



2821 N. 4th St. Suite 223 Milwaukee, WI 53212
Phone: (414) 374-8029 Fax: 414-374-8033

Helping Men and Women Leaving Prison Make a Positive and Permanent Return To Our Community

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Another Year Coming To An End

It is hard to believe that we are almost to the end of another year. This year began with trepidation and anxiety. Last year was a tough year for Project RETURN. We entered into 2018 with significant debt and a lot of questions about what the new year was going to bring. The Board of Directors and many community partners came together to address this issue. By April of 2018, Project RETURN was out of the financial crisis.

Through this process, the Board of Directors started to rethink their role within the organization. The Board of Directors is the 15 person body that provides oversight for the organization. We are blessed to count within the membership of this body eight members who have personal experience with the criminal justice system. This is a blessing for the organization as the Board of Directors is where the vision for the organization stems from. Having people serve on the Board of Directors who have personally experienced the system keeps the needs of our clients front and center as we continue our mission. This said, the role of the Board in 2018 is changing to address more of the fund development, marketing and advocacy within the organization.

This is where we could use your help. Project RETURN is in the process of developing subcommittees to address each of the areas listed above. While the Board of Directors will have members on each of the committees, we also recognize the impact the community has on our work. We are seeking volunteers to serve on each of the above named committees, helping the organization to grow and reach more people. If you are interested in learning more of the vision of the Board of Directors and how you may be able to have a role in that vision, please contact Wendel Hruska at wendel@projectreturnmilwaukee.org.

We thank you for all of your support and look forward to a very exciting 2019!



Project RETURN



@ProjectRETURN1



38th Annual Celebrate the Return

On Saturday, October 27th, Project RETURN held its 38th annual gala, "Celebrate the Return" in Marquette University's Alumni Memorial Union ballrooms. The event brought people from across our Milwaukee communities; from a Supreme Court judge to a journalist, from churches to correctional facilities. The event featured a silent auction with many donations from inmates currently incarcerated, the presentation of our annual Don Bein Volunteer Award and Elijah O'Neal Award of Excellence, the keynote speech by the Honorable Janine Geske, and performances by Kateri Bluford, Steven Rodriguez, and Apollian. On this night, Project RETURN was able to raise nearly \$17,000 to fund our work within the re-entry community.

Reverend Matthew Short led the prayer. In his invocation, he spoke of how God was there within all of us that night. The 38th Annual Celebrate the Return Banquet and Awards Celebration also featured entertainment from local artists. Kateri Bluford gave us a beautiful rendition of "Feeling Good" inspired by the gospel music that has influenced her life. Steven Rodriguez's spoken word was a performance that we won't soon forget. His emotional poem about his personal experiences with the criminal justice system left us all feeling something. Apollian was the last performance of the night. His uplifting song "Live my Life" had everyone dancing and singing along.

The Honorable Janine Geske gave the keynote address in the beginning of the program. She spoke of her work with restorative justice and how important it is for formerly incarcerated persons to hear the impact they have on victims. Her detailed stories of work with the formerly incarcerated surely opened the eyes of those in attendance to a side of justice that we don't often see. The work she has done throughout her life is truly inspiring. We are very lucky to have heard from her.

The night was quite the success. We send our sincere thanks to everyone who came out and made it possible. We would like to show our sincerest gratitude for the underwriters of the event, those who took out ads in our banquet booklet, and those who donated tickets so our clients could attend the evening in particular. Through your generosity a truly memorable and uplifting evening was shared by the nearly 160 people in attendance.



The Don Bein Service Award

In 2005, Project RETURN set up an award to designate one volunteer who, through his or her outreach to us and our clients truly demonstrated that he or she is a champion of the mission of Project RETURN. This award was named after Don Bein, a man who fervently supported Project RETURN and our mission. He served for 22 years on the Board of Directors, serving in every capacity.

During his time on the board, Don was extremely active in reaching out to people and uniting them for the cause of Project RETURN. He offered our clients excellent financial advice and showed them a path to stay out of prison. He did this through many volunteer outings such as to recreational events, jobs, church, or even the movies.

