



Merrick Ward stands in front of the Transformed Lives Transitional House for Men on Stockton Street.

## Second Chances

Former inmates walk out of Transitional House different men

BY LAYLA GARMES  
THE CHRONICLE

Merrick Ward is a man on a mission. After spending eight years of his life in prison for drug trafficking, the 38-year-old Yonkers, N.Y. native was released with a clear vision of what he wanted for his life.

Ward, a onetime music producer and studio owner, is now working full time at K&W Cafeteria and attending school at Forsyth Tech. The father of one dreams of transferring to the film school at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts.

Ward also volunteers in the Media Room at Winston-Salem First, where he has attended church for the past several years. He recently purchased a car and hopes to have his own apartment in the next few months. He credits the Transformed Lives Transitional House for Men with playing a valuable role in his post-release success.

"I've got family. I didn't have to come here, but I'm at the age where I just didn't feel comfortable going to a family member's couch," he said. "I just wanted to be able to get on my own two feet."

Ward has stayed in the house since his release in February 2010. The House is operated by husband and wife team Stephen and Michele Powell, founders of Transformed Lives, Inc., a Christian based community resource center. The House offers case management and shows residents, all former inmates, how to reach their goals. Food and shelter are provided for a nominal fee of \$300 a month. Residents are held to a strict set of rules, which requires them to attend church, bible study and ex-offender support group meetings. In addition, they must volunteer at the Transformed Lives Center on New Walkertown Road and other area agencies. The men are also expected to honor a nightly curfew and perform chores around the house.

Stephen Powell, who works closely with the residents, said the structure of the program is designed to help the men establish a deeper relationship with God and stay out of prison for good.

"Ninety-five to 97 percent of people who are incarcerated are going to come out of incarceration," he said of the organization's motivation to offer the program. "We can be prepared to help them be successful, or we can do nothing and continue to see the revolving door of prison. This community is very open and has a lot of opportunities to help people, and I think we all

should be willing to do that."

Ward met Powell, an ordained minister, at Winston-Salem First at just the right moment.

"God just pointed me in the right direction because Steve was there that day," Ward said. "I was going to church and he (Powell) knew that I was on the right path, so he wanted to help me."

Powell said the house is there to help men who want to help themselves.

"We try to help them make all the connections that they may need to accomplish their goals," related Powell, director of evening operations at Winston-Salem State University's Thompson Center. "They have to be in a place where they want to change their lifestyle. If they are, then we're willing to help them."



Powell



Simpson

Bronx native Gordon Simpson says he can testify firsthand to the effectiveness of the Transformed Lives House program. Simpson, 58, moved into the House, which has been in operation for four years, in 2009. He spent just one year at the facility, but says it helped him to solidify his faith following a rough period in his life.

"While I was in jail, I went through a divorce and it just seemed like I had lost everything I had," said Simpson, who served 18 months on a cocaine sales conviction. "It seemed like there was no hope, but I believed God had something for me."

Today, Simpson is gainfully employed as a cook at Wake Forest University, and says he has been offered a promotion once he completes his certification through Second Harvest Food Bank's Triad Community Kitchen program. He is newly married and expecting a daughter this week. Though he has moved away from the home, he is still a fixture at the Transformed Lives Center on New Walkertown Road, where he volunteers regularly. Simpson said it is easy to give back to a place that has helped him so much.

"God made a way. I refused to go back to the way I was. It was a struggle, but my spiritual faith is really high," said the father of one, who also holds a Bachelor of Arts in culinary arts. "I came out looking for a new life. I knew that it was something God got for me, so I didn't give up."

For more information about the Transformed Lives Transitional House for Men, call 293-7959 or visit [www.transformedlivesws.com](http://www.transformedlivesws.com).

and groundbreaking scientist Anthony Atala. Nearly 40 local notables were interviewed over a two-year period for the exhibit.

"It's all the stories of our community and it's all interesting (because) when it's gone, it's gone," said Fuller, referencing to the recent deaths of Drayton and former Wachovia CEO John Medlin, who was also interviewed.

Fuller conducted the interviews, which were videotaped by Nick Gooler, a graduate student in Wake Forest University's Documentary Film Program. Gooler, who also mans the front desk at the Museum, said that taping the more than 30 hours of interviews was enlightening.

"It was a lot of information about Winston that I had no idea about," said Gooler, who moved here two years ago from Illinois.

The Museum plans to continue adding to its collection of video interviews, Gooler said. There are plans to even set up an interview room in the Museum where locals can make appointments to come by and share their stories. Interviews will eventually be posted online as well, according to Fuller.

Fuller wants to expand the Museum's photo collection by starting its own online digital archive and inviting visitors to bring in their own photos to be scanned.

The Museum, which charges no admission and is funded by donations, is destined to become a resource for local schools, groups and organizations, Fuller believes, especially with its close proximity to Old Salem Museum and Gardens.

The Museum's Board is currently seeking a permanent director and talking about eventually demolishing the Museum's current building to make way for a new, grander one.

The Museum is currently open from 2-5 p.m. from Tuesday-Friday. For more information, call 724-2842 or go to [newwinston.org](http://newwinston.org).

