

by Stephanie Chasteen

LIFE BEYOND BARRS

More than 600,000 inmates will be released from prison this year, many lacking the support needed to keep them from going back. But a few programs are taking over where they system falls short—and may serve as models nationwide.

david Lewis used to steal lawnmowers when he was a boy, using their engines to power handmade scooters. Petty theft quickly escalated to a life of crime, and he was arrested for selling heroin when he was eighteen. All told, he did seventeen years in San Quentin, Folsom, and Soledad prisons. When he got out, re-entering society was a challenge.

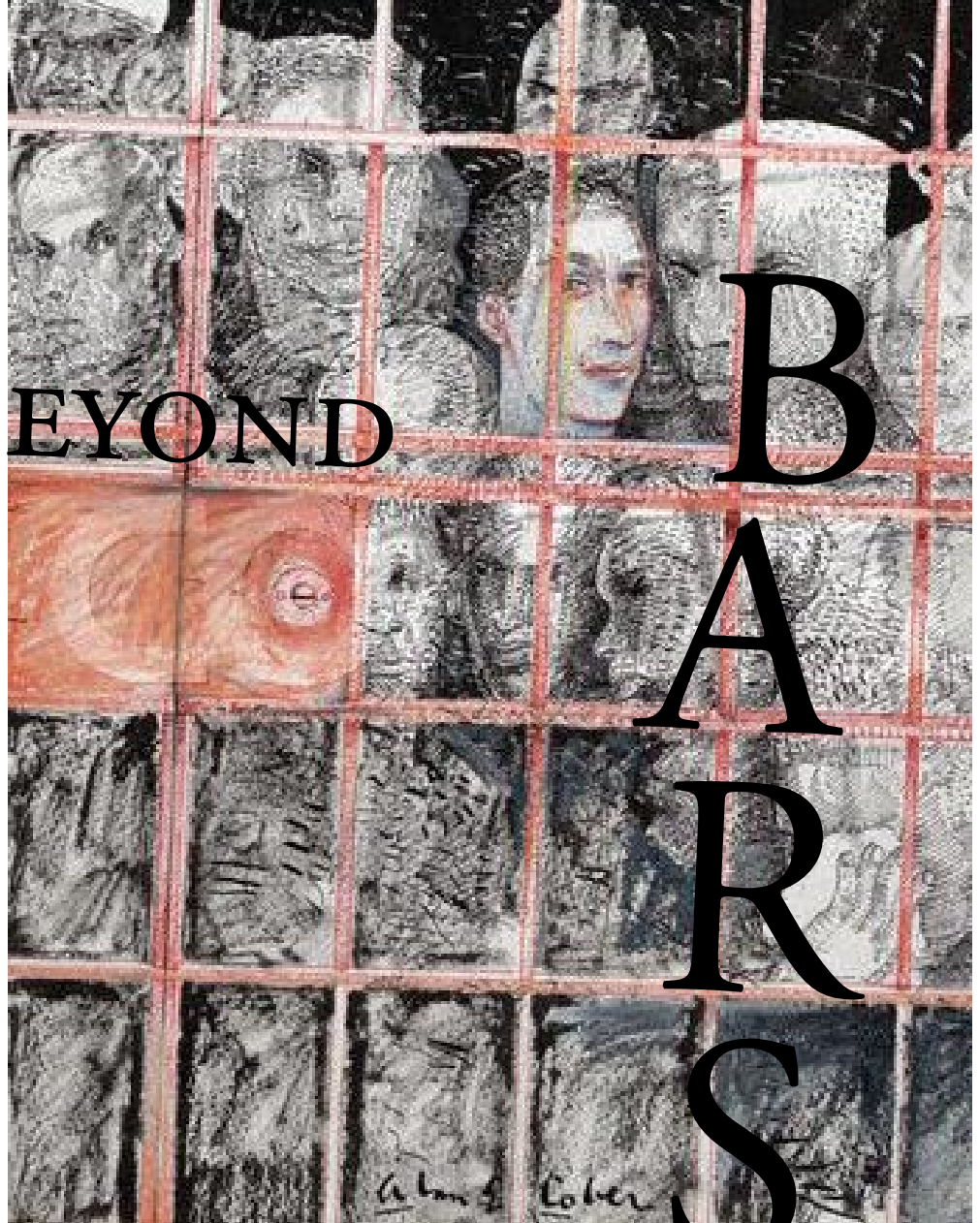
“I been a damn crook my whole life,” he says, leaning his large frame back in his chair and putting his hands on his smoothly shaven head. “I never was a part of society. I didn’t have a clue about how to get in a car and put seatbelts on, go in a store and pick whatever you wanted, sitting in a restaurant and being able to order off of a menu.”

Through a combination of luck and hard work, he stayed out of prison and co-founded Free At Last, a program for newly released prisoners in the heart of East Palo Alto, California. Now he helps others like him: people who have gotten out of prison and don’t want to go back. But most released

prisoners *will* go back, and how to keep them out of prison is an increasingly desperate problem.

