

Knocking Down Barriers

OPPORTUNITY OREGON
WORKS TO CONNECT FORMERLY
INCARCERATED PEOPLE
WITH JOBS

By Dan Buckwalter

In the beginning — just released from the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville in 2010 after three years served for her role in an armed robbery — Nancy Pance kept a low profile at a halfway house in Bend, trying desperately to find a job so as to not return to prison.

Her applications were rejected out of hand. One rejection at a restaurant still sticks out. The manager told Pance that she would be a “liability.”

“I left feeling defeated,” Pance noted in testimony early this year in front of the Oregon’s Legislature’s Senate Judiciary and Conduct Committee, where she voiced support for SB 697 and SB 698, known as the Clean Slate Oregon bills that would modify the process for setting aside convictions and keeping records sealed. “Despite my efforts to ‘do the right thing’ upon my release, I felt like no one would ever give me a chance.”

She went to school, instead, and step by step, starting with business and accounting degrees from Central Oregon Community College in Bend in 2013, Pance put those frustrating days behind her to run, in partnership with her brother, Joseph Carmack, a successful business. The two have run Anytime Fitness in Lebanon since 2015.

Yet Pance never forgot the barriers she faced in those early days of freedom, the struggles to find work and housing with a prison record hanging over her head, and she has worked daily since March 2021 to help pave a smoother road for men and women released from prison.

That’s when Pance, along with her brother, founded Opportunity Oregon in Springfield, a nonprofit dedicated to identifying prisoners about to be released who have gone through reintegration training and pairing them up with employers as job openings arise. She also serves on the board of directors for the Oregon Justice Network/JAM (Juvenile Advocacy and Mentorship).

“It takes me back,” she tells *Eugene Weekly* of her work with released prisoners. “I remember those barriers. It has improved, but they are still there.”

Pance says that Opportunity Oregon, working with the Department of Corrections, identifies inmates with skill



NANCY PANCE
CO-FOUNDER OF
OPPORTUNITY OREGON

Photo by Todd Cooper

sets that have been honed while in prison and are suitable to the workforce, and it provides resources for re-entry with classes and workshops inside. Oregon Opportunity also partners with Sponsors Inc. in Eugene, WorkSource Lane and Lane County Workforce Partnership.

According to Pance, 205 formerly or currently incarcerated individuals have come through the office for services since March 2021, either in person or by mail, though she adds that this number might be low because Oregon Opportunity started using data tracking software only a year ago.

From there, Pance pretty much goes door to door to advocate for her clients at various businesses, extolling the benefits of hiring the formerly incarcerated. This segment of people, she notes, are routinely overlooked, but she adds that they are strongly motivated and will stay at the job long-term.

Pance is fiercely loyal to the people she represents, even accompanying clients to job interviews. “I have an ongoing relationship with them,” she says, adding that she has helped the newly released navigate housing applications, set up bank accounts, teach them how to drive again and obtain an Oregon driver’s license.

“We’ll celebrate the wins,” she says. “We’ll go to Starbucks or go get ice cream.” One former client, she cheerfully notes, sends her a cake everytime he gets a raise or promotion, prompting Pance to playfully wonder if that’s messing with “my girlish figure.”

Unlike the early days after her release from Coffee Creek, Pance now is open about her past — her descent into drug use, her homelessness, the robbery and the fact that she nearly died. She poured it all out on social media in 2021, around the time that Oregon Opportunity opened, and many people who had only known her as a successful businesswoman came to understand her better. She crossed her fingers, and the response was overwhelmingly positive.

“I knew one day I would share it,” she says. “I showed them a mugshot when I was at my worst. I told them I got my family, self-respect and dignity back, and that now we as a team have started an agency to help ex-offenders find jobs. I ended with — ‘If I can do it, you can, too.’ Anyways, I’m just grateful and had to share why.” ■

Opportunity Oregon is at 1045C Gateway Loop, Springfield. Information on its services is at Opport-Unity.org.

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