

## **‘A godsend’**

### **Season of Sharing helps man thrive in new life**

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## **SEASON OF SHARING**

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### **Sandra Amrhein**

Sarasota Herald-Tribune USA TODAY NETWORK

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On one of his earliest days as a prison law library clerk, David Harris – then serving a life sentence – was presented with a question that would alter the course of everything.

“Give me one honest reason why you should be let out – and one I’ve never heard before,” asked Ms. Carlsten, the kindly older librarian who’d given him the job and was now playing the role of a judge.

David, in his mid-30s, thought hard about an answer. But after several minutes, he came up short.

“I didn’t have an honest reason why I should be let out of prison,” he’d later say.

It would take another 27 years for David to find one – both within himself and tucked inside of case law.

But from that point forward he made up his mind to change, to address the scene that kept replaying in his mind like a movie reel – and the frozen image of pain on his mother’s face.

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## **A way out**

As a child, it was his father whom David revered most.

Raised on the South Side of Chicago with two younger siblings, David yearned to impress the man who was “ironclad” tough and who had used his GI Bill benefits to study.

David’s father later became a barber and a businessman in charge of his own bar.

Yet whether David was competing at a swim meet or jamming in the backyard with young bandmates

from school, his father seemed to relish David's public humiliation.

"The more I tried to excel, the more he ridiculed me," David recalled.

"He was determined to make me the butt of a joke in front of my whole family."

David's mom, on the other hand, was nurturing. The two of them were close.

"You're doing great," she'd say, trying to run interference with David's father. "Don't listen to him."

Nevertheless, by high school David began to rebel by skipping class, which prompted the harshest of his father's discipline – this time in the form of an extralong telephone cord.

Before his junior year, David dropped out of school altogether, at which point his father kicked him out of the house.

By now drinking and smoking marijuana with friends, David stayed at their homes or sometimes in his parents' car, which his mother would leave unlocked overnight so he'd have a place to sleep.

At 16, he tried Job Corps and excelled for a time – thrilling his mom – but then was expelled for sneaking beer onto campus.

By his late teens, living with friends, he graduated to cocaine and stealing – sometimes booze from his dad's bar, where he occasionally worked, but more often cars.

"I started feeling helpless," David said, describing a sensation of being trapped in a downward spiral.

One night at a local carnival fair on the West Side, David heard that the crew running the Super Zyclon roller coaster was hiring more muscle to tear it down.

"Hey, man, you need help on the road?" he asked, envisioning an escape route.

"Let's see how you do tonight," the guy told him.

David did well enough that he got the job.

"My answer to it was to leave the city," he said about his problems.

Instead, his problems went with him – and were about to get much worse.

### **A shot at a normal life**

For the next four years David toured the country with the amusement park company, moving part of the year to Palmetto, where it was based.

Between seasons, David went home to Chicago and worked in his father's bar.

His drug use continued, as did a series of arrests which would see him spend one or two nights in jail.

His mother, by now working at the jail as a data processor and systems analyst for the Cook County Sheriff's Office, was well known there.

When her fellow deputies made the connection, David – angry and cocky in his early 20s – pushed down his shame.

As he did when she came to pick him up, a look of pain on her face as they left the jail-courthouse complex at 26th and California.

“David, you need to stop what you're doing,” she told him, driving them home after giving him cigarettes and money.

Instead, by his mid-20s – done with the entertainment company and back in Palmetto full time – David was using crack and burglarizing businesses.

Busted for the latter, he spent five years in prison, during which he tried treatment for the first time.

By age 30, David was back out and getting himself on track in Sarasota – married, with a car and a good job at an oilchange garage.

“I wanted a shot at a normal, stable life,” he said.

Thinking he could handle it this time, he started using drugs again, and once more his life spiraled out of control. After his wife kicked him out, he slept in his car.

One night in search of money for drugs,

he stuck a pistol in a man's face at an ATM – his first violent offense – getting away with the man's wallet and \$40.

For decades to come, the scene would replay in David's mind – the man's expression of helplessness and fear – alongside David's ever-deepening sense of shame.

“This is where I've ended up,” he thought.

After robbing a 7-11 a few weeks later, David was arrested following a highspeed chase on U.S. 301.

It was the mid-1990s, a “tough-on-crime” era of harsh penalties, mandatory minimum sentences and mass incarceration. Convicted as a habitual violent offender, David was sent away to prison for life.

“I decided I couldn't do this anymore,” David said in recalling his inner reaction to Ms. Carlsten's question. “Something in me has to change. If I ever get out of prison, I can't be the same guy.”

### **Blossoming hope**

With his sentence appeal left to a public defender, David began to get busy on it himself during his hours working in the law library.

