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## Continuing to Fight the Good Fight

This year has flown by as we move into the final month of the year. 2017 has presented new opportunities and challenges to Project RETURN. On top of the remodeling of our offices which began in January, Project RETURN has seen many new partnerships blossom and expand. The staff of Project RETURN has grown this year, which has increased the work capacity of the organization. Through the end of October we have been able to place 102 unduplicated clients in employment with an average salary of \$11.50/hr. We have also assisted 73 clients attain stable housing and hundreds others with various re-entry needs at the moment of first contact.

There have been challenges along the way but because of your support we have been able to continue into our 38<sup>th</sup> year of assisting men and women with their re-entry needs. To stay updated on the work we do in and around our community, please follow us on Facebook (Project RETURN) and Twitter (@projectRETURN1). With your support, we hope to work on the issues at hand and expand the work we do in the months and years to come. Project RETURN is proud of the fact that we receive our funding from private grants and donations rather than from government funding. Your tax deductible gift to Project Return greatly helps us continue our mission, especially during the cold winter season, when people are seeking warm clothing and housing. If a monetary gift is not feasible, we also accept donations of gently used winter clothing, hygiene products, bus cards, gift cards for groceries, small household items, and Christmas Cards. All these items help those who are incarcerated and recently released with their re-entry efforts. We thank you for your support in this year and we are excited to continue our mission and expand our partnership in 2018 and beyond.



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

On October 7, Project RETURN held the 37<sup>th</sup> annual Celebrate the Return Banquet and Awards Celebration. The event was most definitely a great success that included an uplifting opening prayer given by Pastor Marilyn Miller, especially inspirational testimonials, and an enriching benediction given by Pastor Ron Ballew. Our gala featured a silent auction with prizes that blew the guests away. Some of the items up for auction were made by inmates that are currently incarcerated in one of 7 institutions in Wisconsin. The Don Bein Service Award and the Elijah O'Neal Award of Excellence were also presented to very deserving individuals working alongside Project RETURN. The event even raised just over \$22,000 to help Project RETURN continue assisting the Milwaukee community with the re-entry work and restoring justice to the people.



Executive Director Wendel Hruska addressing the 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Celebrate the Return.

The Gala also featured entertainment presented by the Marquette Naturals. This group of young men certainly set the mood for the rest of the event, encouraging our audience to keep fighting the good fight. The Naturals covered the uplifting hit "Fight Song" by Emmy-award winning artist Rachel Platten. Andre Brown, employment specialist at Project RETURN, ended the event on a rather positive note. Also known as Apollian on stage, he rapped for the audience and blew us away with his beautifully heart-felt lyrics. The audience most definitely felt the personal touch of empowerment and strength in his song. Both of the performances tied in very well with the theme of the event and did a great job at successfully starting and ending the Annual Banquet.

As done in previous years, Voice of the Fatherless Child performed a short skit for our audience. In the skit, an eager young man is released from prison after serving a short sentence only to come home and see how much crime he is surrounded by. His own mother was engaging in drug use at home and his younger sister was also seen suffering the emotional toll of such actions. The brother and sister worked towards changing their mother's actions and altering their own lives in order to steer clear of serving time ever again. This skit allowed banquet attendees to view a more personal perspective to how incarceration and crime can change a family for the worse. Their final message displayed their faith-based approach by clarifying how important it is to fight through these difficult decisions and ultimately choose a better life for all of those involved in one's life.

The event was without a doubt a huge success. The event would not have been so great without the help of our supporters. All of us at Project RETURN owe gratitude to all of those at the Tripoli Shrine Center who helped host the banquet. Our partner organizations, Voice of the Fatherless Child, Wisdom, and the Sunbeam Kids certainly helped us ensure this night turned out successful.

A very special thank you to the Reva and David Logan Foundation, who underwrote the entire event. Their unwavering support has truly been spectacular and we are blessed to have it.

## 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 Ex-Prisoners Organizing (ExPO).

ExPO stemmed out of the 11X15 Campaign of WISDOM, now known as the ROC WI Campaign. ExPO's mission is to engage those who have been formerly incarcerated in policy making decisions in the state of Wisconsin, particularly in areas that directly impact those who are or have been incarcerated.



Members of ExPO accepting the Don Bein Award

Through their work we have seen the ROC WI movement gain steam and continue to advocate for the rights of those who have experienced incarceration. More importantly we have seen a subsection of our population, namely those who have experienced incarceration, transform from a group of men and women who have been disenfranchised from a system that makes decisions about their welfare to an active participant in the policy work of this state and nation, thus becoming an active part of their communities. We are proud to recognize the work and to be community partners with Ex-Prisoners Organizing!

## Our Newly Renovated Office Space

The year of 2017 will forever be remembered by Project RETURN as the year our offices underwent major renovation. The changes are utterly outstanding. Prior to the renovations our offices were quite worn out, having frayed shed carpeting, unexposed beams, shaky ventilation, the walls were torn up, the windows caused for a drafty space, and the entire space was overheated the majority of the time. Project RETURN has really used the space since we moved to this location in August of 2002. In that time we have seen no renovations to the space we inhabit. But now we have brand new hardwood floors, new windows that prevent draftiness inside, renewed walls, and an updated ventilation systems.



These updates have definitely made the office more bearable to work out of and they look a lot more professional. Office Manager Teri Woodley, an employee at Project RETURN for the last 11 years, is positively relieved after seeing the new renovations. "We now have a lighter and brighter office," she says. "Space that is welcoming to walk into every day and these changes have made it easier for me to perform at my best for our clients." The Board of Directors and staff of Project RETURN invite you all to come on over and see all these new changes and support us as we move up and strive for success in the work we do for our community.

## The Elijah O'Neal Award of Excellence



Elijah O'Neal is a founding member of Project RETURN thirty-seven 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-seven 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 are recognizing two people.

The first recipient is Alphonso James. Alphonso has been an active member of our AODA program for a number of months. Alphonso has been active with Project RETURN since 2008 while he was still incarcerated at Green Bay Correctional Institution. We were able to reconnect with Alphonso when he was transferred to Marshall Sherrer Correctional Center. Once released, Alphonso showed persistence in his attendance with the group as well as a good role model for other guys. While he came to us looking for a mentor, he has become one himself.



Elijah O'Neal Award Recipient Alphonso James



Elijah O'Neal Award Recipient Matthew Schechter

The second recipient is Matthew Schechter. Matthew first came to Project RETURN shortly after he was released from incarceration. As a registered sex offender, Matthew had an uphill battle just to get his basic needs met. While the odds were stacked against him, Matthew slowly began to get his life back together. He found employment, was able to secure an apartment, reconnected with his family, and found a way to give back to his community. He was interviewed by Fox News here in Milwaukee and was quoted as saying "If this is winning, I don't want it." Matthew is indeed winning and is a role model to others that, regardless of the adversity, you can make it.

Alphonso and Matthew exemplify the spirit of Elijah O'Neal and it is for these reasons that they are the recipients of the Elijah O'Neal Award of Excellence.

