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# **Transforming Lives: Racine Vocational Ministry marks five years of helping people -- 1,000 people and counting -- turn their lives around**

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Talking with Sasha Walter today, one might never guess that less than two years ago the 24-year-old single mother was struggling to survive. The confidence now evident in Walter's voice wasn't there when she was going through a difficult divorce, with no job in sight.

"I was distraught. I didn't know what to do," said Walter, who had spent two years as a stay-at-home mom just prior to the breakup of her marriage.

Not sure where to turn, Walter sought advice from the pastor of her church. He suggested she contact Racine Vocational Ministry — a faith-based social service agency that helps people become financially and emotionally stable by empowering them to live out callings through fulfilled participation in all areas of life, including work.

“I had never heard of Racine Vocational Ministry,” she said. “But now I wish I had known about them sooner.”

With the help of RVM, Walter is now employed as a certified nursing assistant at a nursing home in South Milwaukee and is working toward taking nursing classes, with a goal of eventually becoming a pediatric nurse. RVM not only paid for Walter’s CNA schooling and the state certification tests, but helped her build the skills necessary to re-enter the job market and take control of her life as a single mom.

“No matter what point in life you are at, they can help you get your goals straightened out,” Walter said of RVM.

“They are a great source of encouragement.”

Like everyone who works with Racine Vocational Ministry, Walter took the agency’s “Solutions for Success” training class which helps participants develop life skills, covering a wide range of topics from work ethic to conflict resolution and interviewing techniques.

“The class helped me build back confidence in myself,” said Walter, noting that her divorce had left her feeling inadequate.

She followed the Solutions class with one-on-one counseling with RVM, and with the agency’s help worked out a plan to pursue the nursing degree she had begun working toward a few years earlier. Walter had dropped out of school to stay home with her son.

“They were extremely instrumental in getting me back on track,” Walter said of the staff at RVM. “They would not only shoot job opportunities my way, but Jim would often call me to see how things were going and would tell me to let them know if there was anything I needed.”

## **Doubly successful**

Jim is James Schatzman, who has served as executive director of Racine Vocational Ministry — as well as an inspiration to its clients — since its inception five years ago. In those five years, Schatzman and the rest of RVM's dedicated staff have helped people from all walks of life to not only find employment, but to turn their lives around.

In August of this year, RVM placed its 1,000th employee — a figure that is more than double the agency's original five-year goal of placing 90-100 people in jobs for each year of its existence, according to Schatzman. What makes that number even more impressive is that some of those placements involve people who had very little hope of ever being hired, due to their criminal records.

"The word on the street is, if you want to get your life back together, this is the place to come," said Schatzman.

One of the greatest success stories among RVM's clients is that of Endel Williams, who since his release from prison about a half-dozen years ago, has worked his way up to a well-paying construction job with the City's Water Department. Williams, whose story has been told in The Journal Times before, connected with RVM after returning to Racine following his five-year sentence in an Oklahoma penitentiary for drug-related offenses. Willing to do whatever it took to stay out of prison, Williams devoted himself to RVM's program and with their help landed an entry-level job with a local moving company. From there, he moved up to a carpenter's apprentice/construction job for which he commuted to Iowa, and later was trained and hired as lab technician for Payne & Dolan Inc., an asphalt production company in Waukesha.

While he is very grateful for all of the job opportunities he's had in the last few years — all of which he described as good learning experiences — Williams is especially pleased to have his current position with the Water Department. His job can be hard work with long hours at times, but Williams doesn't mind. He is thrilled to be making enough money to provide for his family and he was able, recently, to buy his first house. Williams also loves the environment he works in.

"I work with a great group of guys who really make me feel like I am part of the crew," he said. "As the new guy, they have helped me learn what I needed to know. We all work together to get the job done. I can't say enough about them."

### **Give and take**

Williams feels the same way about the folks at RVM, without whom he wouldn't be where he is today.

"Whether you need bus fare, tuition for school or just someone to talk to, they will help you figure out how to get what you need," Williams said. "If you've been looking for that break — you've been trying, but you just can't seem to get there because people don't trust you — Racine Vocational Ministry can help you."

At the same time, participants in RVM's program have to be willing to give it their best shot in order to be successful, he said.

"I know from experience, that if you take even one step in the right direction, they will bend over backwards to take three steps for you."

Williams is so enthusiastic about RVM and its work, that he has recommended the program to **many others who have come from circumstances similar to his own.**

### **Just starting out**

One such young man says he was looking to make a change after being released from prison last year, when Williams hooked him up with RVM.

Currently enrolled as a student at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, this young man asked to remain anonymous because he is concerned that fellow students will judge him differently if they know of his criminal background.

“I am reformed and am educating myself, but people who have been in prison are still treated as if they are taboo, especially if you are a felon and are African-American,” said the student, who served five years for possession of cocaine with intent to sell. “It is rough.”

He said that all he wants is to be given a fair chance at a new life, and he has found that opportunity with RVM.

“They are the best thing I have ever seen,” said the young man, who grew up with a drug-addicted mother and began selling drugs at age 11. “They give you support and acceptance. They don’t degrade you — they talk to you like you are a human being. These people want me to do good.”

Racine Vocational Ministry, however, does not do the work for you, he said. They make suggestions and steer you toward opportunities, but you are the one who needs to learn the skills and has to want to make the necessary changes. His plans for the future

include getting a degree in sociology and eventually working with youth in the inner city neighborhoods he grew up in.

“I feel like I can do it, I just need to stay focused,” he said.

The folks at RVM enable him to do so not only by being supportive, but by helping him secure financial aid for his schooling, teaching him how to write a resume, checking regularly on his progress and so much more.

“These people are a blessing,” he said.