

Cycles of Redemption

by Andre Thomas



Raymond Brooks reached out to me from a Half-way house in Trenton seeking an opportunity to get back on track. He was incarcerated for marijuana, now legal, but being incarcerated can set your life back in so many ways and getting back on track isn't easy. I am very familiar with that struggle because I was formally incarcerated and was faced with the challenge of getting back on my feet. I was fortunate to have a support system and I was determined to never put myself in that position again. Since then, I have been committed to helping others facing similar challenges. I'm

very fortunate to work for an organization like Isles that took a chance on me 21 years ago, and am committed to using my platform to help folks looking for an opportunity. I made a promise to myself that when duty calls to help those less-fortunate I would answer that call.

When Raymond reached out to me, I knew my assignment was to connect him to the resources that Isles had available. Although there is a blueprint to this path that others like me have developed, it still relies on the energy and commitment of the individual. I had a sense that Raymond was ready. He came to us needing to get his driver's license, he needed to obtain a meaningful work experience, and he needed some tweaking and coaching.

Isles Community Development and Planning department had a new program called Climate Corps that I thought might be a good fit for Raymond. It was structured in a way to engage him on a level that would build his confidence while I was there to coach him through any personal issues as they came up.

Stephanie Sharo was amazing with the guys and we made a great team. She sought out advice from me about how to best connect with the guys and she gave me the space to interact with them to help them see the long-term vision. I also connected with Jennifer Jones-Hamilton, the Workforce Development Manager at IYI. I knew it would take multiple resources to help Raymond get going on a different path. It really takes a village and Isles has its own village of sorts. When we work together to serve this community, great things happen.

Raymond embraced the structure, and he was very personable, and he understood the assignment. Whenever he hit a bump in the road, he would seek my guidance and we would work through it. Raymond completed Climate Corps and through a connection we had with The City of Trenton he got hired making a very livable wage and he's doing work that he learned at Climate Corps. I explained to him that now it's his duty to create a path and leave a trail for others to follow in his footsteps.



In Raymond's words

The biggest thing I learned: "Global warming and climate change is real and we must change the way that we live."

My favorite things to learn about: composting, GIS mapping, and First Aid/CPR

Biggest Impact: "Sacrifice Zone", our first movie and dinner event

Favorite part of the program: "Jim taking the chance to reach us at every tree and plant"

Most Important training session: goal setting class. Members were asked to write down three goals: one about themselves, one about our program, and one about their community. He accomplished two of these goals: getting a job and working for Isles Inc.

Raymond's final thought: "To thank Steph and Jim for the learning experience and Mr. Thomas for sending him."