But the biggest transformations he tackled were within, including the way he walked.

He reflected on the people he admired, emulating characteristics of honesty, kindness, self- and mutual respect – while keeping his guard up to stay safe.

He earned certificates and studied business administration.

Over time, he stopped using drugs that regularly flowed into the prison.

Soon in the law library, he was a trusted advocate among fellow inmates, who turned to him for help with their cases, too. But as the years ticked by, so did the court denials of his appeals of his sentence.

Still, David didn't give up.

Through his research, he was convinced that the statutes had been misapplied to his case.

Then in 2020, when his final denial came down – 25 years into his sentence – David despaired.

“I remember saying, ‘Lord, I can't fight this case anymore. I'm done,’” David said.

He said it was the moment he simply put his fate and will in God's hands.

Several weeks later while eating a bologna sandwich, David was reading a copy of the Florida Law Weekly when a few short paragraphs caught his eye.

There tucked into updates on court decisions from around the state was information about a case similar to his. The sentence was overturned due to a misapplication of the statute – close to the same argument he had been making for more than two decades.

David wrote up a new legal brief citing this ruling and other case law.

Fellow law clerk inmates read over it for him – a common practice among the men who supported each other's work.

Then in March, 2022, David got the answer he'd waited nearly half his life to hear.

The Second District Court of Appeal sided with him – vacating his sentence and mandating the case back to Sarasota for re-sentencing.

“This was where my hope blossomed,” he said.

## **Freedom**

Later that year, David was terrified sitting on the stand.

But when Judge Thomas Krug posed a question similar to the one Ms. Carlsten had asked so long ago – on why he should be let out – this time David was ready with honest reasons.

Many of them filled the thick packet he'd prepared for the judge – 27 years' worth of college transcripts; self-improvement courses; certificates in basketball and handball leagues; and a cover of the book of fiction he wrote.

There were notes from family, friends, his ex-wife, an ex-girlfriend and fellow law clerks he had helped.

There were letters filled with admiration and respect.

Others were in the legal brief he'd also prepared himself.

Most important to David, though, was facing this reality: the guy who went into prison more than a quarter of a century before may have deserved what he got.

“But I'm here to tell you,” David expressed to the court, “I'm no longer that guy.”

The judge agreed – and sentenced him to time served.

“When I got to the cell and told the guys in the pod, the pod erupted,” David recalled, pausing at this memory to sob into his fist.

Other people were also rooting for him – including a deputy who had put him in touch with Project 180, a nonprofit that helps formerly incarcerated residents reintegrate into communities.

The deputy escorted him outside. While other former inmates were sent out the back, the deputy took David through the building's lobby, hugging him goodbye.

This time, David, dressed only in a Tshirt, tennis shorts and a pair of boots, walked out the front door of jail not with a sense of shame, but instead feeling proud and humbled – and more than a little bit afraid – determined to rebuild his life.

## **Resilience**

By early 2023, David was already a house leader in one of the sober group homes run by Project 180, whose representative had been there to greet him that day he was released.

Ever since, the agency had helped him get on his feet with a job referral and important documents. David hit the ground running.

The next 18 months he worked quality control and inventory at a flower shop and then later a job with a sliding glass door company.

But there was one position he wanted all along – at Project 180.

And in the fall of 2025, he got it as a coordinator overseeing transition for former inmates during their first week out of prison.

But David was hitting a setback in his own transition.

Having moved out of group housing and renting an apartment with a girlfriend, he faced a \$9,000 repair after his car engine blew.

Instead, he decided to buy a new used car, wiping out his savings in the process – and falling behind on his rent. Suddenly the life and stability for which he'd fought so long was at risk.

At Laurel Civic Association, Kristi Ackerman, director of adult services, helped him apply to Season of Sharing, which covered \$1,200 in rent to get him caught back up.

"I tell her, 'You were a godsend,'" David said. "I didn't know where I was going to come up with that."

Ackerman understood the precariousness of his situation.

Many Sarasota area residents are grappling with the affordability crisis, but her clients who have criminal records are up against stiffer challenges.

"You're not only facing issues because you're trying to find a job with a criminal record," Ackerman said, "but (you're) also trying to find a place to go that is safe and doesn't put you in the same environment that got you into trouble in the first place."

Also, she was immediately struck by David's commanding presence.

"When he speaks he doesn't just speak to talk but because what he has to say is important in that moment. He's a very impressive individual," Ackerman said.

"He's allowing (his experience) to catapult him into making changes in other people's lives," she added, "and I think that's beautiful."

For Seth Campbell, program coordinator with Project 180, David's resilience is "next to none."

