



Transformation Happens Here

Fall 2020 Newsletter

Transformative Power of Hope

“The experience of being locked in a cage has a psychological effect upon everyone made to endure it. No one leaves unscarred.”

- Mika 'il DeVeaux, The Trauma of the Incarceration Experience

Prison is not designed to offer individuals much hope for the future. Nevertheless, most people emerge from prison envisioning a fresh start, a better life ahead. The barriers they face upon release are daunting, though, and can instill doubt about whether that life is possible. The trauma of incarceration itself is compounded by the collateral consequences of a felony conviction that participants face after they are released. With your support and partnership, Sponsors is here to provide a hopeful path to successful reintegration.

The transformative power of hope takes shape in the hearts and minds of participants every day, week, month and year. Transformation may be small at first: cautious excitement after a first coffee meeting with a volunteer mentor; budding pride after talking openly about prison time and a renewed perspective on life in a job interview. Participants walk with a greater sense of purpose as they begin to gain confidence in their ability to make changes.

We know prison may be unavoidable at times. We also know that, with the right supports in place, Sponsors can be the catalyst that breaks the cycle of incarceration and homelessness. Our programs keep folks from returning to prison. Everyday supporters just like you are helping to offer the necessary tools to those individuals working hard to rebuild their lives and discover the transformative power of hope.



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From the Director

Paul Solomon

Dear friends,

2020 has been a year like no other. As we grapple with the ongoing impacts of a global pandemic and historically unprecedented wildfires throughout the state, Sponsors' program participants inspire me to recognize all there is to be grateful for. I have a deep appreciation for the challenges that our clients face during these most unusual times. Reentering the community is daunting under the best circumstances. The folks we serve arrive at our door the day they are released with little more than the clothes on their backs. Now they

have a pandemic to contend with and many are required to quarantine for the first 14 days they are out. Even simple physical human connection like a long-awaited hug may put them or a loved one at risk. They are also returning to a local economy where service industry jobs, the type of work most of our participants rely upon, are few and far between. And yet, despite all of these challenges, we witness the dogged determination and perseverance of the people we serve, even after years of incarceration.

One of my favorite moments in a participant's journey is the day they move from our transitional housing into a place of their own. The excitement and joy are palpable.

Over the last year we served a record 615 people in our Transitional Housing Program!

The vast majority successfully completed the program and moved into stable, permanent housing where they continue to thrive.

This past week we welcomed our first residents to Jeffrey Commons, ten beautiful new Tiny Homes. We had originally planned to open them in spring but instead reserved them to accommodate individuals who needed to quarantine because of COVID-19. Our first resident told me, as he walked in, how grateful he was to finally have a place of his own. ***A veteran who had experienced homelessness, he was on the verge of tears, acknowledging his heartfelt appreciation for his beautiful new home.*** I am continuously grateful for the community support that makes housing opportunities like this one a reality.

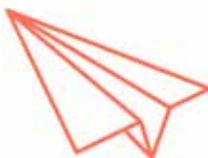
It goes without saying that we are living together through unprecedented times. *And "together" looks and feels different than ever before.* I am so grateful for and humbled by the continued support and solidarity you have so generously shown over the past year. It is truly remarkable that, despite numerous challenges, our programs and clients continue to *thrive*.

And yet, despite so many successes, there remains a great deal of work to be done. The Black Lives Matter movement has further illuminated the historic inequities and structural racism that persist in our communities. The systems that purport to deliver safety and justice are in much need of reform. I believe we have a responsibility—as individuals, as an organization, as a community—to honestly and courageously examine the ways that we participate in systems that perpetuate racism and inequity. This is not work to be undertaken lightly. But we at Sponsors are strengthened in knowing that we are in this **together**.

In closing, I want to share my gratitude for the incredible community support we receive from people just like you. As evidenced by the story I shared about our newest Tiny Homes resident, your support makes a very real difference in the lives of our program participants.



Thank you,



Letters of Transformation



Dear reader,

In the one year since my release from prison Sponsors has been an amazing partner in my successful journey back into society. Talk to any probation officer or felon and they will tell you the hardest part of incarceration is not the years behind bars, it's "getting out."

