

Freedom Lost and Freedom Found: A Resident in RCHP-AHC Re-Entry Housing Takes It One Day at a Time.

Interview by Deb Convery

RCHP-Affordable Housing Corporation provides housing for many vulnerable populations, including those coming out of prison. **Nathan Gray, who goes by the name “Freedom”, lives in one of our apartments in a beautiful town in Middlesex County.** Released from Southwoods State Prison (a medium security facility located in Cumberland County) in May of 2023 at the age of 49, Freedom had spent the last 17 years behind bars.

It's not uncommon for family and friends to lose faith and give up on their loved ones in prison; often there is no safety net when it's time for re-entry. **Freedom was lucky enough to have siblings and close friends surrounding him with the love and help he needed when he got out.**

While in prison, he had connected with a professor at Georgetown University, a former seminary classmate of Pastor Amos Caley, Assoc. Pastor at RCHP, who then referred Freedom to Trysh Vargas, Director of RCHP-AHC Re-Entry Housing.

Though he struggles with adjustment post-release, he's grateful for the assistance he's received so far. **“The Re-Entry program paid for my rent for the first four months and a friend of mine helped me to get a job at a company that assembles meals for the airlines.”** He says the work is tedious and it takes him anywhere from 1 ½ - 2 hours to get to work via public transit and hopes to eventually save enough money to buy a truck so he can start a junk hauling business.

Asked whether he spent any time in solitary, Freedom says “I started out pretty illiterate, but once I boosted my reading skills, **I started to read about stuff like racism and classism and eventually published a ‘Zine (a small-circulation, self-published work of original or appropriated texts and images) that highlighted those issues and how that connected to abusive conditions in the prison.** That landed me in me in solitary (known these days as either ‘Isolated Confinement or ‘Administrative Segregation’) from 2009-2014. They try to break your spirit.”



Being confined to Solitary means 23 hours a day alone in a cell, with 1 hr/day for personal needs and occasional additional time for “recreation”. “Being in solitary does things to you”, Freedom says, as he continues to deal with the emotional toll it has taken on him.

I asked Freedom what gives him sorrow, what gives him joy and what his hopes and dreams are. “There’s so much hatred in the world. The younger generation – black men killing each other, and cops killing people. **My family gives me joy and I’m proud of the person that I’ve become.** I would love to own a home – no one in my family has ever owned a home; I’d like to have something to pass on to my son (who is now 26 years old). I’d like to publish a newsletter for those just coming out of prison, so they can have the necessary resources for a fresh start. My dream job would be something in the Social Services field. I’d like to help my comrades who are still in prison and help the youth in the neighborhood where I grew up in Plainfield, to point them in a positive direction.”