On The Right Track

The Prisoner Review Board and
C Number Success Stories

Illinois Institute for Community Law

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Prepared by the Illinois Institute for Community Law and the Campaign In Support of C-Number Prisoners

CAMPAIGN IN SUPPORT OF C NUMBER PRISONERS
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The Illinois Institute for Community Law is a not-for-profit corporation that develops policy and programs which deal with issues that impact men and women in prison and upon their return to their communities. It is the Institute’s goal to enhance their opportunity for successful reentry.

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It is the mission of the Campaign in Support C Number Prisoners to aid them and to solicit and train lawyers to represent C Number Prisoners in their attempts to obtain parole.

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INTRODUCTION

Prisoner Review Board The Prisoner Review Board (PRB) is a state agency consisting of 15 members, appointed by the Governor and approved by the Senate:

- It approves or denies parole (annually or less often) to eligible C# prisoners sentenced before the abolition of parole for adult prisoners in 1978.

- It approves or denies parole (annually) to all prisoners in the juvenile system.

- It hears clemency applications and makes recommendations to the Governor.

- It can determine parole revocation if a parole officer alleges that an individual has violated conditions of his or her parole.

- It issues certificates of good conduct credit for former prisoners.

C# prisoners. Every individual entering the US penal system for incarceration is assigned an identification number beginning with a letter. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) utilized numbers beginning with “C”, such as #C12345. These prisoners were given indeterminate sentences—that is, they received no set release date at sentencing. Instead, release was and is still determined by the PRB. Judges sentencing prisoners under this scheme understood that a fully rehabilitated inmate would be released once eligible for parole, regardless of the length of sentence assigned. Likewise, C# inmates understood, in an almost contractual sense, that they would be released if they committed to rehabilitation.

There are approximately 260 of these elderly C# prisoners in Illinois. Most were eligible for parole after serving 11 years or less. All have served 30 years or more, but because their crimes were committed prior to the sentencing law of 1978, they continue to be the only adult prisoners eligible for parole before the PRB. Among the C# prisoners released thus far, most have experienced resounding success. Yet despite consistent vindication of the PRB’s actions on behalf of these prisoners, concerns continue to overshadow facts. Today, the data suggests that merited justice can and should continue for C# prisoners:

- These prisoners have a recidivism rate less than 5%, compared with the 54%+ recidivism rate for the general prison population.

- The PRB has never released dangerous sex offenders or prisoners likely to engage in violent behavior. According to statistical studies, the C# prisoners who have been released are no more likely to commit another crime of violence than someone who has never been convicted of such a crime in the first place.

- Despite their increasing ages and low recidivism rate, fewer C# prisoners are released each year. In 2008, the PRB released 7, 6 in 2007, 11 in 2006, 15 in 2005, and 23 in 2004. In fact, the parole rate has fallen from 57% in 1978 to 5% in 2007, a 91% drop.

- Consistent with the restorative justice philosophy at the foundation of Illinois’ penal system, parole is intended to reflect behavior during incarceration. However, more and more PRB decisions now place sole emphasis on
the nature of the original crime, thus negating all rehabilitation efforts and accomplishments. Far from being “bottom of the barrel,” between one-third and one-half of remaining C# inmates have excellent records.

-Some fear the PRB favors prisoners over victims. To the contrary, preservation of victims’ rights is paramount. Not only are a victim’s family members and any other witnesses opposing parole allowed to attend the prisoner’s institutional and en banc hearings, “opposition hearings” are conducted during which the State’s Attorney represents the opposing position to the PRB directly. Neither the prisoner nor a representative is notified of the time or location of these hearings. They are given no transcript. Any misstatements made, whether deliberate or unintentional, are assumed true. There is simply no event in the C# parole process of which a victim’s family is not notified or given an opportunity to affect.

Trust Rewarded. The men portrayed in this pamphlet are a sampling of C# prisoners the PRB has released over the past several years. They have, without incident or exception, successfully integrated back into their communities. All completed parole and are gainfully employed. Many volunteer to work with youths at risk, using their own harrowing experiences to point the way toward wiser choices.

