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Life After Prison: Lorenzo's Journey

Part 4: Opting in or Opting Out

By Alice Popovici | May 23, 2016

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Lorenzo Brooks (Photo by Alice Popovici)

Lorenzo Brooks pays \$215 per month for a medium-sized, shared room at the Fortune Society in New York City's Harlem neighborhood. When he first came to the reentry support organization, in October—just weeks out of prison after serving 30 years for second-degree murder—he lived in a room with four other men, but seniority and good behavior have earned him more privacy.

Now he only has one roommate. If he keeps up the good work—and there’s availability—he could eventually have his own room.

For Lorenzo and the other 59 men and women who live at Fortune Society’s The Academy residence, a Gothic-style building at the corner of West 140th Street and Riverside Drive, life is structured by rules, curfews and mandatory meetings. In return for following the routine, residents—most of them former inmates—get room and board in a safe place, and time to rebuild their lives.

The days begin and end with focus groups where residents are encouraged to talk about what’s new in their lives, and share job leads. On a rotating basis, they are assigned to sweep the floors, clean the common rooms and bathrooms, and wipe down tables in the dining area, along with other chores.

Every day, all residents must pass a drug and alcohol test—which they administer themselves by looking into a machine that measures the dilation in their pupils.

Some residents chafe at the rules. They struggle to find value in the morning and evening discussion groups they are expected to attend—as a few recently complained to staff during a weekly Thursday night meeting—but 60-year-old Lorenzo says he appreciates the structure. Only eight months out of prison after spending half his life behind bars, he is still adjusting to the rhythm of things outside a correctional institution.

This is Part Four of an occasional series. As Lorenzo begins to rebuild a life he left behind 30 years ago—when he was convicted of second-degree murder—he has agreed to let The Crime Report document his journey. Previously in our series, Lorenzo met with a job coach at the Center for Economic Opportunities, started a new job at the nonprofit Project Renewal and traveled to his hometown of Norfolk, Va. to reconnect with family. [1]

One of the biggest hurdles, he’s discovering, is changing his own perceptions about himself.

“Just because you’re out of prison doesn’t mean you escaped prison,” he said. “You can still be in your own prison.”

Getting Through the ‘Minefield’

For people who have been incarcerated, life after prison can feel like “getting through a minefield” because of the shame they carry around, said Shadd Maruna, Dean of the School of Criminal Justice at Rutgers University and author of “Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives.” [2]

On the outside, Maruna observes, they may appear to be doing well—working a new job, developing a relationship with a new girlfriend or boyfriend—but they live in constant fear that their past will be exposed.

“The key challenge that ex-prisoners face is one of stigma. They have to make a case for themselves that they are a person to be trusted,” Maruna said. “How do they make sense of their past and turn it into something that can lead to a promising future?”

The answer, he said, is developing a new identity to match their new life.

At Fortune, this is a challenge everyone understands firsthand.

“We’re outcasts of society, and to just throw us in with the rest of society can be a culture shock and it can also be lonely,” Lorenzo said.

The heavy wooden doors to The Academy open into a hallway where visitors are greeted by an oversized smiley face next to a few typewritten notes.

“Success is having the discipline to do what you know you should do, even when you don’t feel like doing it,” one note reads. “The sky is the limit,” says another.

Fortune Society, founded in 1967 by theater producer David Rothenberg, serves more than 5,000 men and women in its two adjoining centers in West Harlem (Castle Gardens and The Academy) and its main center in Long Island City, Queens.

Rothenberg was inspired [3] to start the organization after producing a play about an inmate’s traumatic prison experience, titled “Fortune and Men’s Eyes, which sparked a conversation about incarceration and led other former prisoners to come forward with their own stories.



Chef Mustafa Tyson, right, serves Tommy Porr a plate of food during lunch at the Fortune Society. (Photo by Alice Popovici)

Residents who are employed pay 30 percent of their monthly income in rent to the Fortune Society; those who don’t have an income pay the organization the \$215 monthly allotment they receive from New York City’s Human Resources Administration. (Lorenzo, who began receiving the cash assistance before he found a job, knows this support will end in the near future.)

At the Academy residence, people tend to gather in the dining area by the kitchen, where there is coffee and tea, a vending machine and a TV mounted on the wall. In the mornings, chef Mustafa Tyson—himself a former Fortune resident—switches on a medley of R&B and old-school 1970s jazz as he prepares the cafeteria-style lunch.

“Morale is a great part of the kitchen,” Tyson said. “Music, something to eat—calms everyone.”

Fortune is a place where, residents say, you can feel safe enough to let your guard down around others, to be a little friendlier. This can be a hard adjustment to make, especially for people coming from volatile environments such as prison or some homeless shelters.

As Lorenzo's friend, Tommy Porr, puts it—borrowing from a Cherokee legend [4] about the struggle between two wolves, which represent the two opposing sides of human nature—at Fortune you feed “the good wolf” most of the time, and starve “the bad wolf.”

In prison, it's the other way around.

“In there, because it's very dehumanizing...I get the bitterness, the anger,” said Porr, 52, remembering always being on alert during his time in prison. Since his release, Porr said he has had to re-learn how to live in a society where relationships are based on mutual respect.

Porr and Lorenzo know each other from the Woodbourne Correctional Facility in upstate New York, where they both served out the final stretches of their prison sentences. By the time Lorenzo arrived at Fortune, Porr, who was released in 2014 after serving 32 years for second-degree murder, had already been there about eight months and knew the routine.

