

# Project RETURN

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Helping men and women leaving prison make a positive and permanent return to our community.

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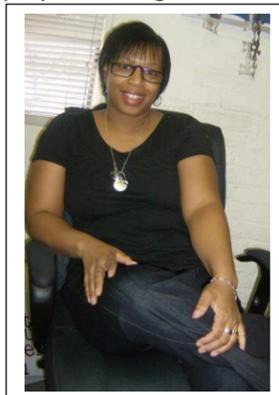
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## A Time to Say Goodbye

For over ten years LaVealea Ball Johnson has been a case manager for Project RETURN, assisting clients with their immediate needs from employment to alcohol and drug abuse counseling. She has, through this time, become the second longest tenured employee the organization has ever had. In February LaVealea will be leaving Project RETURN.



LaVealea first came to Project RETURN over 16 years ago, straight from being released from incarceration. She at that time did not know where she was going to live and what she was going to do with her life, but she knew that re-incarceration was not an option. After assisting with her immediate re-entry needs, LaVealea found a purpose in her life through counseling others in need. Four years after her release Project RETURN hired LaVealea as an AODA counselor where she excelled at helping women address their addictions and counseling women in need. When a full-time position became available two years later, Project RETURN jumped at the opportunity to bring LaVealea on as a full-time case manager, a position she has maintained for over a decade now.

Project RETURN has changed immensely in the decade LaVealea has been on staff. She witnessed struggles of the organization and the clients as well as unprecedented growth. All the while LaVealea has been a key cog in the mission and work of the organization. Please join us over the next few months as we celebrate the work of LaVealea Ball Johnson at Project RETURN and in the greater Milwaukee community.



## 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Celebrate the Return

On October 24<sup>th</sup> Project RETURN held our 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Celebrate the Return Banquet and Awards Celebration. This event was a huge success filled with inspiring testimonials and a very special keynote address by Representative Danny Davis from Illinois. 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, and the inaugural presentation of the Gwendolynne Moore Commitment to Restorative Justice Award. Through this event Project RETURN was able to raise nearly \$20,000 for the re-entry work of Project RETURN.



Rep. Davis accepting the Gwendolynne Moore Commitment to Restorative Justice Award from Rep. Moore

After being presented with the Gwendolynne Moore Commitment to Restorative Justice Award by Representative Gwen Moore herself, Rep. Danny Davis shared a heartfelt keynote address touching on his years of public service and the need for comprehensive corrections reform both here in Wisconsin and nationally. Rep. Davis commended Project RETURN for our work and our success while also urging us and those in attendance to continue the work of re-entry ministry.

The 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Celebrate the Return Banquet and Awards Celebration also featured entertainment through the talents of local artists. Kateri Burford performed two songs acapella in the evening. Her voice resonated the power of redemption through the songs.

Antoine Nixon, aka Kwabena, performed a spoken word piece for the event as well. Kwabena spoke with conviction and energy. He created an interactive experience with the crowd and made the ex-offenders feel welcomed, honored even. His strong message placed heavy emphasis on the individual. Particularly that people will constantly bring others down and it is thus on the individual to shake it off and be strong and confident enough to think otherwise – and prove them wrong. His comparison of “how” versus “why” carried an important significance. He said that as long as individuals have a strong why, the how should not matter. The how is the part that stresses people out and causes them to give up so easily. As long as people know where they want to be and why they want to one day be there, that is all that is necessary to hold onto. It does not matter who or where they have been, all that matters is that they know where they want to be.

The evening was a rousing success. But it could not have happened without the help of a lot of people. The event was hosted by Marquette University who, per usual, did an excellent job of making sure everything was perfect for the evening, from the room setup to the Meet & Greet to the food. Thank you especially goes out to Marquette's Provost Dr. Daniel J. Myers who not only underwrote the Meet & Greet but also attended and welcomed us to Marquette to open the program.

A very special thank you must go out to the David and Reva Logan Foundation who underwrote the entire event. Their support has been truly amazing and we are blessed to have it.

## *WISDOM Honored with 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 WISDOM.

WISDOM launched the 11X15 Campaign in 2012 to combat the negative effects of mass incarceration in the state of Wisconsin. Through a statewide initiative WISDOM has managed to change the climate of re-entry and corrections reform in the state of Wisconsin while also forging partnerships in other states.

Through these efforts WISDOM has tackled issues such as the overuse of segregation and solitary confinement in our prisons, the need for increased Treatment Alternative Diversionary programs throughout the state, the overly punitive use of revocations for rules violations, and the sentencing of non-violent first time offenders under the age of 18 in adult court, to name a few. In these past four years WISDOM with its partners have been able to shift the dialogue from the problem to possible ways to address the issue. Project RETURN stands with WISDOM on the issue of criminal justice reform.

## *The 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.

Throughout the thirty-five 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's recipient is Mark Rice. Mark came to Project RETURN through the 11X15 Campaign. As a student at UW-Milwaukee, he had heard about the work of WISDOM and wanted to become involved. The issue of mass incarceration hit home with Mark as he had been formerly incarcerated.

Early on Mark became a leader within the movement. He openly spoke about his incarceration and underlying mental health issues that led to his incarceration. Mark has shared his testimonial to a number of civic groups and churches as well as testifying before the legislature.

Mark joined the Board of Directors of Project RETURN and is helping to steer the organization to better serve those with mental health issues. He is opening eyes and hearts to the needs of those who have been formerly incarcerated and, in doing so, is carrying on the work of Elijah O'Neal and thousands more before him.



## 11X15 Campaign now

## ROC Wisconsin



On November 3 about 200 people from around the state met Madison to kick off the campaign now called ROC Wisconsin: Restoring Our Communities -- *Beyond 11x15*. Please check out the new website: [www.rocwisconsin.org](http://www.rocwisconsin.org). ROC Wisconsin continues the work of the 11x15 Campaign, calling for Wisconsin to shift away from a cycle of endless punishment and imprisonment, especially for people of color. The campaign will call for a new era of restoration. People with addictions and mental health problems need to be restored to health, not warehoused in jail cells. The goal for those who must go to prison should be for them to be restored, whole and prepared to re-enter society as productive citizens. Those who have spent time behind bars need to be restored fully to the community when they come home, where they need jobs, housing and an opportunity.

The campaign began with a very moving Prayer Rally, in an empty field right next to the Department of Corrections headquarters. Prayers were offered for people in solitary confinement, for people with mental health and addiction issues, for old law prisoners, for the elderly and inform in our prisons, for corrections officers, for people returning from jail and prison, and more. Then, Rev. Marilyn Miller, the new MICAH President blessed 32,000 Prayer Cards, led us in praying that prayer together, and distributed the cards.

The 32,000 cards represent 22,000 people in our state prisons, and 10,000 people employed by the Department of Corrections. ROC Wisconsin aims to enlist 32,000 people to pray for them all. There was a press conference at the state Capitol, and every state Senate and Assembly member's office got a visit from a WISDOM delegation yesterday, to deliver our new materials, as well as our new book of letters from Old Law inmates who are waiting and waiting for the parole system to function properly.

The ROC Wisconsin kick-off also featured the development of EXPO (EX-Prisoners Organizing). EXPO is comprised of formerly-incarcerated people from around the state who are organizing to support each other and to help to lead the ROC Wisconsin campaign. The motto of EXPO is "You have the right to NOT remain silent."

