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Criminal Records: Connecticut Pardon Team helps rescue lost lives

Reformed convicts get 2nd chance

Photos



John Shishmanian/ NorwichBulletin.com

Norraine McQueen, 36, of Norwich, center, was helped by the Connecticut Pardon Team. Joining her are her husband, Alexander McQueen, her mother, Daphne Bennett, and clockwise from Bennett, her children, Shannelle Hanson, Keyana and Jevane Watson, Alexander McQueen Jr., her niece, Renasha Brown, and children Shakoya Watson and Shaleisha McQueen. Not in photo are her other children, Kirt Watson and Stacey Fearon.

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By MICHAEL GANNON

Norwich Bulletin

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Norraine McQueen started to get her life back from a 1991 cocaine conviction on a break at work more than four years ago.

"I was miserable," she said. "I put pen to paper and wrote out my life's story."

She put it in the mail, and shortly thereafter received a letter back from then-Gov. John G. Rowland.

"He wrote and said I should ask for a pardon."

McQueen, 36, received her pardon in June after a nearly two-year process. And she has begun speaking out on behalf of the Connecticut Pardon Team, a Norwich-based organization run by former Norwich Alderman Jacqueline Caron. It has helped guide thousands of people through the first steps of the application process.

"When you have a criminal record, you have no hope, no future," said McQueen, a native of Jamaica and a mother of eight. "I'm going public with this because I want to reach out to other people, to let them know where they can turn for help. The difference now is that I have my life back. I can apply for a better job for my children. I don't have to go on welfare."

Caron is up front about her own pardon in 2001, stemming from incidents connected with a drinking problem. She and her husband, Richard Caron, founded the Connecticut Pardon Team in 2004 to help people with the application process.

Invisible bars

"You might make one mistake," she said. "But once you've served your sentence, you keep serving. The bars are just invisible. Having a criminal record is like wearing a scarlet letter. It's hard to get a job, because each time you fill out an application they ask, 'Have you ever been convicted of a crime?' If you say yes, they don't ask you for the circumstances. They reach for a different pile of applications."

"And these days it's not just employment opportunities,"

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Richard Caron said. "It's things like housing, insurance, education opportunities. They're all asking these questions."

Caron said her defense attorney knew about the process and encouraged her to pursue it. She said the pardon team is there specifically to assist with the long and detailed

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application process.

Richard Caron said the initial application is 17 detailed pages, and it can grow to 40 or more if an applicant is accepted in the initial screening process.

Erase the past

Now, when asked that question on an application, McQueen and others who have received a pardon may legally answer no, as if their past never happened.

"It's a second chance," Jacqueline Caron said.

"I knew Jackie, and she encouraged me to try," McQueen said. "You have to get all your paperwork. You have to review your whole life. You have to answer a lot of embarrassing and unpleasant questions. They can ask you anything. And if you get a hearing, you have to answer them again in front of the Board of Pardons and Paroles and 200 other people who are there getting hearings."

"The joke is that they end up knowing you better than your doctor," Jacqueline Caron said.

The Carons said the pardon process is not a rubber stamp.

"Nor should it be," Jacqueline Caron said. "You have the burden of proof. You really have to prove to them that you have turned your life around."

"And just telling them, 'I want a better job' ain't gonna cut it," Richard Caron said.

He said the process has become more available in recent years.

"A few years ago, 58 percent of the applicants were turned down in the initial screening stage without a hearing," he said. "The last numbers we have, from 2007, that is down to 21 percent. So the process is more accessible, though I don't want to deceive anyone into believing that this is easy. It isn't."

McQueen's husband, Alexander, said his wife's criminal record was not as devastating as it might have been for other families, but it still was not easy to deal with.

New opportunities

Norraine McQueen said even in the short time since receiving her letter of acceptance in June, new horizons have begun to appear.

"I did not receive jail time; I got probation," she said. "But, at the time, they wanted to deport me for that. I was seven months pregnant and had to get a waiver. But that also meant I could not travel out of the country. I went 10 years without seeing my mother. Now I can travel."

Two weeks after getting her pardon, she finally received her green card, which is necessary for many kinds of employment for foreign nationals living in the United States.

She also hopes to obtain her state license as a hairdresser in the future.

"And now I can apply to become a United States citizen."

Get in touch

Reach the **Connecticut Pardon Team** at 1-866-251-3810 or in Norwich at 823-1571. Its Web site is www.connecticutpardonteam.com

For information on the Board of Pardons and Paroles, visit www.ct.gov/doc/site/default.asp

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