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Pardon Team Helps The Deserving Close The Book

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Norwich — Trina Williams doesn't pretend she never committed her crimes.

She is honest, she says, on every job application.

She is honest with her 13-year-old son when he asks why she spent so much of his childhood in prison.

And she is honest with herself.

"I sold drugs because I was paying the rent and the light bill, and that's it," she says.

Williams was convicted, twice, of selling crack cocaine. She has served more than seven years in prison.

Now, a year and a half after completing her sentence, that record makes it hard for her to earn an honest living.

At 34, she lives with her four children in an apartment owned by the Thames River Family Program, and she works as a housekeeper at a motel in Groton, where she barely makes enough to pay her rent.

When she's not working, she says, she's looking for work.

But employers take one look at her record and pass.

"I have four kids here, and I'm trying to provide for them. They don't have a father around, so it's just me," she says. "I feel like I've served my time. I did what I did, and I paid for it ... so many years out of my life. And now, I'm still paying for it."

Williams is one of thousands across the state who have learned that a criminal record will pull them down, perhaps for the rest of their lives.

Unless they get a pardon.

Under state law, a person who lives a crime-free life for at least five years after serving their sentence, takes steps to rebuild her life, contributes to her community and sets an example for others who have been convicted of crimes, can petition the state Board of Pardons and Paroles to have her criminal record expunged.

Which means, says Norwich resident Jacqueline Caron, founder of the Connecticut Pardon Team Inc., that a person can honestly answer the job application question "Have you ever been convicted of a crime?" with the word "No."

Having that as a goal can give people like Trina Williams the hope they need to keep going day after day.

"No, not everybody has five years under their belt," Caron says. "But they have something to work towards. Even if they're not ready, they say you know that this is something that can happen ... and it just changed their whole outlook on the situation they were in."

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The arc of Caron's own life is a model of what a pardon can mean.

The story of her rough youth, her alcoholism, her larceny conviction and her time in prison are well-known in southeastern Connecticut. As is the story of her redemption, her receipt of a pardon in 2000 and her election to the Norwich City Council in 2001.

But Caron didn't stop there. She began going out and letting others know that they, too, could win a second chance. And in 2004, she started conducting forums statewide.

Caron's pardon team helps guide petitioners through the process, a painstaking gathering of information including the petitioner's criminal history, notarized personal statement, minimum of three personal reference letters and other documentation.

Last fall, the team incorporated as a nonprofit organization, so they could receive donations to carry on their work.

Gregory R. Everett, chairman of the state's pardon board, says Caron's team "has generated interest" in the pardons process but stresses that the board has done its share of outreach work, "making it more user-friendly" by going out and addressing the public and putting the pardon application online.

"A pardon, an absolute pardon, is an extraordinary remedy, it's an act of grace, it's a privilege, it's certainly not something to be taken lightly. Most other states have nothing like that," Everett says.

"By the same token," he says, "if you're a nonviolent offender, and you committed some offense years ago, and now you own a home, work full time, have a family, you're probably somebody that's going to get a pardon."

The board, Everett says, weighs many things in deciding on a petition: "How long is your criminal history? Were they crimes of violence? How old were you when you did them? Were there any victims involved? And what have you done? Have you educated yourself? Have you gotten steady employment?"

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Since November 2004, when the state consolidated the parole board with the pardon board, 876 petitions for pardons have been submitted to the board; 467 of them have been granted.

While the average number of petitions has increased only gradually since that time, the average percentage of pardons granted has increased by some 23 percent.

Still, the number of petitioners is but a small fraction of the potential candidates for pardons out there, Everett says.

"There's approximately 55,000 people on probation, 30,000 people come on and off probation every year," he says. "There's tens of thousands of people that might be eligible for a pardon now or in the not-too-distant future."

Caron says her organization has received more than a thousand inquiries from people who have spent a lifetime running from a record.

And she's been criticized by some who feel that people should pay for their crimes for the rest of their lives.

"I run into that attitude all the time," Caron says. "How long must they pay? Especially if they've turned their life around and given back and are truly sorry for what they did and helping somebody else. How long, how long should someone pay?"

That is the question on the lips of Brenda J. of Hartford, who did not want her full name used because she wants a pardon for the reason of clearing her name.

Nine years ago, J. says, she was charged with second-degree assault after she lashed out at an abusive boyfriend. The charge was reduced to a misdemeanor, and she served 45 days in jail and took courses in anger management.

"I can't believe I made such a fool of myself," she says. "I was in college. I was raised in a two-parent home. I didn't come from that kind of environment."

But since completing her probation in 2000, J. has run into the wall of that conviction.

She has an associate's degree in sociology and psychology and is a year away from earning her bachelor's in social psychology and criminology.

"I want to help young teenage girls and juveniles," she says, "so I'm learning how to equip myself to help others."

But J., raising two children, has been unable to find anything but administrative work because of her criminal record.

Her latest heartache came when she gave up a \$10-an-hour job with the state for a better job at a Hartford insurance company. She got the job and had given her notice when her new employer told her they had changed their mind.

So now J. is out of work.

"I pretty much take what I can get because I've got to eat and take care of my family," she says. "I know I did something wrong, and I'm sorry for it, but it's like I'm still paying for it all these years."

J. just sent off her petition to the pardons board. Now she waits.

"I can never, never change what happened," she says. "But there's no doubt in my mind and my heart that I've completely changed my life."

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The problem, for people like Trina Williams, is how to manage for the five years she has to wait before she can petition the board.

She must make enough money to pay the rent on an apartment, pay bills and buy food for her children, all on what are likely to be minimum wages for menial work.

More than anything else, she says, she wants a job that lets her work with people and help them. Recently, she says, she applied for her "dream job," a position with an organization in Groton that helps developmentally disabled adults.

She has done volunteer work for the group "and I loved it, loved it. The hours are perfect, the pay is good. I came home and I was telling the kids about the adults I was working with, and some of them I just wanted to put them in the car and bring them home. I loved them."

But Williams fears that that "piece of paper," her criminal record, will make it impossible for her to make her way.

"Any job I get right now I'll work extra hard," she says. "I'll try to, so that when I do need a reference, they can let them know that what you see on paper, that's not her. She's changed her life now. And I'm hoping somebody will hear that and give me a chance."

For more information about pardons, call 866-251-3810 or visit www.connecticutpardonteam.com.

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'I have four kids here, and I'm trying to provide for them ... I did what I did, and I paid for it ... And now, I'm still paying for it.'
Trina Williams, on the difficulties of finding work with a criminal record



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Pardon Team founder Jacqueline Caron served time in prison and received a pardon herself before getting elected to the Norwich City Council.



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Trina Williams with her children Fred Grant, far left, Tavon Williams, far right, and twins Jajuan and Jashawn Santos.