This year, Project RETURN, in commemoration of the hard work and commitment that Don Bein gave to us and our clientele, will be presenting the Don Bein Service Award to Representative David Crowley.



Rep. David Crowley accepting the 2018 Don Bein Service Award

Representative Crowley is finishing his first term as a representative in the Wisconsin Assembly. He is a lifelong resident of Milwaukee and has a long history of supporting Project RETURN. Shortly after graduating high school he joined an AmeriCorps program called Public Allies where he was placed with Project RETURN. After his year at Project RETURN, he attended University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and worked with Urban Underground on grassroots organizing, with a focus on inner-city youth.

Throughout his political career, he has shown support for his community, especially the youth and the formerly incarcerated. He has also worked with Project RETURN and WISDOM on criminal justice reform. We are honored to support Rep. Crowley and his work.

Elijah O'Neal Award of Excellence



Elijah O'Neal is a founding member of Project RETURN thirty-five years ago. Before his involvement in Project RETURN, Elijah also gave back to the community through organizations like the Benedict Center and Self Help of Sheboygan. Elijah has tirelessly given of his time, talent and treasure to serving on the Board of Directors and mentoring clients one-on-one.



Emmanuel Washington receiving the 2018 Elijah O'Neal Award of Excellence

Throughout the thirty eight years Elijah has brought the experiences and life lessons of a former offender to every endeavor he has taken part in. He has been a valued support to our clients, both for his firmness as well as his compassion.

The Elijah O'Neal Achievement Award is given annually to a client who has grown the most in a given year and shown other former offenders that change is possible. This year, we honor Emmanuel Washington. Emmanuel came to Project RETURN just one month after his release from prison in 2013. He came to Project RETURN almost every day searching for employment opportunities and a safe space. He also became an integral part of the organization by volunteering, attending the alumni group, and helping staff in any way possible.

He would bike through rain and snow to come visit the office. His determination is an inspiration, and though we don't see as much of him these days, he is still a light in our lives. Even though he has worked full-time for 4 years now, he continues to help plan our Celebrate the Return. We are blessed to have him in our Project RETURN family and are honored to have given him the Elijah O'Neal Achievement Award. His speechlessness showed just how humble he is. For all he has given to us, we are blessed to have given him this recognition in return.



Hosts Re-entry Simulation

Article by Sara Riegler, Project RETURN Intern

On November 6, Project RETURN in partnership with Senator Lena Taylor and the Department of Corrections sponsored a re-entry simulation at Project RETURN's office. The simulation was created by the Department of Corrections so that both staff and inmates can better understand the obstacles that are experienced upon release from incarceration. Over 85 people pre-registered to participate in the simulation which consists of four 15-minute sessions representing the first four weeks after release. You are given a packet with a checklist of what you must complete each week, information of what offense was committed, job information, money, and other necessary information.

The room is set up in a circle with tables representing certain agencies: the jail, probation office, career center, bank, housing office, etc. You also need to have enough "bus tickets" to travel between places throughout the simulation which can create additional challenges. Each person has a very unique set of circumstances that they must overcome in order to be successful within a given week. I was surprised to see that Anthony, my persona for the simulation, had saved \$200 while in prison and already had a part-time job. Even still, I was \$100 short for rent after paying my probation agent and paying for a form of identification. This left me homeless for the next two weeks. The first week, I also failed to attend my AA meetings which made them very upset with me when I showed up the next week. This was perhaps the most surprising part of the simulation: we were treated like criminals at some tables.

The probation table in particular had a tendency to give people a hard time. When someone failed their "drug test," the probation officer would ask them what happened, why it happened, and if the excuse wasn't up to par, which it never was, he would say "really, that's the best you got?" I felt like I was walking on eggshells around every person I had to interact with. Even though it was a simulation and I have never been incarcerated, I really felt the sense of shame for missing a meeting or getting a positive drug test back. I definitely did not expect that.

The very real nature of the simulation, though unexpected, is perhaps what makes it so important. At the end of the sessions, someone said that it would be great if all officers had to complete this simulation in order to truly understand the struggle-- which would be a great idea. There is definitely something we all can learn from putting ourselves in someone else's shoes.