He told Lorenzo whom to avoid and whom to befriend, and how to make the most of his time at Fortune. “You've got to do the footwork,” Porr told Lorenzo on the day he arrived. That means finding a job, saving money, and participating in all the classes, focus groups and meetings that Fortune requires as a condition of residency.

“They only help if you help yourself,” he said.

Lorenzo knew what his priorities were even before he was released from prison on Sept. 22 (he had gone to six parole board hearings before his release) and he's been checking them off his list, one by one: housing, health insurance, a new job, visiting family he hadn't seen in decades.

He's been at his job since December, working the night shift at a men's homeless shelter run by the nonprofit Project Renewal. [5] He wants to advance to a higher position as a drug counselor, and eventually become a case worker. But before he can qualify for the first promotion, he has to complete a four-month training program, which he's just started.

With his schedule increasingly more packed, Lorenzo does his best to shuffle doctor's appointments and other daytime errands so he can get a few hours' rest between 8 a.m., when he leaves work, and midnight, when he begins his next graveyard shift.

It's not always easy.

Sometimes, he has trouble staying awake during the mandatory M.R.T. (Moral Reconciliation Therapy) [6] evening classes he has to attend once a week at Fortune, a counseling program designed to help people in criminal justice settings understand the choices they've made. Other times, he is too tired to complete the assignments. When Lorenzo's friend and fellow Fortune resident, Thabbit Iddin, 66, hears Lorenzo complain that things are too difficult, he tells him to “put his big-boy pants on” and follow through with his responsibilities.

“I try to be his older brother,” said Iddin, who was in prison himself decades ago, and was released in the early 1990s. He came to Fortune just over two years ago, he said, after a nervous breakdown left him homeless and living in a shelter on Ward's Island.

“It's hard to take off the plastic mask and look at yourself,” Iddin said. “When you finally surrender to it, then you start making progress.”

A New Identity

Maruna, whose research focuses on the psychological aspect of reentry, said having a supportive community of peers, including mentors and role models to follow, is a big help to people returning from prison. But the most important determinant of successful reentry is the ability to construct a new “self-narrative,” or identity, after prison.

“All of us have a sense of identity...it’s our theory of the world, and also our sense of who we are,” he said. For someone just coming out of prison, this self-narrative is still a work in progress, and this process can last up to two years after release.

The narrative can take a few different forms and varies from one person to another, said Maruna, who has interviewed about 200 former inmates about their successes and challenges during reentry.

In some cases, the individual must show that they are a changed person and make sense of what they’ve done in the past.

Others—in an effort to overcome anger and other negative feelings—look for a “redeeming quality in the mistake that they made.”

“There’s a sense of finding some good out of a tragic past,” Maruna said.

For others, a new identity could mean placing what they did within the context of their environment. They might tell themselves: “I was a good person in bad circumstances.”

Ideally, people are able to stay on track after the narrative has been developed.

“Once you get (the) mythology of who you are, you come to behave in the ways that you’ve narrated yourself,” Maruna said.

“Opting in”

Every Thursday at 6 p.m., residents and staff at the Academy gather in a large meeting room to talk about day-to-day issues at the residence.

“What’s going on in the house?” Max Lindeman, senior director of housing, usually asks, and hands start going up.

During a recent meeting, a few residents said they were concerned because they had noticed some of their neighbors weren’t following rules—skipping the mandatory drug tests and leaving a mess in the kitchen—and they wanted to know if staff were going to hold these individuals accountable. Other residents complained that the mandatory morning and evening discussion groups are dull and repetitive.

One man, who likes to bid his fellow residents “good morning,” said he doesn’t understand why people don’t return the greeting.

Stanley Richards, senior vice president at the Fortune Society, told residents that everything they do comes down to one choice: “opting in or opting out.”

“Nobody’s participation in something should determine how you show up,” Richards said, advising them to do the right thing even if some of their peers choose not to.

“Make it meaningful.”



Thabbit Iddin, left, and Lorenzo Brooks at the Fortune Society. (Photo by Alice Popovici)

Lorenzo was silent during the meeting, on May 5, but later said he felt “encouraged” by Richards’ advice. He decided to focus on himself and stop worrying about what others are doing.

Just like the man who spoke up during the meeting, Lorenzo said he has been troubled by some residents’ unfriendly nature. When he says “hello” to fellow residents and receives no acknowledgement, he says it makes him question his own communication skills and he starts to wonder if he’s doing something wrong.

Now, he knows he should follow his own instinct. Sometimes that means—true to his Virginia roots—being friendly to others even if they don’t reciprocate.

“In the South, we’re like that,” he said. “What I learned that night, it really encouraged me to go forth with what I’m doing.”

Alice Popovici is deputy editor of The Crime Report. In the next part of this series, she will follow Lorenzo as he deals with medical issues, using a program designed for people returning from prison. She welcomes comments from readers.

1. <http://thecrimereport.org/2016/04/12/life-after-prison-the-journey-home/>
2. <http://www.apa.org/pubs/books/431645A.aspx>
3. <http://thecrimereport.org/2013/03/05/2013-03-finding-the-miracle-people/>
4. <http://www.firstpeople.us/FP-Html-Legends/TwoWolves-Cherokee.html>
5. <http://www.projectrenewal.org/>
6. <https://www.ccimrt.com/mrt>
7. <https://soundcloud.com/thecrimereport/life-after-prison-opting-in-or-opting-out>

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