

## Testimony

### Jerry Blassingame

#### **From Prison to Proprietorship: Helping Previously Incarcerated become Entrepreneurs**

My name is Jerry Blassingame and I am the founder and CEO of Soteria Community Development Corporation in Greenville, South Carolina. I grew up in Greenville, South Carolina and was raised by my grandmother. My mother was murdered by her boyfriend when I was 5 years old. I never got an opportunity to meet my father and I was raised in a low-income housing project in the Inner City of Greenville. I probably would not have made it through school if it were not for my loving and caring teachers. My grandmother took me and my 4 other siblings in to live with her and my grandfather. She was a great person, very loving and caring, but she only had a third-grade education. Education was not her strong point but loving and nurturing was. Grandmother saw that I had a love for school, and she made sure that I was equipped for school on a daily basis. Although she could not help me with my homework, she did the best she could by making sure I had the necessities I needed for school.

I performed fairly well in elementary school and really began to shine while I was in Middle School. While in Middle School, I fell in love with woodworking and reading. My middle school teachers made sure that I was ready for high school. When I reached high school, my industrial arts teacher was my inspiration to pursue architecture. While in his class he encouraged me to take vocational training in 11th and 12th grade. At the completion of my senior year I was awarded a 2-year scholarship to Greenville Technical College in the architectural engineering program. During 1985 and 86 the crack epidemic hit Greenville, South Carolina and I began to sell drugs after school. By the end of my second year in college I was making a lot of money with it, my grades began to fail, and I dropped out of school. By this time, I had my own empire. Several of my friends in my neighborhood were employed by me and we were all doing very well for ourselves. The first time I got arrested I only did 4 months and I had 5 years probation. When I was released from this sentence, I could not get a job because of my conviction. Six months later I was arrested again and released on \$150,000 Bond. I managed to stay out on bond for 18 months before I went to trial and was sentenced to 20 years for several convictions of distribution of cocaine.

Being incarcerated the second time was the turning point in my life. My sister who was a Christian encouraged me to read my Bible and pray regularly. Although I did not believe there was a God, I did what she asked reluctantly. I finally got to the point that I submitted my heart to Jesus, and I became a Christian while I was still in the county jail. My thought was if I was going to do 20 years in prison, I needed to do it with God. The first day that I got to the yard of the state prison at McCormick Correctional Institution I found the chaplain's office. I asked the chaplain about all of the religious services and told him I wanted to get involved. Pretty soon I began to meet a lot of the Christian men who are on the prison yard and we would study and pray on a daily basis along with attending various church services and ministry opportunities such as Prison Fellowship and Kairos prison ministry. Very quickly I realized that there were a lot of people in society that really cared about young men, such as myself. When I saw this, I began to take life seriously.

There was one group in particular that really took a liking to me and they began to correspond with me, a group of men and women from Clemson United Methodist Church adult discussion Sunday school class. This group of individuals wrote me weekly and encouraged me in my new life with Christ. After a few months of corresponding with them I told them that I had an interest in becoming a minister and would love to go to school. They paid for me to take correspondence classes at Columbia International University. This was really encouraging to me to see that these people really cared about me. Every day while in prison I began to write and pray. I would get up at 5:00 or 5:30am in the morning and I would journal and make plans for what I was going to do when I was released. I knew that I would not be able to find a job. In my heart I wanted to help other men and women like myself.

So, I began to write the plan of Soteria Community Development Corporation. In the beginning the organization was called Soteria Urban Ministries. I would write letters to individuals and organizations and I would read newspaper articles to stay up on the latest trends. This was the height of the drug epidemic in America and the 1994 Clinton Crime Bill had already begun to take effect on communities. People who committed crimes were getting longer sentences and a lot of the programs that were in prisons previously were taken away. Programs for education such as the Pell grant program for men and women who are incarcerated and people who had a drug conviction could not get a Pell Grant, even if they were not in prison. After I heard about all of these things I already knew that when I got out, I would not be able to get a job and I was going to have to pull myself up by my own bootstraps.

So, every day for three and a half years I would journal and write and make the plan for what I was going to do. Habakkuk 2:2 says, "write the vision and make it plain so that those who read it may run with you." This was my inspiration to keep planning and writing down the vision. In 1999, I received a letter from the South Carolina Probation Pardon and Parole services that I was going to go up for parole on March the 23rd. No one ever thought I would make parole, but I made parole. This was the start of my new beginning. In April of 1999, I had already received a charter from the state of South Carolina to start my non-profit. I knew this was what I had to do to get myself back on the right track. Sometimes I was not even thinking about myself, I was thinking about the other people that were in prison and how I wanted to help them. we started just by writing people and encouraging them and sending them the basic necessities that they need. We sent Bibles and Bible study material. I was placed over the prison ministry in my church and I started to go in to visit men and women while they were in prison, to encourage them and to let them see that I was still doing well after incarceration and keeping to my promise.

