her to become homeless. While living on the streets, she became involved with a man who physically abused her and introduced her to crack. Within nine months, she was in prison.

"I still didn't understand that I had all this untreated trauma," Whitt said. "I still didn't understand that I had mental health issues. I didn't know anything about that. Matter of fact, I would reject anything of the sort because there's a high stigma around mental health issues, and I did not want to be associated with that, so I refused to even consider that I might have something going on."

According to the Center for Prisoner Health and Human Rights, about half of prison and jail inmates abuse or are dependent on substances, and over half meet the criteria for mental illness.

"The majority of people that are in prison have untreated trauma, undiagnosed mental health issues, domestic violence, drug addiction - which is a social crisis, not a crime," Whitt said. "We criminalize addiction, and addiction should not be criminalized. It's a social issue, and it's everybody's problem; it's not just the person addicted to drugs. Because we are your community, we are your neighbors, we are the parents of your child's friend at school. And we need help."

**Turning points**

It was during their last stints in prison that Rucker and Whitt decided to get clean and change the direction of their lives.

For Rucker, it was a book shared with him by an inmate he wasn't supposed to talk to.



Jackie Whitt's first day of her last prison term was the day she decided to get clean and sober. PHOTO BY ARKADY BROWN

The California prisons he was in were heavily segregated, and there was very limited interaction among different races, a stark change from Rucker's hometown of Pasadena, where, he said, "everybody hangs out with everybody."

But one day, a white man approached Rucker, who is black, in the TV room on a day the black inmates had control of the TV.

"I think he took advantage of the moment no one was there," Rucker said. "He said, 'Man, these jail rules. I grew up in Long Beach. The majority of my best friends are black and Hispanic.' He goes, 'But these rules, we have to follow these rules.' And I damn near wanted to cry."

The other inmate told him about a book he read that "changed his whole perspective on life," and Rucker asked to borrow it. He read the whole thing in one night - "The Secret" by Rhonda Byrne, a book about the laws of attraction and getting from the universe what you put into it. The book struck a chord with Rucker, and from that day, he said, he had a "mind-frame change."

So when he received his \$200 from the prison on his release date, he didn't head to Skid Row and spend it on drugs, a backpack and a hygiene kit, like he usually did. Instead, he bought a ticket to Portland.

In Portland, he became involved in Central City Concern's recovery and mentor

programs.

"I went to treatment, I learned those tools, and everything started lining up," he said.

He got a job at Dollar Tree. Three months later, he was hired on call at Central City Concern, and he was promoted a year later. A year after that, he was hired on full time as a case manager at Transition Projects. In 2014, having housed the most people of any case manager, he won the Skidmore Prize, which Willamette Week awards to outstanding nonprofit workers.

As for Whitt, she "knew from the day I went to prison everything about my life had to change," she said. "Not just some. Every single aspect of my life."

She became heavily involved in her spirituality and went to treatment. She stayed away from people that didn't respect her boundaries, worked full time as an orderly, and attended church services and all the classes that she could.

Yet she wasn't allowed to finish her treatment program. "Their reasoning behind it was they felt I wasn't going to stay clean," she said.

When she got out, she had 16 certificates of completion from different programs and classes. She took Rent Well classes, attended Mercy Corps re-entry

programming, took vocational rehabilitation classes and accessed mental health services.

She was able to keep her apartment, and she started family counseling with her children. "Since then, I'm crime free, domestic violence free, and my clean date is when I went to prison," she said.

Today, Whitt is part of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Union Local 48. She is also a peer support specialist, and she lives with her children.

Rucker, meanwhile, is working toward his Bachelor of Arts in health administration, owns a home in St. Helens and has custody of his young son.

Both have felony status but have overcome many of the barriers that come with that. Yet they both agree that prison created more barriers than it removed.

"It's just so sad because the system is so built like that," Rucker said.

"It's about money," Whitt added.

"This is a system; this is how it goes," Rucker said. "A few of us are able to maneuver out. But some people, I got friends who have surrendered to that life."

"Shaping a Future: Life After Prison" will give Rucker and Whitt the opportunity to shed light on the injustices they witnessed and experienced in the prison system.

Imani hopes people in attendance will learn about these injustices, such as the lack of access to services, mandatory-minimum sentencing and the disproportionate imprisonment of people of color.

"I want to challenge the community, that if they really want a better community, like I know they want a better community, they need to worry, and they need to care, and they need to ask questions," Whitt said. "Like what's happening to those people when they get to prison? What situations are they being put into, and what access do they have to get mental health help?"

"When people start learning about this stuff, there's going to be a lot of people that are outraged, even regular community members, at the state of affairs, and why and how they got that way. And there are going to be people that change it. So I'm looking forward to that. I'm going to be one of those people, to change it."

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