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HOMECOMERS—YOUTH & ADULTS RETURNING FROM PRISON

Curtis Watkins and William T. Lawson

Introduction

A small, but committed, group of folks participated in the “Homecomers—Youth & Adults Returning From Prison” Workshop. The intimacy of the group provided a wonderful opportunity for the up close and personal workshop that emerged and that lasted more than half hour beyond schedule.

Group Sharing

Curtis Watkins, Director of the National Homecomers Academy (NHA), opened by inviting each participant to share why he or she had chosen to come to this particular workshop. Folks had made the choice either because of previous or anticipated work experience with youth and adults returning from prison and/or for purely fundamental core beliefs inherent in the “No Throwaway People” concept of humanity and co-production. Found also in the words of the National Homecomers Academy mission, we, all of us as human beings, are entitled to build—or rebuild if that’s the case—our lives, families and communities. Furthermore, we owe it to ourselves and one another to be individually and mutually supportive in that quest.

Testimonials

C. Watkins then talked briefly about the National Homecomers Academy. He’d been dealing with the criminal justice system for 13 years and had become Director of Homecomers years ago. He met with Homecomers and they talked together about what mattered most: caring about community and wanting to “reach back” and make a difference; Voter Registration; the “Ban the Box” Bill to end the cycle of dismissing anyone who’d been to prison; and, how they would become the “mavens of communication” in communities. They listed the many communities they’d like to go to and what they’d do once there. He touched upon NHA’s Phelps Stokes affiliation and origins, the organization’s outreach mission and how he and NHA had come to be introduced to Edgar Cahn and TimeBanks.

Three years ago, Edgar invited Curtis and Homecomers to join him, Chris Gray, Dr. Foster--altogether about eighteen individuals--all of whom had gone through personal transformations--to share information not about where any of them have been but where they were trying to go. They talked about drawing upon one another’s strengths, as well as opportunities they could pursue based upon their shared commitment, and how by using the following five core principles of co-production they could navigate a way there together: (1) operating from an assets or strength-based perspective; valuing real work; reciprocity (paying it forward); community; respect. Out of that meeting mutual trust emerged as did the “Coming Home Report” thanks to the added assistance of a Kellogg Foundation grant.

Reminding the audience to remember that “We all are a decision away from a mistake,” C. Watkins introduced William T. Lawson. In turn, “William T” began his personal testimonial by re-introducing himself and welcoming all in attendance to “the Starship Enterprise.” He and fellow Homecomers spend a great deal of

Participants

Sherry Sutler
Philip E. Nelson, II
Tizoc Perez-Casillas
Meredith Hackleman
Cynthia Robbins
Audrey Jordan
Ebony Winston



their time going to neighborhoods and communities that few, if any, visit— apropos of Star Trek’s opening: “to boldly go where no else has gone before.” What followed was a personal story that included admission of making bad choices in the past, the length down to months, days and minutes spent “behind the wall,” personal recollections of conversations with God, and his inspired commitment to be a change agent in—and for— tough communities similar to the one he’d once landed in prison for disrespecting. His candor, energy, laughter and smile were contagious. In my “just little” and personal estimation, standing up and honestly putting yourself out there in front of people is nothing short of extraordinarily brave.

He talked about fulfilling a commitment to himself with kids in trouble (prefers kids “at promise” expression as opposed to “at risk” label) before being introduced to Homecomers, sharing the story of being asked to reach out to someone’s son who was “behind the wall” and contemplating suicide. He’d met Curtis Watkins when he (C. Watkins) was working for another non-profit organization. Later on, when he reluctantly accepted a second invitation from another Homecomer to attend a NHA meeting, he ultimately decided “nothing beats a failure better than a try.” In their midst, he felt a kindred connection. Their concern for, and loyalty to, one another is palpable. In the words of Homecomer, Cortez Daniel—whose name came up more than once especially in relationship to the Father McKenna Center at Gonzaga which partners with Homecomers—“Compassion without expectation is enabling.” (Participant/Workshop photographer Tizoc’s worked there.)

