

Let's Give Them a Second Chance

“After being in prison for ten years, I wish that the Bahamian people would be more forgiving and give former inmates like myself a second chance.” These are the words of a former prison inmate who is searching for a job and cannot find one simply because as he says, “The Bahamian people are not forgiving.”

It is imperative that we understand that a major aspect of rehabilitation is after one has served time for wrongs committed, the society gives the person an opportunity to live a productive life. Most of the prisoners are remorseful for the pain they have caused to families, friends, and the community and truly want to have a second chance. Some of us who have never been incarcerated feel as though everyone who is in prison cannot be rehabilitated. I have personally seen the dramatic changes in prisoners over time as they wait for their day of release. While lying down in their dark cells, hardly being visited by the warm Bahamian sunlight, they dream of ways they can make a difference in their families and communities. One inmate told me that he wants to own a business and become a leading farmer in The Bahamas. Another told me that she wants to be the best car mechanic in Nassau. Yet still another told me that he wants to become a lawyer and have a reputable law firm so he can help defend other prisoners, especially those who did not receive justice. One prisoner told me that his life has truly changed after going to prison. He can now read, use the computer, do carpentry, auto mechanic, and agriculture. He learned all of these skills while serving time. He is anxious to use his newly-acquired skills in the society. He is excited. You can see it in his eyes. Are you willing to give him a second chance?

I believe there should be a law preventing discrimination against former prison inmates who have paid their debt to society. Many former inmates today are being turned down after a very good interview when interviewers discover they have criminal records. Many times these records do not even involve killing or robbery!

Many are not aware that great things are happening behind those walls we call Her Majesty's Prison. Prisoners can become members of Toast Masters, join the prison choir and become a trusted leader among peers. There is a training center for prisoners where they are exposed to a number of skill-training classes. There is a computer lab, for example. A few weeks ago the prison held its second annual job fair. Yes, that is correct. It is a novel and great idea. Many Bahamian businesses were invited to come into the prison compound to display what they can offer to prisoners who are nearing the end of their sentences. Hundreds of prisoners were interviewed and even offered jobs. During the first job fair held in 2006, a few prisoners told me that they had more than three job offers. They were leaving prison and going right to work. You could see the joy and excitement on their faces. Congratulations to those business owners who are extending mercy and hope to these prisoners. We need more Bahamians who are just as forgiving and willing to make a difference in the lives of these men and women.

Remember, many of the ex-prisoners become frustrated over time because too many find out after leaving prison that the society is so cold and unforgiving. As a result, they go back to what they know best—a life of crime. In other words, in trying to protect our own turf by not hiring ex-prisoners we are actually re-creating them as criminals again. By our attitude we are assisting

them to move back into the cold, small, restricted dormitories for criminals. We want to feel safe and secure. We believe that these people are not good enough for our society. Then we have the gall of complaining about the high rate of crime in our country! What a shame! What a disgrace! The non-criminals are in fact helping to create the criminals by their cold and indifferent attitude. If we give them a second chance by treating them with respect, hiring them, and listening to their plea, I believe we can make a difference in our society. There are many redeemable men and women in our prisons. Many of them I have found to be more respectful, creative, and sensible than many we meet outside of the prison walls who are supposed to be normal.. Let's give them a second chance. **Barrington H. Brennen is a marriage and family therapist. Send your questions or comments to P.O. Box N-896, Nassau, The Bahamas, or call 242 323 8772, or email question@soencouragement.org, or visit the website www.soencouragement.org.**