THE CHARLES B. THORNTON STORY

As a talented point guard for H. D. Woodson High School[1], I had tremendous opportunities in front of me. Ranked within the top 100 in the country, a Division I full scholarship was well within reach. I needed to maintain a C average, stay out of serious trouble, and sports would be my ticket out of the notorious 58th Street, SE, public housing projects. My housing complex in 1979, became one of the first open air drug markets in the city. Against this backdrop, my mother, a single parent raising six children, did the best she could, but the lure of streets with its promise of easy money, peer pressure, nightlife, alcohol and drugs were simply too much to overcome. Not a bad kid, but clearly a child moving in the wrong direction.

In 1978, at the age of sixteen (16), I became yet another immature and wholly unprepared teenage parent. Not a parent or father by any stretch of the imagination, but a child with a child-- one foot in sports, the other foot in the streets, and barely managing a 1.7 grade point average. All though this was too low to play Division I sports, my high school coaches still tried to help, mapping out a junior college route to bring my grade point average up, and then transferring to a division I school.

[1] See the 1979 Washington Post (Star) Article.

In 1979, I graduated from H. D. Woodson, enrolled in junior college in Washington State, and had my first introduction to the District of Columbia and the Washington State criminal justice systems. And so it began, an eleven year revolving door odyssey in and out of jail (mostly in) for typical drug user offenses: simple possession, possession with intent to distribute, gun possession, violation of parole, etc., and so it went without an end in sight. A series of "get tough initiatives" contributed to extended periods of incarceration and releases. In 1983, I was one of the first to be sentenced under the newly enacted mandatory minimum sentencing law, receiving a three (3) to nine (9) year sentence for simple possession[2]; and in 1988, with yet another District of Columbia crime initiative "operation clean sweep" resulting in chronic overcrowding, I was paroled early. The District of Columbia did not have an ex-offender reentry program, so I was largely released to the streets, without any real supervision, and every statistical measurement weighted against me. True to form, I remained on the streets for less than ninety (90) days before being arrested and re-incarcerated--a poster child for recidivism.

In 1990, I was again paroled to the streets without any real supervision, reentry program, or any reasonable expectations of remaining out of the system—everyone including me believed that I would be back in jail in short order. However, in less than one (1) year, I had completely turned my life around, and was irreversibly moving in the right direction. So it is fair to asked, "what happen and how can this be replicated on a larger scale?" My story suggests that there is a loose, existing network of individuals and organizations, capable of coalescing into a model ex-offender program. The essential elements--temporary therapeutic housing, training, employment and mentoring programs--already exist. True, they operate independent of each other, and most without an ex-offender focus, but the core services are being provided. Ex-offenders are being released everyday, and a few find their way into this supportive network. With some organizing and capacity building, this existing network could reach an even larger population.

[2] See, the 1983 Washington Post Article on mandatory sentencing which includes my jail house interview.

On my release from Lorton in 1990, and unlike 1988, I tapped into this combination of public-private services, training and mentoring programs. This was the essential difference! For example, the programs of alcohol and narcotics anonymous provided guidance, direction and moral support in addressing my underlying addictions; my AA sponsor provided temporary "Oxford Style[3]" housing, which both physically removed me from the 58th street environment, and provided program and mentoring support in the housing setting. So home was truly a safe place. A friend from the neighborhood, who had turned his life around, acted as yet another mentor and gave me my first real job opportunity as a building maintenance worker. He both understood my situation and was sensitive to my employment limitations. Phelps Vocational school allowed me to move from a maintenance worker job to a career in building engineering. Additional study and licensing put me in a position to compete for and obtain the position of chief building engineer for the John Akridge Company, Smithy Braedon Company, and the Advanced Realty Group. My career has included real estate agent, developer[4], entrepreneur, and now back to the non-profit sector as Sasha Bruce's[5] construction manager.

As a direct consequence of this public-private support network, I now enjoyed the love, support and respect of my family and friends; I have rebuilt the relationship with my high school sweetheart, and now the same two teenagers who brought a little girl into

[3] The Oxford House program was established in 1975, and it provides therapeutic transitional housing to individuals recovering from substantive abuse. There are approximately 1,200 houses in the United States, but there are a far greater number of transitional housing programs which follows the "Oxford House Model." Under the model, the residents share the lease cost, manage all housing activities according to established rules and procedures, and provide support and mentoring to each other in association with some outside program.

[4] Ironically, the first property I acquired in 1992 (with the help of the HPAT program) was my sponsor's Capitol Hill residence. Since that time, I have acquired and renovated for my own account at least 30 pieces of property, and I have acquired, renovated and/or developed at least twenty-five for the accounts of others.

[5] With assets of 8 million and revenues of 6 million, the Sasha Bruce Youthwork, Inc., is one of the largest and most experienced providers of services to youth in Washington, DC. Founded in 1974, the mission of Sasha Bruce is to improve the lives of runaway, homeless, abused, and neglected and at-risk youth and their families in the Washington, DC area. They achieve this by providing shelter, counseling, life skills training and positive youth development activities to approximately 1,500 youth and 5,000 family members each year.

this world in 1978, are married responsible adults. We have legal custody of our grand son, as our daughter works through her reoccurring substance abuse problems. We have been given a second opportunity, and we are determined that our grandson will not become a statistic or a burden to the state. My wife and I have accumulated all of the material markers of personal and financial success including a substantial net worth.

Today, and for the past eighteen years, I have had an active spiritual program with all of its associated gifts and blessings. Most importantly, I have maintained a verifiable, sustained commitment to the community, and to at-risk populations, ever mindfully of that spiritual axiom which states that "from those who have received much, much is expected." I am an active member of the substantive abuse support networks, and the community of faith-based and ex-offender organizations. I have been a D.C. Department of Correction volunteer since 1994. My real estate development company is a major provider of beds and housing facilities to non-profit social services organizations that address the needs of the homeless, families living with HIV/AIDS, at-risk youths, and low and moderate income housing.

All of these are the fruits of an informal, loose, collaborative, public-private partnership that provided temporary, therapeutic housing, life support services, training, employment, and mentorship. And as a consequence, I have been able to quietly, and without fanfare, return the same to the community seven fold.