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Changing lives: Racine Vocational Ministry helps people chip away at obstacles to find their success

BY LEE B. ROBERTS

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Endel Williams commutes from Racine to Iowa each week for his job. Every Sunday, the 30-year-old makes the journey across the border, where he works with Racine-based Ricchio Inc., doing construction work. He and the rest of the crew work four 10-hour days, staying in a hotel through Thursday, and then head back to Racine to spend the weekend with their loved ones.

To some this may not sound like a dream job, but for Williams it is pretty close to a miracle. Just four years ago, he was finishing up a five-year term in an Oklahoma penitentiary for drug-related offenses, with no prospect of employment. His life up until that point had been filled with crime and misfortune.

Troubled youth

Born into a household where parents were absent more than present, Williams was just 4 years old when he saw his father shoot his mother. His mother survived, his father went to prison and, a couple years later, Williams was adopted by another family. The experiences of his earliest years, however, followed Williams,

and he struggled throughout his childhood - often getting into fights at school.

"I was kicked out of just about every school in Racine," he said.

By the age of 13, Williams was in detention and, at 14, he was sent to the Wales School for Boys. The only place he felt like he belonged was in the street gangs, where his crimes earned him acceptance and praise from his peers.

Selling drugs and running from the cops became a way of life for Williams - one that landed him in jail now and then. But the status that the money, cars and women of that lifestyle brought him seemed to be worth the risk - at least until a judge sentenced him to serve time at a federal prison.

Williams said that's when he knew that it was time to make a change in his life. While incarcerated he took a job in the prison's kitchen, working there all five years of his sentence - even during his "off" time. It was the first "real" job he'd ever had.

When he returned to Racine, Williams was eager to work, but employers weren't exactly eager to hire someone with his criminal background. He understood their reluctance - not only was he an ex-con, but the only jobs on his resume thus far were that of drug dealer and prison kitchen staff.

How could he convince employers that he had changed - that he was willing to work hard just for the opportunity to make an honest living? Williams found the answers to that question with the help of Racine Vocational Ministry Inc., a faith-based counseling service that works to help people become financially and emotionally stable.

Beyond job referrals

Formed in 2002, Racine Vocational Ministry is more than just a job referral service. Its goal goes beyond helping the chronically unemployed or underemployed find work, to dealing with the issues in their life that might be preventing them from finding success in the workplace.

"The role we play is that of an advocate," said James Schatzman, executive director of RVM, which has offices in St. Luke's Episcopal Church. The agency not only helps people sort through life issues such as domestic abuse, financial difficulties or drug and alcohol dependency, but also will assist them in making the connections necessary to deal with those issues. Participants take a series of Solutions for Success classes, led by program director Sherry Hartog, that deal with life issues and things such as developing a resume, successful interviewing and other practical job application skills.

"Many times people don't have role models in their home life who can provide an example of how to accomplish these things," Schatzman said.

Williams' story is just one of many successes for RVM and the community. Since its inception, the inter-faith agency has helped approximately 472 people find work, according to Schatzman.

"Lives have been changed, felony charges involving drugs and violence have been overcome, the disabled are on the way to career paths and the homeless now have jobs and homes and a more stable environment for their kids," he said. "Lives have been, and are being, transformed."

'Starting from scratch'

Such transformations don't happen overnight, however. It takes a lot of hard work, both on the part of the potential employee and the RVM staff to make them happen.

"It may take a while for them to get established in the work field, but you have to remember that in some cases they are really starting from scratch," Schatzman said. "Some people have literally never left their neighborhood, and they need to learn the basics of applying for a job."

It also takes some understanding and cooperation on the part of employers in the community.

"A lot of these people just don't fit into the typical boxes," Schatzman said. "Therefore, we try to get employers to think outside the box."

In Williams' case, it was a matter of finding an employer who was willing to take a chance on someone with a criminal history and then convincing that employer that Williams was worth the risk. His first job through RVM was with a local moving company.

"Jim really went to bat for me," Williams said.

And in return he didn't let the RVM staff down. He not only showed up on time for work every day, but worked hard enough that the moving company employing him didn't want to let him go when he decided he needed to move on and find steady, year-round employment (moving company workers sometimes get laid off for the winter due to slow business).

After nine months with the moving company, Williams got an assembly job that offered less pay but dependable hours and a steady paycheck. And when the opportunity with Ricchio came up, he took it because it offers better experience toward his goal of

becoming a carpenter. He is currently working toward getting his apprenticeship certification.

`Food for the soul'

Williams has shared his story with area troubled youth, at places like the Taylor Home, and he hopes to someday be able to work more with young people to help steer them in the right direction.

"That kind of work is more than just a job for me," he said. "For me to be able to help those kids is like food for the soul."

As he goes along on his career path, Williams stays in touch with Schatzman and Hartog to let them know how he's doing.

"It's really nice to have someone you can talk to who really cares about what you are doing," he said. "They have given me a lot of inspiration."

And Williams, in turn, has inspired the folks at RVM.

While not every story at RVM is one of success, seeing someone chip away at the obstacles before them as Williams has done, is what motivates people like Schatzman and Hartog to do this work. It takes a lot of time and effort on everyone's part to get to the point Williams is at today, he said, but seeing someone like him succeed makes it worthwhile.

"His life is just blossoming before our eyes," Hartog said.

INFORMATION

In 2004 Racine Vocational Ministry put 147 people to work, surpassing its goal of 95 for the year. And 66 percent of the agency's workers last year worked six months or more.

Such successes are made possible by both the RVM staff and the help of volunteers. Opportunities for volunteers at RVM include serving as a mentor; providing volunteer office support; providing lunch for a Solutions for Success program; hosting a Solutions for Success program at your church or agency; and more.

Racine Vocational Ministry is located in St. Luke's Episcopal Church, 214 Seventh St.

For more information call (262) 633-8660.

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