These essays and portraits represent what is best and must continue in the Illinois penal system. They prove that with the promise of fair treatment and the chance at a better life, every human being has infinite potential. Through humbling self-knowledge and a willingness to take full responsibility for unthinkable mistakes of the past, these men have become role models for their families and their communities. May their remarkable success despite staggering odds inspire the actions necessary to ensure future accomplishments by those worthy C# prisoners still awaiting parole.
A sage Smith is a man on a formidable mission. Convicted in 1973 as the result of a murder, he knows all too well the plague of violence swallowing neighborhoods whole as the rest of the world stands by. Armed with the antidotes of education and unwavering commitment, he works both the system and the streets to restore hope to his community and accountability to us all.

Considered a “model prisoner,” Smith was a dedicated volunteer for literacy and AIDS programs throughout his incarceration. He also pursued numerous academic opportunities that would lead to his most gratifying experience, establishing and maintaining law libraries at Statesville and Menard. As a certified paralegal, he became an accomplished law clerk as well, earning the respect of inmates and prison staff alike. Soon, fighting for the disenfranchised became a life-long vocation he was eager to embrace.

Upon his release, Smith quickly settled into a position that fit like a glove. For the past five years, he has worked with the attorneys and paralegals of the Center On Wrongful Conviction at Northwestern University’s School of Law. As Director of Client Services, he oversees the intake process of over 200 requests for counsel per month, applying strict standardized criteria and making recommendations based on merit. Complete innocence is essential, so he vets each case carefully through investigation of applicant claims, both at his desk and in the field. Because the program—the premier of its kind in the nation—is a clinical process for the law school, he often finds himself accompanying students in neighborhoods they might otherwise find intimidating.

He enjoys supporting them all he can, though. For him, it is another way of honoring a fledgling volunteer attorney who, in 2003, succeeded in her single-minded purpose of securing his own release after 27 years of incarceration. Had it not been for the compassion this young woman showed at hearing his beleaguered story, Smith’s fate might be in limbo even now. The two met at Menard—she, a visitor representing the Illinois Coalition Against the Death Penalty, and he, a law clerk and librarian working on death row. While he never doubted her sincerity, he certainly misjudged her tenacity. The future seemed dark to him, with more than 15 failed parole hearings and no expectation of a miracle. And yet it came. Just over a year after their acquaintance, Smith returned home to a hero’s welcome. Today, he works exceptionally hard to live up to the title.

Through his active participation in organizations such as the Positive Anti-Crime Thrust (PACT), Smith is dedicated to a vision of hope, both as a life coach for the struggling individual and as a torchbearer for the community at large. His main objective is to downsize prisons altogether, providing educational resources to those most at risk and spearheading the broad paradigmatic changes essential to society’s reform. According to Smith, 57 percent of all released prisoners return to the same six or seven communities in the Chicago area. “It becomes entrenched,” he warns, “and if the public doesn’t become more involved, it’s just a vicious cycle.” Through advocacy and access, he pries open even the blindest eye to justice.

What of his future plans? “At my age, I’m not on a career path,” the 65-year-old quips, “but my goal is to just stay involved and to put something on the table for my grandson before I check out of here.” Smith’s gentle humility and dry sense of humor all but conceal far more ambitious aspirations. In addition to his tireless work for Northwestern and his high hopes for the advocacy groups he supports, he seeks new opportunities for himself as well. With plans to start a consultancy practice designed to bridge the divergent worlds of formerly incarcerated individuals and of employers anxious to hire them, he is confident his message has market value. “So many people have been affected by crime, from all parts of society,” he explains, “I bring a different perspective to the whole question, and I want to provide solutions.” Through his innovative protocols and bold resolutions, A. Sage Smith continues to prove that even when the battleground expands, the true crusader only gets stronger…and smarter.
David Wilson takes nothing for granted these days, having faced his greatest fear—dying in prison—when he was stabbed 23 times by a fellow inmate. He wasn’t in a gang when convicted of murder in 1978, but destructive alliances quickly developed as he struggled within the system. “You had to be affiliated with somebody back then—for insurance,” he explains, “I spent a majority of time just trying to stay one step in front of my enemies.” For 12 years, frequent disciplinary tickets and extensive segregation were a fact of life for Wilson, until the stabbing and an appearance before the parole board shattered his self-image. “They called me ‘atrocious’” he recalls, “I had to look it up later. It said ‘savage-like’ and I was really shocked.” The idea so disconcerted him, in fact, that his very motive for existence became unclear.

