

Returning to society after prison or jail still a challenge

Ex-convicts are making slow progress with the help of emerging programs and mentors

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Julie Ghant walked out of a Gatesville prison in February with \$50, the ragged used men's clothing she got from prison officials on her back and a bus ticket to anywhere.

Ghant said she came to Austin in February because she heard that Travis County offered ex-offenders lots of help.

The 37-year-old mother of six said she had been medicating herself with drugs and alcohol in Abilene when she landed in prison in 2003 to serve a four-year sentence for drug possession — her third criminal conviction since 1989.

While she was locked up, her husband and mother died within months of each other; her children were left behind to be raised by relatives.

"I felt like I was the only one left," she said.

She arrived at an East Austin halfway house in February, starting the journey back into society that an increasing number of Texas inmates make each year.

Thousands of people convicted of drug offenses during crackdowns in the 1990s are finishing their sentences. An estimated 50,000 inmates are released in Texas each year — more than four times the number released five years ago. According to a 2005 report by the Washington-based Urban Institute, about 2,000 come to Travis County, where a host of programs run by the City of Austin, Travis County and area nonprofit groups try to help ex-convicts build new lives.

Ghant needed help with basic survival needs before she could worry about finding work. With the help of mentors, friends and other ex-convicts, she avoided drugs and alcohol as she applied for the documents that make up a life — a Social Security card, a driver's license.

She lived with a few other women at a local transitional house, Lydia House, which she heard about from Texas Reach Out Ministries, she said. She paid about \$250 a month in rent, she said.

And Patricia Hall, a Round Rock evangelist who leads Bible studies in area prisons, became her mentor. Hall helped Ghant buy clothes, took her to church and brought her home-cooked meals.

"I need all the help I can get, and I feel really blessed to have it," Ghant said.

Then Project RIO, a training program for the unemployed run by the Texas Workforce Commission, led her to Construction Gateway, a five-week program at Austin Community College's Riverside campus that trains people in carpentry, safety standards and installation methods. Ghant complemented the plumbing skills she had learned in prison with construction skills.

About 50 percent of the students in the program are ex-offenders — a portion that has increased as the program's reputation has grown, said Mike Midgley, vice president of Workforce Education and Business Development at ACC.

She went to class from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. every day for five weeks. She helped her classmates build a shed for a local school. She learned what builders and companies look for in a resume.

After class, she went back to the transitional home she shared with other women. In her free time, she said, she visited Hall or hung out in the house with the women she lived with, instead of partying, like she used to.

On a recent Sunday, Hall and Ghant sat with another ex-offender in Hall's Round Rock apartment after attending church. Ghant sat on the edge of the couch, nervously playing with her rings. She was not having the best day: Her 12-year-old daughter, Jasmine, had called from Abilene to ask how long it would take her mother to "get it together."

Ghant told Hall that Jasmine's question made her feel like she wasn't doing enough. "Every day is not easy. Sometimes it feels like I'm not making progress the way I want to," Ghant said. "I pray about it."

"You're already a success because you're trying," Hall said. "Some people who have never been to prison aren't even where you are right now."

Ghant had been out for almost two months and was close to finishing classes at Construction Gateway.

In a trailer on ACC's Riverside campus, Ghant had scribbled notes furiously while Ed Miller, a balding man with piercing brown eyes, taught her and eight other former offenders how to get comfortable with their criminal records.

Get used to "wearing your record like a lizard wears a tail," he said.

He told them to prepare to face prejudice when they begin looking for jobs.

He gave them a standard answer to give employers who asked about their past. "Tell them, 'When I was younger, I made some mistakes. I understand what I did wrong. I've paid for it; I've changed my life. Now I'm looking for a chance to get ahead,'" he said.

Before the program ended, Ghant got a job offer in Dallas. She was giddy about it, telling Hall that she would be working for a builder.

Taking that job meant she would be closer to her children so she could try to rebuild her relationship with them.

On graduation day in March, she donned a used cap and gown, gave a short speech and took her seat among her 10 classmates.

"I'll be starting out in the basement somewhere, somewhere under entry level," she said. "But I never thought I'd amount to anything. Now I know it's only going to get better and better."

She was going to be on her own again, without her safety net.

This month, almost two months after she'd left for Dallas, her new cell phone was disconnected. Hall was worried because she hadn't heard from Ghant.

"The first six months are crucial, and she doesn't know anyone up there," Hall said. "I hope she doesn't get caught up using drugs again."

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