

Vivian Nixon Reentry Week Presentation Transcript

Link to the presentation: <https://vimeo.com/airclientvideos/review/528860294/582cfae3c1>

It is really awesome to be here. I had a Second Chance grant a few years ago, and I remember what that experience was like, learning all the government speak and the acronyms, and my head hurt I had to learn so much. But I got through it. And now I'm happy to be able to be in a position to help other people get through it and to see so many of my friends from Just Leadership doing that as well. And that is really what my talk is going to be focused on. That in doing this work, there are a lot of details we have to learn, a lot of acronyms, a lot of: How do you do a budget? How do you do the PMI? How do you ask for a no cost extension? All of that matters, or you can't do the work. But what matters really, more than anything to me is, what do you think about the people you are serving? Because what you believe about the people you serve matters.

(Opening Slide – *Second Chance Success: Leadership, Education, Ability, Development*) (1:04)

And that's where I'm going to start my talk today. We all have abilities and sometimes we put people in pigeonholes and categories, and we say, well, this group of people, they are not able to do certain types of careers. But if we focused on technical education, which is a wonderful thing for people who have that aspiration, then we can have more success. How about if success really means helping people achieve their goals and their dreams, helping people do whatever they want to do? So if somebody really is a hands-on type person and wants to do carpentry or wants to do construction, yeah, let's help that person follow their dream. But what if somebody wants to do something else? What if somebody wants to be a college professor? What if somebody wants to lead an organization? Well, that's what we're going to talk about today. I think that in order for us to have success in the Second Chance Program, we have to understand that the people we are working with are capable, they can get education at any level, they can be leaders, and our job is to develop that. Their human development is our job.

(Slide 2 – *A Dream Deferred: Image of a correctional facility and sign that says "Correctional Facility Inmate Crew in Area Do Not Pick Up Hitch Hikers"*) (2:35)

So 2001, March 17th, I stepped out of that building. I'll never forget that building. And it's funny, I was Googling Albion Correctional Facility and this picture came up and the name was cut off, but I knew right away, I said, that's that building. Three and a half years, and that place is ingrained into me like nothing else in my life. It's where my dreams could have all gotten just tossed forever. My dreams had already been deferred through a path that I took, but were they going to be gone forever because I ended up in this place? Is this place the dream killer? Or can after being in that place, dreams be resurrected?

(Side 3 – *A Dream Deferred: Image of College at Old Westbury Student Union Building*) (3:33)

The reason I focus on education is because one of the core issues in my life was being a failure at going to college when I was 18. I went to college, I was expected to go, my parents expected all of us to go, and I didn't do well. It's my first time far away from home without my parents' very strict supervision. And what do 18-year-olds do when they're over supervised and then they get free? They act a fool. So I acted a fool, and that sent me down a path and I didn't graduate. And even into my 30s, the memories that that brought up, how I disappointed my parents, how I failed, I still, if I think about it

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long enough, a tear will fall because it hurt me that much that I disappointed them when they had invested so much in me.

(Slide 4 – A Second Chance from Who?) (4:36)

When I got home, I didn't think about college right away. I knew I needed a job, and so I started going around looking for a job. And the first step in any job is you fill out an application, I would fill out my application. And a couple of days would go by and then I'd realized what was happening next, background check. And then what happened next was rejection. And that didn't just happen once, it happened over and over and over and over and over again, until one day I met a woman at St. Francis Hospital in the town that I lived in, who was the head of the HR department and HR lawyer, who actually knew the law of New York State. And she sat me down and she said, "I think you are capable. You have abilities. And I think you can work here. But the job you're applying for has some restrictions. Please keep in touch with us." And within three months, I was working there. So my success required her to believe in me and to give me a second chance.

At the same time, I was part of this organization called College and Community Fellowship. And we had this study group ... all of us were college students, also women in reentry. We had a study group that was studying the collateral consequences of criminal conviction. And we read the famous Devah Pager, Bruce Western study about employment. And I began to think, hmm, I wonder if there's a problem in other areas other than employment, and then I learned that there were. I'm just a student, I'm at CCF learning, but I noticed that:

(Slide 5 – A Second Chance at What? Image of a College Application that has been rejected) (6:44)

With all of the conversations about Ban the Box and collateral consequences, not a lot of conversations were happening about college. And then I went back to try to reapply to college. I was in College and Community Fellowship as a beginning fellow, that I was just learning, I was going to community meetings, but I wasn't in college yet. When I applied to college, I got rejected by the State University of New York because they had a arduous process for people with criminal convictions that I chose not to follow.

