

## Stephanie Gatewood Interview

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### ***Opening Slide – Reentry Week: April 26-30, 2021. Conversation Between AIR Coach and A Community-Based Grantee***

[Joseph speaking]

Well good day to you, my name is Joseph Williams, and I am a Training and Technical Assistance Coach for the Second Chance Act Community Reentry Track, and I'm here today and I'm interviewing one of my outstanding grantees, Stephanie Gatewood. Stephanie is the Reentry Director for an outstanding organization in Memphis, Tennessee called Hopeworks, good day to you Stephanie.

[Stephanie speaking]

Good to do you too as well Mr. Williams, good morning!

[Joseph speaking]

We're going to talk about how you and Hopeworks have overcome some of the challenges that you have faced as a Reentry Organization, so, we were talking before you mentioned that you guys focus on Employment Readiness and Employment, so why don't you tell us a little bit about barriers that you've overcome in the area of employment.

[Stephanie speaking]

First of all, Hopeworks has been around for about 20 plus years and 2020 was a year of COVID, so one of our greatest barriers was how we were to operate inside of these restrictions that were placed on us. So, a part of the year was had with everybody was quarantined, so jobs were quarantined, as well as our clients, and one of the greatest challenges I think was how do we operate in a COVID environment and still be effective. And what we found was that the virtual world was reborn. Now we've always known about the virtual world but not as it related to job training and interviewing our participants to participate and even interviewing some of the employers.

[Joseph speaking]

You came onto this project right at the beginning of the pandemic so that must have created some interesting barriers as well.

[Stephanie speaking]

Let the truth be known, I was hired in the middle of the pandemic and so we were used to interacting face-to-face with employers, interacting face-to-face with the participants, but thinking outside of the box, thinking how we can still be as effective. So, we had to pull out our computers and do it in a virtual setting, and so I think for me the greatest issue or greatest challenge in the middle of COVID has been how do we operate behind the screen, versus face to face. It's even different when you try to have eye contact, how do you even know just like small intricate details, like how do you ensure that you have eye contact. Well instead of me looking at you on the screen I have to look directly in the camera and that's a little hard to do as well because you want to be able to look at people's responses.

[Joseph speaking]

Well, a lot of these strategies that you've adopted to be successful during the pandemic will continue even [Stephine agrees "absolutely"] after the pandemic right and that and that certainly is the direction that the whole employment area is going. Can't knock on doors anymore, and not even face-to-face interviews, but virtual interviews.

[Stephanie speaking]

Yeah, and it's the new normal, it's the new normal. Even when we are back to normal, it's the new normal.

[Joseph speaking]

Okay, and so have you guys found it challenging finding employment opportunities for people coming out of incarceration?

[Stephanie speaking]

Oh, absolutely Joseph. So, of course the first challenge is knowing that a person who is trying to reintegrate to society already has a record, and I think the greatest challenge for us has been not to find employers who are willing to hire those individuals, but to have those individuals really be able to talk positively about their ability to want to return to the workforce. We do a skills assessment with them prior to them getting out and then we're able to start working on finding them opportunities prior to them being released, so that when we are released, they can just step right back into the workforce. And I think one of the other challenges has been for the individual to really find confidence within themselves, because what you'll find is that a lot of times, they're really down on themselves more than the people around them are. And they lose their confidence and just really helping them build their confidence back up to re-enter the workforce.

[Joseph speaking]

Yeah, and you guys have had a lot of success I understand in helping these formerly incarcerated men and women to get back into the workforce with living wage employment.

[Stephanie speaking]

Yes, and so Joseph you know everything that we do in life it's about relationships, and so I think our success has been building those strong relationships with those reentry partners, and also with the workforce partners, really being able to talk with them and being a true partner. Now being a true partner means that we would actually walk through the interview process with the participant, we would if they needed a ride to the job interview, we would take them there, if they needed clothes to be able to look presentable, we did all that in a mock type setting first. And then we followed them 12 months on their job to make sure that there aren't any barriers that might come up. We've been able to create strong relationships with the HR managers, IE directors, and even their supervisors, to where we get updates on their progress and the person that we're working with is knows about it and they're even willing to help share what barriers they may have so that we can get ahead of those barriers. And we found that to be a part of our success.

[Joseph speaking]

Yeah, so your particular grant had required that you go into the corrections facility to recruit, assess, and to provide some pre-release services before people come back out into the community. But the pandemic created some challenges along those lines as well for you.

[Stephanie speaking]

Oh yes it did. So, nobody has been able to go into the prisons personally, face-to-face in the prisons, and so we have to really rely on our strong partnership with Shelby County Corrections, and even those employees that work there to help us identify potential candidates to be a part of our program. So, but we still have to we still have to get the consent forms, we still have to do all the paperwork that has to be done, but now it's just another layer put in place to help us do that. And so Hopeworks applied for a grant and we were able to get 150 computers, and we were able to place those computers with the, because we have a strong relationship with Shelby County Corrections, they trusted us enough to say okay I think you're going to do your due diligence, we can, you can provide these computers to our, to our people, that are housed here. Those who are just as involved and from there we trust you to be able to handle the classes. And so, that has really been, a like, you can't, there's no amount of money to pay for that kind of relationship, and so because we built that strong relationship. But we also have a strong relationship with the Office of Reentry. So they were kind of our forerunners, and they kind of helped facilitate and set up the meetings, and set up the conversations, and introduced us to the concept. And then from there, it was given to us as, okay now it's yours do with it what you need to do with it, and for me I think it has to do with relationships, trust, and really the fact that we have a good track record, and at the end of the day we are helping our community even more by giving

these individuals this training so they can become productive citizens, and go to work, and make sure that they're providing for their families.

[Joseph speaking]

Yeah and I really appreciate the work that you guys have done, to switch to virtual, to use your strategic partnerships and all those ways, to continue to providing vital services to these men and women who are incarcerated and coming back into the community, and it certainly benefits them, and it benefits the community overall, so you certainly to be applauded for that. You got any questions for me?

[Stephanie speaking]

Tell about your story.

[Joseph speaking]

So, like the old hair club commercial, I used to say, not only am I the president, but I'm a client. So, certainly that is a part of my personal background, I am a formerly incarcerated person. Was actually a career criminal for some time, was a person who had a hardcore addiction, and it was members of the community, who really helped me to overcome that as a young man, and I was so grateful, to be free from crime and addiction, that I wanted to give something back, and so yeah, I've been involved in this work actually since 1982, and in various capacities, pretty much cover the full spectrum of serving incarcerated men, women, and for brief time youth, in all aspects of this work. And I'm thrilled to be able to work with AIR to be able to support service providers, and so yes, and I did operate similar programs to what you're operating for about 20 years. So it's really a joy for me to be able to serve you, and the other grantees around the country, to be successful, in serving people who are returning to the community from prison.

[Stephanie speaking]

I just want to say that I think we are lucky, blessed, to have you as part of our Technical Advisor, and to and really to be able to be so responsive I think you have an innate ability to really be responsive to your grantees, and really be able to provide them with what they need, because you know of the time requirement that we have and we don't have a whole lot, and so I'm thankful for you helped my job become better, and easier, because of your responsiveness, and so for that I'm truly grateful. It takes teamwork to make the dream work, that is so true in this situation.

[Joseph speaking]

So thanks Stephanie for taking this time out to talk to me, and to share with other grantees about your project.

[Stephanie speaking]

Yes thank you my pleasure.

[Music Playing]

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