In 1999 there were no funding streams for people who were getting out of prison. Re-entry for returning citizens wasn't popular back then, so we did whatever we had to do to gather resources. If it were not for the religious organizations who rallied around me, I would not have been able to get off the ground. The Sunday school class from Clemson United Methodist Church pooled together funding to help me to get the organization started. There were also a couple small churches that were very supportive when we opened up our first transitional house in 2000. the Upstate Homeless Coalition and Mike Chesser were very supportive of our organization as well. We opened up a house with four men and quickly we had another house with eight men. Our houses were the nicest houses on the street, and we maintained them well. Pretty soon, a person in our church donated nine houses to our organization. The Houses were dilapidated and being used as prostitution and drug houses. We renovated two of them to make them transitional and we demolished the rest of the houses. By this

time, we knew that we needed funding and realized that Community Development was the only tool that we could use to help people who are getting out of prison.

Community Development Corporations help low to moderate-income people in low-income communities gain wealth. People who are released from prison definitely fall in that category. I soon began to seek out Community Development practitioners. Finally, I met up with Bernie Mazyck, he was the founder and CEO of the State Association of Community Development Corporations. Bernie had heard about some of the interesting things we were doing in the community and told me that I was doing Community Development work and that I was an asset to the state of South Carolina, because no one else was doing this for people who are getting out of prison. Bernie became my mentor and we quickly began to seek out resources. We were able to get a \$100,000 Grant from the South Carolina Department of Commerce and we were able to leverage that \$100,000 Grant into a \$700,000 low-income housing project. The Upstate Housing Coalition partnered with us to get HOME funds and State /housing funds. We built six 3 bedroom 2- bath energy-efficient low-income rentals on the property that was donated to us. The next year we acquired six two-bedroom one-bath duplexes and renovated those as low-income rentals as well. At this time, we were already doing a landscape and yard maintenance business. We created this business because no one would hire the guys in our program, so we decided to start our own businesses. This was the beginning of our social enterprises.

We did the landscape business for a couple years and soon after we started GreenStart, a recycling business that recycled paper, plastic, cardboard, and aluminum. We soon received a five-year contract with the school district of Greenville County, and we were doing Recycling in 62 schools in the County of Greenville. We started this business with a \$15,000 Grant from the South Carolina Association of CDC's. We turned \$15,000 into a lucrative business and were able to hire 35 men and women who were previously incarcerated. We did this business for 7 years and later we started our deconstruction business. We were given a contract from the county of Greenville to demolish old homes. Once we collected all the material, we realized we had to do something with the material. So, one day I had an idea to make a farm table and behold, the reclaimed furniture business was born. Other companies and developers began to call on us to deconstruct their houses and we have created over 65 jobs for men and women previously incarcerated, making over \$400,000 in revenue.

There are so many men and women in prison who have a desire to start their own business or nonprofit. The challenge is both funding and education. There are tens of thousands of Jerry Blasingame's in the United States and not enough churches and Sunday School classes to go around. As a country we need to realize that we can't punish people by not giving them an opportunity to do better once released from incarceration. We need to put resources in the hands of those previously incarcerated so that they can become leaders in their own communities, to help build the communities that they once tore down. Re-entry is more than just finding a house and a job. Individuals need to learn personal finance.

At Soteria we require every participant to attend financial literacy class every Saturday morning. We also have health and wellness, along with authentic manhood. Most men in prison had absentee fathers, so they need support in that area. Mentorship is also a requirement to be in our program. We also have a matching savings program that every participant is required to enroll in. This program is a take on the IDA program. We match up to \$1000.00 with a 2:1 match. Participants must save for at least 6 months and can only use the money for business startup, education, home ownership or rental

assistance, or transportation. We were awarded the Shining the Light Award from SunTrust Bank this year and a \$75,000 grant was part of the award. We decided to reinvest that money back into our program participants as a matching savings account. We believe that comprehensive programming is the key to a successful reentry process.

If it were not for the faith-based community I would not be here today. I encourage Congress to put a plan together that will allow previously incarcerated leaders to help develop this plan along with other leaders in the nation. In 2016 when I went through JustLeadershipUSA Glenn Martin would say, "those who are closest to the problem are closest to the solution but farthest from the resources and power." I believe that those of us who have been through the system and especially those of us who have ran our communities via illegal businesses are best suited to be trained to become entrepreneurs in America.

One problem with Government grants is that they are too hard to manage and the people who need them never receive the funding. The funding continues to bottleneck at the state level and never gets to the streets. Previously incarcerated individuals need to be at the decision-making tables. We know what we need, and we know how to navigate our own communities, which is a vital resource for decision making. Having access to capital and reinvesting back into the people in a road out of poverty. I believe entrepreneurship is a gateway to economic mobility. Economic mobility is the way out of poverty and will decrease recidivism. I am living proof that this works. I have managed to survive 20 years as a social entrepreneur.