Realizing he would die young or spend his remaining days inside, Wilson cautiously distanced himself from gang members and sought to earn the trust of prison staff. Without complaint he accepted the most humble work assignments—unclogging toilets, cooking for inmates, buffing floors—and in the process discovered profound reserves of strength, humility and grace. He began to flourish in a society of new and unlikely friendships. An Amish community, which had initiated a correspondence with him by chance, soon became a lifeline to the outside world. Their tender descriptions of breathtaking sunsets or of the fragrance of a dogwood tree deepened his spirituality and ignited an appreciation for beauty he had long forgotten. “I released the hatred and resentment,” he reveals, “and it uplifted my spirit—it made me feel more human.”

Another unexpected connection would change the course of his life forever. In the early 1990s, a Stateville guard extended his hand in friendship and remained Wilson’s advocate even years after leaving his corrections post. Driving 150 miles in torrential rain, the man appeared at Wilson’s twelfth parole hearing, vowing to provide employment and support. Struck by the unusual alliance, the board granted parole and Wilson was immediately engaged by the former guard’s window well cover business. But his prospects didn’t end there. Within seven months of his 2001 release, Wilson purchased a 3-flat property and became a landlord.

He continued to learn the ropes as production manager of his friend’s company until it was dissolved. Shortly thereafter, however, Wilson incorporated Quality Home Products and officially entered the manufacturing sector himself. With an eye toward supplying national home improvement stores, he is confident the business will continue to expand. An exclusive contract with a large co-op has already put the company on track for referrals and future market share.

Mild-mannered and articulate, Wilson is worlds away from the life he knew in prison. Now married with an adopted son, he marvels at the change in himself and in his circumstance. “I’m really enjoying a side of life I never knew existed,” he declares, “I even started wearing suits!” Twenty suits to be exact, which he wears almost daily from business functions to charity events. In yet another astonishing twist, his wife, Dawn, directs the business as Chief Operating Officer while maintaining a 25-year career with the Department of Corrections. Since they were unacquainted during Wilson’s incarceration and met through a personal ad, the couple knows fate had a hand in their courtship. “You don’t surprise God,” he insists.

Today, the fear of dying that once robbed him of hope has given way to a life of riches—in love and opportunity. “I haven’t had a bad day since my release,” he states, “you just have to be thankful for every day you wake up.” He echoes the sentiment of many released C# prisoners when he cites losing loved ones as the most unexpected and painful challenge of incarceration. “There’s a feeling of helplessness when parents die,” he remarks sadly, “and you can’t go to the funeral.” Born an only child, David Wilson reentered society orphaned but not alone. Where once a small cardboard box held the sum total of his worldly possessions, today no warehouse in town could contain the priceless inventory of his beloved family and his uncommon friends.
There’s just one word to describe the source of Duffy Clark’s considerable strength—“family”. The 57-year-old grandfather of three credits his daughter’s indomitable spirit for making him a success today. Born two months after his arrest, she grew to be his staunchest supporter by the age of 15, and when Clark’s beloved mother and pillar of support died in 2004, his daughter was there to pick up the reins. “I almost lost it when they promised but then denied my release for the funeral,” he recalls, “but my daughter, she grabbed me by the collar and said ‘you’re my daddy—don’t you give up.’” From that moment, she made his release her full-time occupation.

The loyalty that runs deep in Clark’s family-oriented personality also made him a respected elder in the gang of his youth. While incarcerated, he encouraged younger gang members to pursue an education while serving time, to seize the opportunities offered for creating a productive life on the outside. When he arrived in prison at age 20, there were no such influences. As an eleventh-grade dropout, he saw no merit in the educational opportunities before him, but his mother insisted he edify himself every single day of his sentence. True to his promise, he did exactly that—GED, Associate’s, Bachelor’s and two classes short of a Master’s in Political and Social Sciences.

“Put down the knife and pick up the pen,” a voice inside prodded him. While helping to build one of the best law libraries in the corrections system, Clark threw himself into defending prisoners’ constitutional rights. With an average load of 140 cases at any given time, he wrote 15 legal responses per week for the next 15 years, on issues ranging from “indifference to medical needs” to “use of excessive force.” By applying appropriate pressure on correction officials, his work improved living conditions for his fellow inmates and paved the way for others to demand the basic dignity our laws command.

Clark’s own story is fraught with breach of justice and false accusations. He doesn’t deny his gang affiliations or mistakes of the past but adamantly maintains his innocence of the murders that sent him to prison for 34 years. After countless review hearings from 1981 to 2006, Clark was finally released on parole, receiving only $34.14 in an envelope. “It was like a hot sword had been pushed through my body,” he declares, “I mean how is a man supposed to make it with that?” Yet, he was one of the lucky ones.