My 60th birthday should have been a great celebration; however, this would be the day I entered the prison system for the first time in my life. Being incarcerated was something I never thought would happen to me, however sometimes addictions (in my case Oregon video slots) result in actions that are clearly wrong.

During my final two months

behind bars, the one thing I heard from other inmates was how fortunate I was to be going to Lane County because "they have Sponsors." Many counties offer little or no services except for a couple nights in a hotel room and directions to the local mission. Many of the fellow inmates I met were worried about getting out because they knew they would end up hanging out with their old crowd, quickly picking up bad habits and would end up back in prison.

"From the minute I arrived at Sponsors I was treated with the utmost respect and dignity as an equal."

Felons reentering society have many barriers and hear the word NO every day. From finding a job to renting an apartment to getting transportation or simply finding a computer; the challenges become frustrating to the point of giving up. At Sponsors, I heard YES with encouragement, respect and support. Some of the outstanding services Sponsors provided for me included: counseling, job/computer/transportation support, housing support, a mentor, financial support, and government services assistance (SSI, Disability, Food Stamps, Driver's License).

I think of leaving prison sort of like an astronaut that has been working and living in the Space Station for years—a million miles away from loved ones, family and friends. Getting out is the hardest part, I felt disoriented like a deer in headlights. But the entire Sponsors staff was there for me. They are, by far, the only organization in the country that understands exactly how we feel and they deliver 120%.

Sincerely,

Thomas Kolver



COVID-19 Update

In the Prison System:

On the heels of multiple outbreaks inside Oregon correctional facilities in August, the September wildfires forced massive evacuations that ultimately led to cramped, unsafe conditions where proper social distancing was impossible. More than 1,000 inmates were squeezed into a single facility already facing over 100 confirmed cases of COVID-19.

To date, 12 people in Oregon have died of COVID-19 while in custody.

On Sponsors' Campuses:

Sponsors staff is working diligently to stay safe. All new residents returning from "hotbed" correctional facilities are quarantined for two weeks. Other new residents are tested within days of arrival. Sponsors continues to offer bi-weekly testing via Lane County Health in the Resource Center.



Mask up!

Remembering Steve Christiansen

Sponsors and the struggle for social justice lost a long-time friend and advocate with the passing of Steve Christiansen in July. Steve was a 10-year member of the Board of Directors and served as the board chair at the time of his passing. In this remembrance the board collectively highlights Steve's contributions to Sponsors and the wonderful personal qualities he shared with us.

Steve led the charge in bringing the *Kindness Campaign* to the local community as he embodied kindheartedness. One of our board members observed "Talking with him for only a few moments...you could tell that he cared," and another "he always had a full, glorious smile that was absolutely contagious, and he was kind.... **always.**"

How a person handles adversity explains so much about their character. Those of us who worked with Steve through the 18 months from his cancer diagnosis to his passing, marveled at the dignity and grace with which he faced his illness and treatment. He had an openness and optimism about his diagnosis, and his dedication to Sponsors never wavered. There was no awkwardness in talking to Steve about his illness because his own acceptance and grace put the rest of us at ease.

At a board retreat last year one of our activities was to exchange how we came to be involved in Sponsors' mission. I learned that Steve came to his social justice values early in life through his parents. It was a story not unlike my own and made me feel a greater kinship with Steve. But Steve was also able to bring his professional

expertise to his work with Sponsors. He spent many years collaborating with social science and health researchers developing interactive media and software tools to assist in behavioral intervention programs. Behavior change is, of course, the thrust of many Sponsors programs with its clients, so Steve's expertise was a natural fit.

Steve also used his video and media skills to produce films that told Sponsors' story, helping to spread our message of justice reimagined and raise much needed funds to realize our goals.