"He came out and fully committed to a new way of life," Campbell said.

After David graduated from the program, he kept coming back for Monday house meetings, sponsoring guys, giving them rides, continuing efforts with Project 180.

"I feel like there is not a guy coming out that he can't relate to," he said.

### **His greatest goal**

For his part, when David is bringing someone into Project 180, David explains what's required, but he also asks a spin on Ms. Carlson's question to get them to take stock of themselves.

"I want to know what's different about this time."

Now 61, David remains sober. He is close with relatives, though his parents never got to see this day.

Before his father passed away in 2013, David learned that he had been wracked with depression for many years.

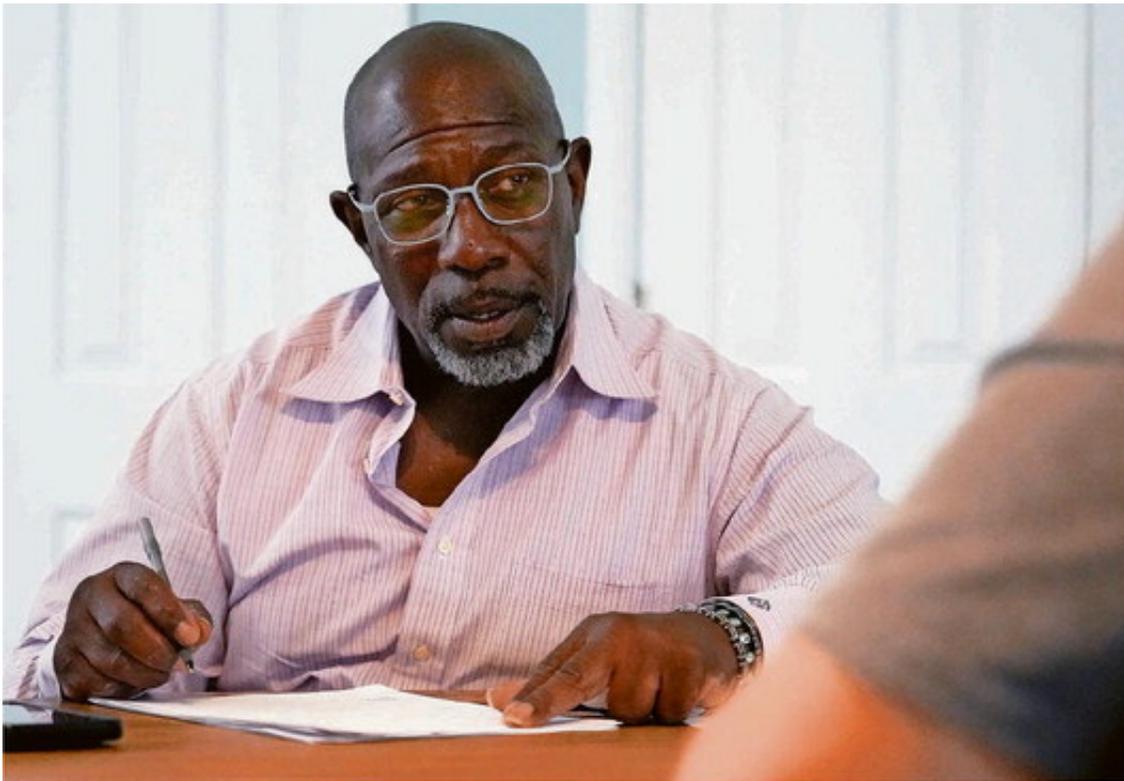
“I told him I needed him to understand none of this was (his) fault,” David said of his father. “I’d come to realize no one put me (in prison) beyond the decisions I made.”

David still thinks often about his mother, who died in 1996, shortly after he went to prison the last time.

The memory of her remains with him, but now it drives his greatest goal.

“To be the man she would have expected of me,” David said.

*This story comes from a partnership between the Sarasota Herald-Tribune and the Community Foundation of Sarasota County. Sandra Amrhein covers the Season of Sharing campaign, along with issues surrounding housing, utilities, child care and transportation in the area. She can be reached at [samrhein@gannett.com](mailto:samrhein@gannett.com).*



**David Harris of Sarasota helps a new resident fill out paperwork at Project 180 – the same nonprofit that helped him transition two years ago from prison. This summer, a job transition and car repair made it impossible to make his rent. Season of Sharing covered it for one month, and he is back on his feet. MIKE LANG/SARASOTA HERALD-TRIBUNE**



**David Harris of Sarasota helps a new resident fill out paperwork at Project 180 - the same nonprofit that helped him transition into housing and society following his release two years ago from prison. MIKE LANG/SARASOTA HERALD-TRIBUNE**