During the 1971 trial, Clark’s attorney was so affected by the young man that he vowed to provide employment upon his release. Within 30 days of that long-awaited day, the promise was made good, and Clark’s employment history has been seamless ever since. “He knew I’d been railroaded,” he says of the attorney, “and he wanted to know I was going to be okay.” When the man who kept open his job for 34 years retired, he made sure there was somewhere for Clark to go. One year with the new law firm then led to his current career with the Uptown Peoples Law Center. As a certified paralegal, he continues the advocacy work he began in prison, investigating prisoner complaints, writing summaries, and then turning the cases over to the legal director who shops them for pro bono representation.

As expected, life outside prison walls has been full of challenges for Clark. When a drive through his childhood community at the now defunct Cabrini Green became a devastating emotional event, he realized that the kaleidoscope of his past—full of light and dark—may remain a close companion for life. Ask about his future goals, however, and his voice brightens. “I want to establish a good viable business with my daughter,” he states, “and I’d like to buy her a house for standing by me all those years.” He insists that although he will always work on behalf of prisoners’ rights, he does look forward to exploring new possibilities, to a destiny he dared not even imagine just a few short years ago.
Not one to wear accolades on his sleeve, Johnny Outlaw, 56, has been gaining quiet respect as a multi-media journalist and community advocate since his release from prison in February of 2007. In fact, it takes a lot of prompting to draw out the breadth of his talents and achievements. “I just do what I do,” he says humbly, “I try to help people do the right thing.” Having served nearly 30 years of a 100- to 300-year sentence for murder and conspiracy to commit murder, Outlaw has a unique appreciation for the gift of time and the obligations of freedom.

Working nonstop 16-hour days, Outlaw considers taking in a televised football game both a luxury he doesn’t allow himself often and the full extent of his current social life. He lives a quiet life in the home he now owns with his sister. He is a disciplined vegetarian, exercising regularly and shunning all habits detrimental to his health, and regards his physical vitality as the secret to his many accomplishments.

The author of four books pending publication, he has a literary agent and hosts a monthly radio talk show on WGBZ 1570 AM. Streamed nationally via Internet, the show explore social and political issues with such high profile guests as Congressman Danny Davis and Eddie Washington, State Representative of the 60th District of Illinois. Outlaw marvels at the public response and is excited to expand the format to include several guests per timeslot. “I’ve been blessed by God Almighty to do these things,” he asserts, “so I’m relentless in my determination to do good.” And the substantial good he does is certainly widespread.

From the South Side to the West Side and seemingly everywhere in between, Outlaw applies his impressive legal acumen and counseling skills in a number of venues. When he is not filing motions or making court appearances for his current employers at two different law firms, he is across town performing pro bono services ranging from family court to small claims. At Kennedy-King, he counsels battered women and senior citizens, in addition to his duties assisting former prisoners find employment. Factor in the Easter Seal charitable work and hospital speaking engagements, and one would swear he is allotted more than the standard 24 hours.

Outlaw kept himself just as busy on the inside. Quickly earning his GED and Associate’s, he pursued his education unabated during his incarceration and earned a Bachelor’s degree concentrating in Political Science. An eager participant in programs with Roosevelt University and Lewis University—among others—he considers these opportunities vital to the rehabilitative philosophy on which the Illinois system was based. One of only ten individuals handpicked by prison authorities to participate in a paralegal certification program from Illinois State University, he also mentored fellow inmates, tutored classmates and taught law courses.

While working in sales for the New Life Organization, Outlaw developed positive relationships with staff and inmates alike, but he says it was the family, friends, and devoted advocates he left behind that inspired him to persevere. Their faith and support helped him weather 17 rejections from the Prisoner Review Board, until a boilerplate “acceptable risk” designation allowed him to touch the lives of so many in his vast community. “Down the road someone looked out for me,” he says, “now I’m trying to do the same.”