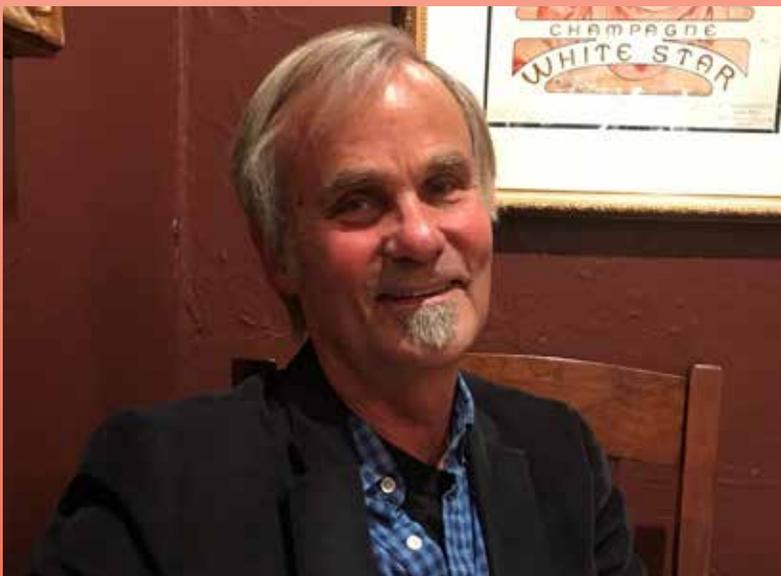
Like many social justice advocates Steve was motivated by the oft-quoted words attributed to Martin Luther King:

“ The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

-MLK

Steve was hoping to remain alive long enough to see that arc bending in the right direction this fall. We share the sadness of many that he was not able to live to see this, but we are inspired to carry on this mission in his name. Sponsors and those of us on the board are all better humans for having known and worked with Steve, and we look forward to honoring him by continuing to support those working to transform their lives and make the world a more just and kind place.

Steve Hecker, Chair, for the Sponsors Board of Directors



If you would like to donate in Steve's name, checks can be mailed to Sponsors Inc.
338 Highway 99N Eugene, OR 97402



Spotlight on Success

Kendra Wright is living proof that people can and do change. As a former Sponsors client and current volunteer mentor, Kendra works full time as a peer support specialist for Lane County. Before her time at Sponsors, Kendra struggled with addiction, homelessness and incarceration. Today she is committed to inspiring hope among those who face similar circumstances as she fights for change as an activist and advocate.

“My whole life I knew I was supposed to help people,” Says Kendra. “[But with multiple felonies] I never thought I would be an employee of the County... I’m blown away every day that I get to wake up and do my job.”

Recently Kendra has been instrumental in passing two crucial pieces of legislation: *the Children of Incarcerated Parents’ Bill of Rights* and *Selene’s Bill* (HB 4009) which allows for reversal of parental rights termination. She has also begun mentoring young women who are preparing to transfer from *Oregon Youth Authority* to *Coffee Creek Correctional Facility*. No official program exists to prepare these young women for the major changes they must navigate through the transition. Kendra is hoping to change that.

“It keeps me going and gives me hope that change can happen. I don’t have to be a victim of the life I had or the circumstances that happened. I can be strong and help others who don’t have the resources they need,” she explains.



Kendra’s extraordinary story is centered around the importance of hope— first losing it, only to find it again and now inspire it in others.

“Sometimes people don’t have hope, and they need someone who can be that light to get them through that dark tunnel. People who are peer supports, advocates or mentors can help shine the light that others can’t see.”



First Residents of Jeffrey Commons are Coming Home

Earlier this year as the pandemic began ramping up, Sponsors was honored to partner with the County to offer Jeffrey Commons—a campus comprised of tiny homes—as a respite site for unhoused individuals sick with COVID-19. The County had been struggling to identify hotel rooms for sick individuals to stay and heal. Sponsors Executive Director Paul Solomon saw a major need and jumped in quickly to fill it.



Now the tiny homes are vacant and fully sanitized, ready to offer new residents safety and stability. Oftentimes individuals with conviction histories struggle to find adequate housing as they continue working to rebuild their lives. Residents of Jeffrey Commons will have access to services including employment support, mentoring and counseling.

Thanks to generous community partners, each unit is fully stocked with everything needed to feel at home for new residents, and we are ready to welcome them!



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TRANSFORMING LIVES TOGETHER

VIRTUAL AUCTION

Supporters joined the auction to bid on 51 packages. The donated packages earned \$10,995—94% of value! Wow!



DONATIONS

Funds raised will support Sponsors programs and services as well as COVID-19 move-in kits, socks and undies, technology and childcare.



TOTAL

With the tremendous support of our sponsors, donors and participants we raised

\$105,000 +counting



THANKS AGAIN TO OUR AMAZING PARTNERS!