

New TV show aligns with CSEM bedrock: Improving the re-entry of former offenders

BY JOHN RAILEY

Winston-Salem State University's Center for the Study of Economic Mobility (CSEM) has, since its inception almost four years ago, made research into economic mobility for released offenders one of its bedrocks. This emphasis is both practical and right: practical because it provides good employees for businesses and upward economic mobility for released offenders, and right because it encourages redemption and better lives for ex-offenders and their families.

Brian Hamilton, the head of a foundation that bears his name, produces Free Enterprise, a 30-minute show that started last month and airs on ABC at 11 a.m. Saturdays. Hamilton has visited CSEM, and the foundation is one of CSEM's partners. Hamilton said in an email: "There is no larger and more unifying proposition in our country than the idea that everyone gets a second chance. Free Enterprise demonstrates that judicially involved people can take part in a most important part of the American dream - having ownership. On the show you will

see real people starting simple businesses to become part of the American tapestry."

Another CSEM partner, David Moore of Winston-Salem, said he sees such rejuvenation constantly. "I'm mentoring these guys who are having those challenges," he said. Moore, who did time in prison years ago, started an auto body repair nonprofit that has turned numerous lives around and has revamped his Project M.O.O.R.E., which mentors at-risk youth with training in music, barbering and cosmetology.

Moore is a CSEM Community Scholar and his group received an Economic Mobility Opportunity Award. Another local businessman who did time in prison years ago, Jerry Anderson, also received the designation and award, which encourages the building of pathways to economic mobility, said CSEM Associate Director Alvin Atkinson. Moore and Anderson have transformed lives by nurturing the entrepreneurial talents of released offenders. CSEM backs those efforts with research into re-entry, most recently by Dr. Douglas Bates, a CSEM



Brian Hamilton, left, talks with a released offender about a new business.

Fellow and assistant professor in WSSU's Department of Social Work.

Free Enterprise touches on challenges CSEM and its partners know well. In the show, Hamilton, who made it in financial technology before establishing his foundation to help released offenders, visits these people and advises them as they form businesses, including a tiling one in Durham and a pressure-washing one in Raleigh.

One of the ex-offenders, a young man named Rashad, says, "I'm tired of just surviving. I want to live."

Hamilton tells Rashad: "So you obviously have

the skills. What's stopping you from forming your own business?"

He and Rashad work through the barriers, Hamilton advising Rashad on how to dress sharply, network, market his business, give a job estimate (figuring in overhead) and do the job right. "Show up on time, do what you say you're going to do," Hamilton says. "All businesses start from zero."

Rashad says, "You get a lot of rejection, but the more I go through it, the more confident I become ... I just want my daughter to have someone she can be proud of."

Hamilton says: "When you're on the bottom, the only place to look is up ...

[Rashad] is living proof that people can change."

In another show, an ex-offender named Bradley says, "I want to prove to the doubters and the naysayers that people like me can be trusted. ... There are good people out there that don't care about your former life, that will give you an opportunity."

Research can ease that process. Dr. Bates is working on a survey that ex-offenders applying for jobs can fill out that gauges their level of "institutionalization" so employers can best work with them. For example, ex-offenders often want firm schedules and rules, like they became accustomed to in prison. The released of-

fenders often make good employees, Bates said, because it is hard for them to find work and they tend to stay on the jobs they find.

David Moore welcomes such research. "Ex-offenders aren't built where you can get a \$50,000 loan and start your own business," he shared. In starting his nonprofit, Southside Rides, he secured grants from the City of Winston-Salem, gradually making Southside a success. Thirty-seven of the men who have been in the program have opened their own body or car shops, Moore said. To encourage more such entrepreneurship, Moore recently gave four graduates of his program stipends of \$1,000 each.

Such innovative techniques, supported by Hamilton's foundation and CSEM, are crucial in nurturing the abundance of talent among released offenders.

Hamilton says: "They deserve a second chance."

Indeed. That is both practical and right.

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