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Ex-offender makes the most of his second chance

Bill Gaertner was nearing the end of an eight-and-a-half year prison term in 2012 for domestic abuse when he had a life-altering moment.

"A Catholic deacon at the Metropolitan Transition Center gave me Henri Nouwen's book 'The Return of the Prodigal Son' based on Rembrandt's painting. It became my Bible," Gaertner said. "I still carry it around with me wherever I go. It was the foundation for my re-entry program. I got out September 23, 2013 and six days later went to St. Mary's in Hagerstown. I walked into the 9:30 mass and there was a life-sized painting of the Prodigal Son. I cried and knew then that this was where I belonged. That is how Gatekeepers started. It is all based on the Prodigal Son."

Gatekeepers is a Washington County re-entry training program Gaertner founded in February 2014 to help transition ex-offenders back into their communities.

"The only way I can say I am sorry to my victim and others I harmed is to wake up every day and do the best and be the best person I can be that day," added Gaertner, who attends mass at one of the three parishes in Hagerstown (St. Mary, St Ann or St. Joseph) each morning. "I totally abused the tools that God gave me

for years and years and years, laced with alcohol. As I sat through the various stages of incarceration, I jumped back onto my faith life which was grounded by going through Catholic schools."

Gatekeeper's job readiness training program prepares participants to return to the workplace.

"We ended up getting 80-90 felons jobs and realized people are good up here, in spite of the economy and what it means to be a felon," Gaertner said. "But as time went on a lot of these guys got fired. Over 250 people came into our office and a) most of them were not ready and b) they didn't take advantage of it. So we adjusted. Now the Washington County parole and probation department sends them to us for a five week re-entry program that provides job readiness, job skills and life skills. That never happened before."

Gaertner was 70 years old when he was released from prison. A college basketball coach for more than a decade, including a stint at Towson University, Gaertner coached with the legendary Jim Valvano at Johns Hopkins, the University of Connecticut (UConn) and Iona. He has used his basketball relationships to help raise awareness.



Bill Gaertner

"Basketball is the common language inside prisons," Gaertner said. "One of my favorite projects is the re-entry mentoring seminar. I took Billy Hahn, the assistant basketball coach at West Virginia University, into the Federal Penitentiaries. We have done seven lectures and it is just incredible. We are taking the players in late April. In May, I am taking (former University of Maryland star) Keith Booth into the Metropolitan Transition Center to do re-entry seminars. I always felt with my background and knowing how coaches think is a great way to motivate and prepare people to re-enter into the community. This was meant to be. I was sent to prison for a reason."

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MARYLAND CATHOLIC CONFERENCE • 10 FRANCIS STREET • ANNAPOLIS, MD • 21401
WWW.MDCATHOLIC.ORG • 410.269.1155 / 301.261.1979 • 410.269.1790 (FAX)