Asked what advice he has for other C# prisoners still awaiting parole, Outlaw is emphatic. “Man, I don’t have to tell them nothing,” he insists, “Because all these guys are doing the same things I did. They’re pursuing their educations. They’re doing the right things. It’s in the Review Board’s hands now.” He knows that many inmates sharing his fate have already cultivated the correct attitude. “Rehabilitation is a state of mind,” he explains, “You do good things, you draw good things to you.”
Mike Nolan
For better or worse, Mike Nolan is a self-made man. And, like every independent spirit, he places himself squarely at the helm, taking full responsibility for his failures and deserving full credit for his considerable success. Now 52, Nolan explains that as a teenager he sought excitement and escape from his upstanding middle-class background. But in 1974, newly convicted of murder and facing a 40- to 75-year sentence, life on the edge was more than the 18-year old bargained for. “I screwed up,” he states somberly, “nobody did this but me.”

It didn’t take long for him to pull up the bootstraps, though. Six months into his incarceration, he vowed to leave the streets behind and cut off communications with all but the close-knit family who never stopped believing in him. “I saw what clinging to the streets did to other guys,” he explains, “I decided then and there to work with the system like you would a job on the outside.”

Quickly earning his GED and an Associate’s degree, Nolan pursued a Bachelor’s through the prison’s successful partnership with Roosevelt University. Just one thesis short of graduating, he earned over 60 credit hours in psychology, using those skills as a hospice worker to fellow prisoners. The health program he designed as a certified personal trainer for ailing inmates maintained a one-year waiting list, and the non-profit New Life Organization he co-founded employed 75 inmates and brought $1 million in annual revenue to the prison within six years. He served wardens, captains and majors in positions as diverse as personal liaison, visiting room attendant and bureau of identification staff. He insists that working 16-hour days and refusing to be reduced to a number commanded the respect of those around him. “You can call me Mike, Mike Nolan or just Nolan,” he recalls saying, “but I’m not a number. I’m a human being.”

Despite an exemplary record and high profile positions in nine different prisons, 24 times Nolan faced the Prisoner Review Board’s patent response that the nature of his offense would make release “disrespectful of the law.” For the first 26 years, he held little hope of early release, until a conscientious observer noticed irregularities in the case. The statement of facts seemed to change with each hearing. The transcripts of his trial went missing. When embellishments to his record were finally exposed, Nolan began accumulating favorable votes, and in February 2007, six months shy of maxing out his sentence, parole was granted.

With his childhood community extinct, Mike Nolan was a stranger in a strange land of transformed places, unfamiliar technologies, and unforeseen challenges as a newborn adult. He recounts his acclimation to freedom after nearly 30 years with the keen sense of humor that defines his outgoing personality. “The first time I used a cell phone,” he muses, “I’d talk into the microphone and move it up to my ear back and forth…and the first time it vibrated in my hand, I threw the thing!” The biggest surprise? “I literally did not exist,” he declares, growing serious. A job interview shortly after his release revealed that the social security number assigned decades earlier no longer existed in public records. Without a credit history, utilities demanded a full year’s down payment. His phone required 12 months of fees in advance.

The most mundane details became formidable daily tasks, but once again Nolan spurned despair and went to work, first in the management program for an automotive maintenance chain and then in sales for US Messenger. Today, as an assistant director for the company, he oversees 4 buildings and up to 20 workers. Entrusted with marketing their services to prominent CEOs, Nolan is confident his independent nature and indefatigable personality serve him well now.

As a model illustration of what the opportunities of rehabilitative justice can do—wasting his big chance, earning his second, and ultimately contributing his substantial talents to the society he wishes he had never left—Mike Nolan is a man who makes you smile, laugh, and then hope his story will inspire lost boys behind him to never underestimate a “boring” American Dream.
Nate Sanders, 63, spent almost half of his life in prison for murder. One imagines the transition to the outside world would be daunting if not debilitating in such a case, and yet, less than one year after his release, it is as though he never left it. A devoted family man with plans to work well into his 70s, he approaches his new life with child-like curiosity and resolute optimism. By immediately throwing himself into the workforce and embracing his community without restraint, Sanders is the model illustration of how precious a second chance can be.

Despite his naturally positive attitude, incarceration was not without its tribulations. With over 20 unsuccessful parole hearings before his release in 2008, he had all but lost hope for freedom. “For a while, I was really on the edge,” he recalls, “I was doing all I could, earning good time to go before the parole board early, but nothing happened—it frustrated me to a degree I almost gave up.” Indomitable, his close-knit family rallied around, bringing him back to a vision of the future and renewing his abiding faith. He sought refuge in his lifelong love of reading and stayed abreast of changes in the world to prepare for a productive life outside.