## Museum

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nity is made of a lot of people doing a lot of different things," said Fuller, a veteran museum exhibit designer who created New Winston's first exhibit.

Photos from Digital Forsyth, a large collection of local vintage images, line the walls of the Museum's single gallery. They are used to tell the story of the city before the towns of Winston and Salem merged. Other images are used to tell the story of Winston-Salem's notable Civil Rights Era, when champions like the late Rev. Jerry Drayton emerged. Photos also depict present-day Winston-Salem and the people and places that make it great.

The pictures on display are unlabeled, but a booklet describing each photo is available for visitors. Some of the eye-catching images include ones of legendary brick-maker George Black holding one of his bricks near a demolished building; Medal of Honor recipient Lawrence Joel saluting at a parade in his honor; Coach Clarence "Big House" Gaines and his Winston-Salem State Rams celebrating their 1967 NCAA Division II Basketball Championship; a visit by inventor Thomas Edison in 1918; and former basketball star Shaquille O'Neal dropping by Brenner Children's Hospital during his NBA heyday.

The photos are accompanied by video excerpts of conversations with those who witnessed and made history, people like Drayton



Gooler

## Majett

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those months, she said she was optimistic that she would overcome the disease. Then tragedy struck. Her son, Monte Evans, was killed by Winston-Salem Police officers who responded to a domestic dispute involving Evans and a woman at a local Bojangles. Police say Evans shot and killed Sgt. Mickey Hutchens and shot and injured Officer Daniel Clark before he was killed.

Shortly after that, Majett was told the cancer was back.

Still, she found reasons to smile, celebrating the bonds the tragedy helped to strengthen within her family and the relationships she built during her chemotherapy treatments.

"It got a little tiresome, but for the most part, I enjoyed my treatments. I still had an opportunity to meet and be around different people everyday," she related. "Since I've been diagnosed, I've met a lot of really great people. God has put a lot of wonderful people in my path to help me and they have been a great help, a great blessing."

Throughout her ordeal, Majett has remained faithful, never complaining about the hand she has been dealt, and even finding the fortitude to encourage others along the way. She says she has counseled many newly-diagnosed women, advising them not to worry, to stay positive, and above all, trust in God. She credits her own faith with helping her to see the silver lining in the heartaches she has endured.

"I draw all of my strength from the Lord, and I let them know that too," she said. "I've never questioned why or anything of that nature. I just know that nothing is too hard for God."

Eighteen-year breast cancer survivor Brenda Sloan met Majett four years ago, when Majett was newly-diagnosed. Sloan maintains an email Breast Cancer Support Group that connects roughly 80 women.

"We're all looking out for each other because we're all in the same boat trying to get to the same place," she explained.

Sloan said she was immediately drawn to Majett's sunny nature, despite the rough road she faced.

"We just kept in touch because I thought she was such a strong person," Sloan remarked.

Evans said her mother, who reared three children on her own, has always been a pillar of strength.

"She put the 'S' in superman," said the mother of two. "...My mom is my everything. She taught me everything I know, from how to cook to how to be a mother to how to be a friend. Even when I was a crazy teenager who didn't care about much of anything, she was always there for me. She was my biggest critic as well as my biggest supporter."

The Foundation provided airfare, hotel accommodations and passes to the three parks for the family. Majett and Evans held a two-day yard sale and fish fry on June 15-16 to help raise money for the expenses the Foundation doesn't



Photo by Layla Garmes

Azilee Majett (left) and her daughter are making the most of their time together.

cover, such as ground transportation and food. The response was far more than either woman had expected. An influx of donated items to sell, food purchases and monetary contributions from community members, churches and groups made the endeavor more successful than they could've hoped. By the end of the second day, both women say they were exhausted, but rejuvenated by the outpouring of support.

"I just cried. It was like an overflow of emotion," Evans said. "It's amazing how many people's lives she's touched. It was so completely overwhelming to me because I know how much she means to me."

Majett says having the money issue out of the way has allowed her to focus on the important things, like which park to visit first. SeaWorld is her top priority.

"I think nature is so beautiful and to be able to see all those big ol' mammals and all that other stuff up close and personal like that, it's gonna be so exciting," she said.

Then it's on to Disney World, where Majett says she will ride everything she can. She's already making a list of people she wants to purchase Mickey Mouse hats for.

"I love rides so I'm going to do quite a bit of riding," she said.

Majett, who spends much of her free time playing games on Facebook or reading, says she still has things she'd like to do, but time and money are in short supply these days.

"I've always had a dream of being able to see different parts of the world," she said. "I've never been on a cruise either, that's something that I've always wanted to do."

Nevertheless, Majett said having the chance to travel to a land that she's imagined since she was a girl is something she's incredibly grateful for.

"To God be the glory for all of the wonderful people that stepped up to help me and my family to achieve this goal," she said. "Thank you... thank you... thank you."

To donate to Majett's dream vacation fund, contact her at [asileemajett@yahoo.com](mailto:asileemajett@yahoo.com) or 473-3532. For more information about Dream Foundation, visit <http://www.dreamfoundation.org>.

# CFL

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