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Monday, 06/20/05

## Project Return helps ex-convicts start over

By CHRIS JONES  
Staff Writer

When Harold Williams was released from a rural state prison more than six months ago, all he got was a bus ticket to Nashville.

He didn't have much cash, and didn't know of anywhere to go.



Harold Williams, who was incarcerated for 27 years, talks about his experience in the "outside world" since being released from prison in November 2004.  
GEORGE WALKER IV / STAFF

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Williams, 46, felt it would be better for him to just stay in the South Central Correctional Center in Clifton, Tenn., where he'd spent the past 27 years of his life, convicted of armed robbery.

"I was scared," Williams, who most call "Big Harold," said.

Then he found Project Return, a nonprofit organization that helps people just getting out of prison find shelter, food, clothing and work.

Williams recalls being released at 2 a.m. and then arriving in Nashville.

#### Return, readjust

Project Return has been helping those who have come in contact with the criminal justice system since 1979. The program specializes in helping ex-inmates readjust to society.

"For the past 26 years Project Return Inc. has been the safety net for individuals who have served a term of incarceration in state, local and federal correctional institutions," said the program's executive director, David Delbridge, in a written statement.

"Generally, the individuals who walk through PRI's door are, for all intents and purposes, indigent and homeless. The services provided by PRI range from an emergency food box to assistance to buy basic work clothing and tools. In addition, PRI makes referrals for housing, mental health and medical treatment and other ancillary services."

Project Return has helped thousands of people in Davidson County. Here are the numbers of clients they've had over the past few years.

- 1305 in 2001
- 1464 in 2002
- 1791 in 2003

He didn't have a place to stay and later found a prostitute who let him borrow her room at a motel on Dickerson Pike.

The woman stole from him the little money he had saved from working in prison for barely more than a quarter an hour.

The only thing he had was 10 digits written down that someone had given him before leaving prison. It was the number to Project Return.

Williams left message after message because no one was answering the phone.

In his message all he would say was, "I just got out of prison and I need help." He didn't know the

location of the motel, nor did he know its name.

However, one of the Project Return workers traced the number Williams was calling from and was able to direct him to a halfway house until he could receive further assistance.

The person who helped him was R.C. Daniel, who has been with Project Return for five years.

"He was scared to leave the prison system," Daniels said. "He hit a guard so that he could stay longer."

Daniels said that Williams had to leave prison.

"I really tried to stay because I didn't have anywhere to go," William said.

After hooking up with Project Return, Williams had housing, clothing and a job.

"It seemed that everything just worked out," said Ian Wilson, the client services counselor who helped Williams.

The workers at Project Return made a call to some social counselors who had opened a restaurant in North Nashville called Dem Bones Bar-b-que.

They welcomed Williams with open arms.

Lee Ann McKnight, one of the owners of the restaurant, said that "Big Harold" is like family to her.

"Harold has been very instrumental in where we want to take our business," she said. "He's a master griller."

Williams had a background in cooking before getting the job. While in prison, Williams work in the kitchen for years.

"I was blessed to get counseling from the women here because that was their job before the restaurant," he said. "I just needed help."

William said that he was released from prison with five other people that night. He's the only one who's been able to find help and a new life.

The others are either on the run from authorities or back in prison, he said.

William has a house now and a girlfriend that he hopes to marry. She has two sons that he says he loves as if they were his own.


He said he had to learn how to smile again when he first got out because in prison it was a sign of weakness. He wouldn't dare do it.

Nowadays, smiles come very easy for him.

"I'm living the life I thought I would never live," he said.

1941 in 2004  
1147 so far this year  
For more information, call 327-9654 or log on to [www.projectreturninc.org](http://www.projectreturninc.org).

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