He pursued educational opportunities wherever he found them—from criminal law to architectural drafting and seemingly everything in between. “The key is you don’t think you know too much,” he confides, “if you do, you fall by the wayside.” He also labored long hours inside, employed first as a head clerk in industry and then in data processing to learn vital computer skills. As chapter president of the JC’s, he oversaw all functions of the organization, taking particular pride in coordinating various charitable funds. “The experience taught me a lot because I’m very business-oriented,” he says. In fact, with an accounting education earned in his youth, he hopes to parlay his expertise into a company of his own soon.

Released at the dawn of profound economic recession, Sanders worried that finding a job outside might be a formidable task but, with typical pluck, he didn’t let it keep him from succeeding. “You gotta knock them doors down and talk to people,” he insists. “If you help yourself and people see you trying, they’ll help you.” Never one to shun manual labor, he immediately found employment as a maintenance worker—first in janitorial positions and then as the supervisor of a Safer Foundation crew working with the Department of Streets and Sanitation. Despite a keen mind and sharp wit, he enjoys working with his hands and hopes his future business will specialize in something that will keep him physically active, like landscaping or contract painting.

Today, as a dedicated member of the Campaign in Support of C# Prisoners, Sanders remembers his days of despair and works tirelessly to restore hope in those he left behind. With boilerplate phrases failing to give constructive justification for parole denials, he knows others still face the frustration of trying to satisfy a rehabilitative justice system that seems to have forgotten its roots. “There’s guys in there I know deserve parole—I mean I’ve known them 10 or 15 years,” he insists, “and they deserve to be helped. They need to know they’re not alone.”

In addition to his work on behalf of C# prisoners, he seeks out any and all opportunities to sound the alarm about life behind prison walls. With the help of his sister—a Baptist minister—and a friend who once worked for the Cook County Sheriff’s Department, he will soon bring his cautionary tale to troubled teens throughout the city. By speaking at community centers and juvenile detention facilities, he hopes to reach the next generation before it’s too late.

Sanders is grateful for the source of his fierce optimism. “I’ve got the support of the right people in my life,” he explains, “that’s the key.” He refers not only to five sisters, one daughter, eight grandchildren, three great-grandchildren and myriad extended relations, but to one woman in particular, who early this spring will become his wife. “Her mom’s crazy about me,” he teases, “it’s a perfect match.” Now, what’s a second chance at life without a second chance at love?
Sometimes you’re lucky enough to meet someone who makes you want to be a better human being. Ra Chaka, 63, is one of those people. Orphaned too early and jostled through foster care, he was ultimately consigned to corrections at age 10, experiencing only fleeting freedom over the next 30 years. As he describes it, “From kindergarten to college, I really grew up in the system.” Formerly a path of struggle from within and without, however, his life is now an expression of faith, perseverance and self-realization through selflessness.

Asked for the secret to his success in and out of prison, Chaka is deeply philosophical: “It is a matter of becoming conscious…it’s a new level of awareness.” In 1976, with a 20- to 60-year sentence for armed robbery collapsing his future hopes, he fell to his knees with “why me” resignation. The answer came to him at once. “Why not you,” he realized, “who could be better prepared for this necessary work?” That moment Ra Chaka’s destiny was sealed. He petitioned the warden to re-institute successful development programs, he instructed inmates on their right to peaceful organization and humane treatment, and he fought for endangered educational opportunities.

He still believes returning to the aspirations of Illinois’ original policy of rehabilitation is the key to rebuilding the integrity of its prison system. “When I was coming up,” he explains, “educational ethic was instilled in us. We had the best teachers. We tutored each other. That’s gone.” Assigned to the facility’s fifth grade when he returned to prison at age 20, the magnitude of his failed potential stung. By seizing the rich academic opportunities offered at that time, he earned the first of several college-level degrees just two years later and established a growing reputation for legal acumen.

With uncanny clarity, he discusses the socio-economics of Illinois’ transformed prison system—from rehabilitative institution to lucrative industry—which sprang from the wave of job loss and tax revenue collapse in the late 1970s but persists today, fueled by the unnatural resource of our under-privileged youths. His work is uncomplaining and optimistic, though, and seeks to harness the wasted potential of his beloved and beleaguered community. “We’re using our abilities to do for ourselves. People need to know that we have the ability to create.” And create he does.