The United States has the world’s highest incarceration rate, with one of every seventy-five American men in jail or prison. There are more U.S. inmates now—2.1 million—than at any other time in history. This increase isn’t due to a crime wave; crime rates have actually fallen. Instead, criminals are serving longer sentences, and many return to prison to finish those sentences when they violate their parole. Two-thirds of parolees are rearrested within five years of their release. Most are rearrested within the first year, some within days. The end result is a huge surge in the prison population—a twofold increase per capita over the past twenty years.

There are also more prisoners being released than ever before: More than 600,000 will come home this year, the equivalent of the city of Boston being turned out onto America’s streets. The majority will have had no access to education, job training, or



Art by Alan E. Cober/|images.com/Corbis

drug rehabilitation. They will exit the prison gates with a bus ticket and a few hundred dollars in gate money, and maybe a list of apartments or shelters. Most will return to crime-rich neighborhoods, and while they will likely be released into some sort of supervision, they won't get as much help as in the past. Many parole officers act more like cops than social workers nowadays.

That's where programs like Free At Last come in. Two small, clean houses provide beds for thirty men and women whose activities are closely monitored. Step by step, they earn small privileges, like being able to go out at night. This structured guidance can provide a valuable transition to the autonomy of everyday life. As Lewis notes, many former prisoners have trouble learning to make even the most mundane decisions after the rigid structure of prison.

Lewis claims that those who complete the Free At Last residential program are less likely to return to prison, which is in line with studies showing that many types of drug rehabilitation, education, and job training programs reduce a former prisoner's chance of becoming a repeat offender. While such programs cost money, and resources that are hard to come by, they may be more cost-effective in the long run, claims Jeremy Travis, a researcher with the nonpartisan Urban Institute in Washington, D.C.

"We spend over \$50 billion a year on prison," he says. "It's not a question of *whether* the taxpayers spend money; it's a question of what they spend money *on* ... How do you want them to come back? Do you want them to come back prepared to be law-abiding, productive citizens, or do you want them to come back more damaged?"

Framed in this manner, the dollars spent keeping people out of jail actually constitute a public savings. But dollars do a poor job of measuring how a cycle of crime and imprisonment impacts families and communities like East Palo Alto, which has a history of gang violence and drugs.

While programs like Free At Last take over where the legal system falls short, filling in some gaps by offering treatment programs and job services, many agree that they can only take a person so far.

"Nothing changed about the system to keep me out [of prison] fifteen years," says David Lewis. "You know what happened? I changed."

Lewis and Free At Last give residents a roadmap for personal transformation through twelve-step programs, counseling, and group meetings. He believes it is important to first tackle underlying behavioral and drug issues before addressing the practicalities of looking for training or a job.

Stephen Peevy, an ex-offender who now works as a re-entry mentor for returning prisoners in a traditionally rough

Boston neighborhood, agrees. "I could get you a job paying twenty dollars an hour, but if you're thinking, living, acting negative, you're not going to hold the job," he says.

Peevy works for a nonprofit organization that is religious in nature, supported by the Azusa Christian Community in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Although the effects of religion on prisoner re-entry are difficult to quantify in a meaningful way, a handful of studies have shown that prisoners who participate in religious activities or hold religious beliefs have lower recidivism rates. For Peevy, staying out of prison and helping others do the same is part of God's plan.

"I don't see, for me, another way [than religion] to stay stable," he says. "But I don't push it on anybody."

Keith Wade, who considers Peevy a mentor, was in and out of prison since he was thirteen. Now thirty-four, Wade has been out for two years. "What kept me out, to be honest with you, is I'm tired," he says.

Dismayed that he wasn't a part of his children's lives, he took stock. "When I got knowledge of self, that's when I realized I could do much better, and God has a plan for me," says Wade. And with Peevy's practical support, he turned his life around.

While both Wade and Peevy acknowledge that religion isn't the key to personal change for everyone, the link between religion and personal transformation is clearly compelling for some. For that reason, community members in churches like the Azusa Christian Community are will-

ing to invest time and money to help safeguard their neighborhoods. Still, many religious institutions have missions that don't include rehabilitating returning prisoners.

Omar McRoberts, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Chicago who spent four years studying predominantly black church communities in the neighborhood where Peevy works, says there was a clearly marked boundary between the church and the street. "The church was the space of salvation and morality, and the street was the space of damnation," he says. "To go out and try to save people was really out of the question."

In many cases, the clergy found it intimidating when returning prisoners came to seek help. Only a small minority of churches, Azusa among them, offered it.

Actively involved in prisoner re-entry or not, religious institutions can help cast the process in a different light, says the Urban Institute's Travis. While ex-cons are sometimes seen as lesser citizens in need of punishment, "The faith community brings the language of forgiveness and redemption, of welcoming home the prodigal son," he says. "You can't demonize somebody if you believe that they can be saved." ©

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—DAVID
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