(Slide 6 – 2004 State of the Union: “America is the land of the second chance – and when the gates of prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life” George W. Bush) (7:20)

Then George W. Bush created Second Chance. 2004 State of the Union, he said, "America is the land of second chances and when the gates of prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life." And I believe that.

(Slide 7: Second Chance Act: “This year some 600,00 inmates will be released from prison back into society. We know from long experience that if they can’t find work or a home or help, they are much more likely to commit crime and return to prison. So tonight, I propose a four-year, \$300 million Prisoner Re-entry Initiative to expand job training and placement services, to provide transitional housing and to help newly released prisoners get mentoring, including from faith based groups” George W. Bush, 2004) (7:39)

But because I was a student, I studied that speech and I read the speech over and over again. And I said, yeah, all of that's true. People need to work and they need a home, they need training and they need housing, but something's missing. Education. Could it be that we as a country don't think this

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population deserves education or that they're capable of higher levels of education? I don't know. But I wanted to find out. So College and Community Fellowship became my support system. Eventually I came to work there as an organizer and in 2006 I became executive director. At the time the organization had a budget of about \$150,000 a year, our budget today is 2.5 million and we have 25 staff.

(Slide 8 – CCF's Three Program Areas: Direct Service, Policy & Advocacy, and Technical Assistance) (8:36)

These are the services we offer, and I'll be really quick because it's very detailed. Our website, you can go to and get more information. We provide a number of direct services that range from academic counseling and college prep, college information, just to advise people that you can go to college and here's how you do it. We do career certificates in partnership with the City University of New York. We do career placements. We're having a big job partnership with some hospitals in New York City right now to try to get people into careers that have a pathway to real financial security and stability. We do financial education. We do policy and advocacy. We worked very hard on Second Chance Pal and other pieces of legislation to make sure that people had access to education and we provide technical assistance in our Thrive Program.

(Slide 9 – THRIVE Technical Assistance Program: Trauma-Informed Service Delivery, Motivational Interviewing, Asset-Based Approach to Service Delivery, Postsecondary Education, Financial Education, Organizational Learning and Development) (9:34)

Thrive has been going for about two years and it offers training on the following best and promising practices that we have found work with our students. And it's the reason that we have upwards of an 83% graduation rate for formerly incarcerated women going to college.

[Applause] Thank you.

We believe this about the women we serve; we believe that they can be leaders, so we focus on leadership. We believe that they can achieve any level of education that their heart desires, so we promote education. We believe that they are able to do anything that's in their dreams. And that just because they lived behind a fence with razor wire for a period of time, their dreams are not dead. They can be revived. And we believe in developing all of that potential in every woman that comes through our doors. My goal for Second Chance success is to ensure that every organization working with this population of people who have been impacted by the criminal justice system believes the same thing about the people that they're working with.

Because when you do that, you get me and you get Chondra and you get all of the other wonderful people at Just Leadership and the women at CCF where I work. This is a huge opportunity for you guys.

(Slide 10 – Second Chance Success: Leadership, Education, Ability, Development) (11:19)

To support in a way that I've never seen reentry being supported, and I've been involved in the reentry field since 2004. You are actually putting the ... Hmm, I was going to mix metaphors. It's money where your mouth is and letting the rubber hit the road. You're doing that and I'm really proud of that. Because once you inspire that kind of achievement in a person, it never goes away. Do you know what I wanted to be when I was 12? Do you think I wanted to be a formerly incarcerated woman that was working in reentry? Probably not. I wanted to be a writer. And for years and years and years, I put that off because I was focused on building this organization. But because people believed in me, a series of

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events occurred that landed me at Columbia University in 2017 in the master's program and in nonfiction. And I graduated in May.

So even at this age, all of that inspiration that was poured into me by the women at CCF, by the directors of CCF, the board, all of the other professionals I've met in this field, all of that that was poured into me, the gift keeps giving. I'm 60 years old, I'm about to get a master's degree and write a book. If you give at that level, if people believe that you see in them the highest possible self that they can be, they will provide it and you will be able to be inspired by the gift you gave. Thank you. I really appreciate being here. Now, go out and inspire somebody to lead.

Closing Slide:

Thank you! We look forward to engaging with all of you in this important work!

College & Community Fellowship

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