C. Watkins periodically interjected complementary information throughout the remainder of the Workshop. “Handing the ball off to one another” they were able to cover lots of ground about the National Homecomer journey. He told us about travelling to the Midwest, establishing partnerships there and their “learning exchanges,” e.g., their “Flip the Script” experience and Skype with other Homecomers. Through the truancy intervention arm of Curtis’ LifeSTARTS program, they became aware of the horrible living conditions in one particular family’s home. They “adopted” the family, performed a “home makeover,” helped resolve some of the truancy problems of kids in the family and took the lead in helping the mother into a Second Genesis addiction program. And, to demonstrate the story, C. Watkins showed before and after photographs of the family and Homecomers and a Homecomers’ Community Outreach video. From then until today, everything “picked up like a locomotive”—from 47 speaking engagements at high schools, colleges, transitional homes for adults and kids and the DC Court Services and Offenders Supervision Agency (CSOSA) to engaging people of all ages to avoid violence in 309 community engagements.

Methods and Tools

As part of their “place-based” outreach philosophy, day after day after day the Homecomers were going into their personally “targeted” communities to develop “a presence.” (They’d picked out 11 communities in which to concentrate their attention.) NHA started a “Safe Passage” program with Homecomers walking parents and their children to school. Still, in the midst of these tremendous strides they were consciously aware that they were not sufficiently chronicling their activities, as well, they were criticized for not taking necessary steps to document and self-evaluate their many activities and achievements—what they call ETOs, or “Efforts to Outcomes.”

They stepped up their tracking and recording. Homecomers’ headquarters in the Trinidad neighborhood is called the “Center for Healing.” There’s where they are most frequently found out-and-about in various areas of the neighborhood equipped with hot dogs, ice cold water, music and basketballs to tempt adult and youth neighbors from their homes. Hoping their visibility would eventually engender community members’ trust, eventually the street corner activity began to disappear and they were getting unsolicited “thanks yous” for simply “being there” from neighbors in the community.

Ultimately they were given a townhouse in another of their “targeted” areas, Glencrest. There Homecomers outfitted a three-bedroom townhouse in the project development. They named it: “The Make-A-Difference House.” In it, there’s a “Quiet Room,” a “DVD Room,” the “We Room” and Computer Room. And, they are working to track activity and visitors, e.g., between May 15 and July 30, there have been 1183 kid visits.

William T. recalled for us his memories of the 1st “Mind, Body, Spirit” meeting at the house. And how because he remembered only at the last minute that it was incumbent upon him to notify everyone of the meeting, he’d erroneously sent a last minute text message that everyone ended up getting 15-20 times. Seventeen Homecomers (and one 11 year old grand daughter) showed up. So thoroughly moved by the experience, he’d handed out and sent thank you notes to everyone for the experience. It wasn’t a dumping session at all, but “a healing one.”

C. Watkins briefly told us about travelling to the Midwest and the “learning exchanges” experienced while there.

Participant, Audry Jordan of the Annie Casey Foundation’s Community Change Initiative unit asked Curtis W. and William T. if they’d tracked their TimeBanks activities. On a quarterly basis, according to Homecomers’ activities, there are “gift” cards, i.e., gas, food and Metro passes. C. Watkins stressed, however, that it often becomes necessary, incumbent upon him, to reiterate to supporters, as well as members, that the crux of the Homecomers’ mission is about people and not programs. Programs have a beginning, a middle and an end. What’s so wonderful about the relationship between Homecomers, Time Dollars and TimeBanking is their mutually supportive alignment behind the same values of co-production. All three are about pioneering a way of life that is first and foremost about relationships, in particular, the individuals and communities of people involved in them. I don’t recall which of the two Homecomers said this, but it could have been either one: “We create this ‘I am my brothers’ and sisters’ keeper’ support system.”

William T. closed by saying: “Going to prison is not what qualifies you to do this Homecomers’ work. It’s your heart that qualifies you.” By Workshop’s end, we’d come full circle since early on in his Testimonial he’d said: “What comes from the heart, reaches the heart.”