Assuming he would serve out his full 60-year sentence, Chaka was shocked by his release after 11 appearances before the Parole Review Board. With no organized efforts against him from outside prison walls, he speculates that his denials stemmed from the waves he made as a resolute reformer. Since his tenacity never diminished, however, those very waves may have carried him to freedom in 1996, and the enlightened attitude his release revealed in the parole system may continue to herald an overdue return to merited justice.

Today, continuing his work as community organizer, minister, and mentor, Chaka participates in conferences seeking social solutions, assists prisoners and families through his non-profit agencies, and maintains autonomous direction of a civil rights law center he established in the heart of the South Side with the assistance of several private attorneys. His greatest pride, the Justice Center rights wrongful conviction cases and pursues justice for inmates abused during incarceration. The work seems unending, and, like so many visionaries, Chaka hasn’t taken a vacation since his release. “By helping others,” he states simply, “I’m helping myself.”

Ever concerned for those just getting out of prison, he recognizes the prejudice of employers. He knows the “don’t call us, we’ll call you” obstacles will force many talented young people back to the streets for survival. His advice to them should ring true for us all. “Find the commitment to people,” he urges, “if you do that, you can stay on the straight and narrow.”
For Melvin Haywood, the wheel of fortune has turned a number of times in his 59 years. Arrested in 1974 for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, he doesn’t deny the gang-affiliated friendships of his youth but insists his murder conviction was a gross injustice. Then, there was the 1979 reversal by a federal judge, which would have vindicated and released him but, for political reasons, never came to pass. And finally, there was the chance overhearing of an inmate’s discussion of information relevant to his own case. With this new foothold on justice, he worked relentlessly toward his release. In 2004—after some 25 appearances before the parole board in 30 years—Haywood went home to renew his destiny.

With a story so full of ups and downs, one marvels at Haywood’s optimism. His secret? The steadfast hub of that unforgiving wheel is his wife of 36 years, Deborah. The two met in high school during the 1960s, and in 1972 Haywood married his childhood sweetheart. With four daughters of his own and a large extended family devoted to him, Haywood survived his prison desolation through frequent visits. “I wouldn’t change my family for the world,” he insists, “I’ve seen the streets from every angle, every level and it’s nothing…it don’t last forever.” The unshakable bonds of family do.

Haywood, the product of his father and grandfather’s insistence on education, also relied on knowledge to persevere inside. From yoga and meditation to welding and printing press operation, he explored every opportunity available. With Pell Grants offered to prisoners until the early 1990s, Haywood accumulated over 190 credit hours and later earned a BGS in Sociology. But the experiences he most enjoyed always revolved around commerce. “I have an instinct for business,” he acknowledges proudly, “and I like people.” As VP of Sales for the JCs organization, the budding entrepreneur gained skills vital to his current life.

“You know, my passion is prevention,” he states. Combine that with a natural gift for marketing, and his chosen career is a perfect match. Shortly after meeting Rap-A-Lot Records CEO James Prince through a mutual friend, he began a collaborative business venture called Strapped Condoms, which makes HIV/AIDS prevention its primary goal. With endorsements by some of the entertainment industry’s brightest stars, the company is poised to hit big. Settling into his business traveler status, Haywood makes numerous trips to the company’s Houston headquarters, explores new markets throughout the country, and has flown to Malaysia to inspect manufacturing facilities there. At every stop, he continues to make time for his anti-violence message.

His involvement in community advocacy has been substantial in both Chicago and Houston, where the aptly named “Don’t Let This Happen To You” program, founded by Michael Prince, brings the reality of life behind bars to those most at risk on the streets. “Had someone told me everyone I loved would be dead when I got out, I might have listened,” he says ruefully, “because to stop the violence, it’s got to come from people coming from the streets, from the inside—not the academics.” Haywood is gratified in knowing he has impacted the lives of many youths through his public appearances. The success he is manifesting now is only made meaningful by giving back as much as he can.

Despite this latest stroke of luck, life after prison has not been without challenges. He credits Goodwill and Safer Foundation for making his own transition from prisoner to productive citizen a relatively smooth one. “A lot of guys think they can perform miracles when they get out,” he explains, “and that just isn’t the case.” No one makes it alone. With the help of staunch supporters, his seamless employment history has evolved from counselor at New Beginnings and Safer Foundation to up-and-coming entrepreneur. As Haywood’s wheel takes its long-deserved journey to the top, there will be many beloved and loyal companions along to enjoy the ride.