

# RELEASE



*A student news collaborative focusing on  
the impact of incarceration in Connecticut*

**FOCUS ON**  
*Holidays*



Brought to you by students at Central Connecticut State University,  
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# *welcome to* **RELEASE**

Welcome to Release, a publication devoted to collecting stories about citizens with criminal histories and the organizations that serve them. Produced by the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy (IMRP) and created by students from Central Connecticut State University, the newsletter provides profiles, general features, interviews, videos, informative graphs and more. Our goal: to empower ex-offenders and to educate the larger Connecticut community on what it can do to stem recidivism. Release covers employment, housing, education, children of incarcerated parents and other subject areas that relate to building a productive life with a criminal history. For your free subscription to Release, which will be distributed online on a monthly basis and also published in print on a quarterly basis, please register at [www.releasenews.org](http://www.releasenews.org).

# What's

# ATTRACTIVE

## *Helping Formerly Incarcerated Men Reenter Fatherhood*

By Dave Baker



REV. LYDELL BROWN III, CONFERENCE OF CHURCHES

It was my first drive down Hartford, Connecticut's Farmington Avenue and, to put it delicately, I had no idea where I was going. Frantically looking for what I expected to be a church, I found a small building outlined in fluorescent green, buried behind a parking lot and sandwiched between two apartment buildings and a convenience store outlet. This is the main office of the Conference of Churches, a faith-based organization and the governing body of over 400 churches in the greater Hartford Area. Responsible for organizing civic projects throughout the Hartford community, the Conference

of Churches identifies and trains transformational leaders. When I sat down with Reverend Lydell Brown III, the Director of Strategic Partnerships, he defined transformational leaders as, "Those leaders who just don't want to see change in the church but change in the community; those who want to see change in power brokers, lawmakers."

We sit at a small, round table in Reverend Brown's office as he explains the mission's work with the prison population and ex-offenders. A photoshopped portrait of Martin Luther King Jr. and President Barack Obama high-fiving hangs on the wall and below that a bobblehead of NBA superstar LeBron James sits on the bureau – the last things I'd expect to find in a minister's office.

With over 20 years of ministry experience, Brown has been working with the Conference of Churches for the past decade. Among numerous community projects, he ran a fatherhood program aimed at helping formerly incarcerated fathers get back into their children's lives. Through the Fatherhood Initiative Brown dealt directly with fathers living in halfway houses and coached his clients not to make up for lost time with their children, but to be the best possible father they could from then on out.

Based on a national curriculum, the Fatherhood Initiative Program was introduced to Connecticut by former CT State Department of Social Services Commissioner Patricia Wilson-Coker. As a single mother, Wilson-Coker saw how the absence of her son's father affected him and sought to improve the lives of children growing up in homes without fathers. The program experienced considerable success at its onset. "What this [program] was able to do was give them some tools to better associate with the mother and let their children see them in a different light. In the three years that we had the program, I would say it touched at least 600 lives, including fathers, their children, and mothers," Brown said.



***"What this [program] was able to do was give them some tools to better associate with the mother and let their children see them in a different light."***



A noteworthy success of the Fatherhood Initiative was a holiday

party, where the fathers in the program wrapped presents and gave them to their children during a Christmas party. Church-run toy drives, local businesses, non-profit organizations, and the Department of Social Services, supplied the gifts. For participants, it was a very profound moment. “For many of these kids it was the first time in their lives their fathers had given them anything,” Brown noted. A surprising element of this event was how it affected the mothers in attendance. Given the sometimes volatile nature of the relationships the mothers had with some of the men in the program, they came to the event very suspect, questioning their intent and motives. They left, however, touched by this display and act of kindness, seeing their child’s father taking a more active role. “It was touching, it was very touching.”

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***Brown has a lengthy history of dealing with formerly incarcerated individuals, whether in his church or during previous visits to Connecticut correctional facilities, and firmly believes in the need for improved support programs upon their release.***

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Hartford native and client of the Fatherhood Initiative, Angel Rodriquez Jr. was an ex member of the notorious Hartford street gang the Los Solidos. Rodriquez Jr. spent over a third of his life in prison, the result of several gun and drug possession charges. Former Hartford Courant columnist Stan Simpson profiled Rodriquez in

2007. Then 35, Rodriquez was living in the Drapelick Center halfway house in Bloomfield, CT. Participation in the Fatherhood Initiative helped Rodriquez reconnect with his son, Angel III, and eased his transition from gangbanger to father. That year, Rodriquez decorated the Christmas tree in the lobby of Drapelick and took part in the Christmas party along with 50 other clients of the Fatherhood Initiative – the first Christmas he spent with his family in over decade. The program’s impact set Rodriguez on a new course in his life, as he strove to become a better father. “Always stand on your own two feet and make your own decisions,” Rodriguez told The Courant. “I didn’t have nobody in my life that really cared, the way I care about my son now. It gives me a lot of purpose.”

Despite the program’s success, funding from the CT Department of Social Services was cut. Programs working with formerly incarcerated individuals are not, as Brown put it, “attractive” to potential funders. “Let’s put it this way: again, it’s about what our funders think is attractive. Funders don’t think helping ex-offenders is attractive.” The

Conference of Churches still provides some charities for families affected by incarceration, such as giving out tickets to see the holiday show at the Bushnell Theatre and to events and performances at the XL Center.

The Conference of Churches has since taken on an advisory role, becoming a consulting firm for non-profits. Though no longer directly involved with the Fatherhood Initiative, Brown acts as a liaison to other branches of the program, offering to train those looking to launch the program in their church or community. Brown has a lengthy history of dealing with formerly incarcerated individuals, whether in his church or during previous visits to Connecticut correctional facilities, and firmly believes in the need for improved support programs upon their release. “When you come out, that’s when the rubber hits the road. Those same demons start speaking to folk that spoke to them before they got into prison. So, I’d like to see more support, more programs. Not just halfway houses, real programs that promote change.”

Regardless of the program’s apparent success, funding remained a critical issue, as it does for many non-profits. It’s a struggle that Brown and the Conference of Churches never escape. “We’re on the battlefield. Other churches are on the battlefield, trying to be there for fathers and mothers and children. It’s the family unit that’s being attacked, not just fathers.”

# Nothing out of THE ORDINARY

*An Interview with Sister Terry Dodge,  
Executive Director of Crossroads*

By Jesse Duthrie



SISTER TERRY DODGE, PICTURED WITH OPRAH WINFREY, RECIPIENT OF THE 2010 MINERVA AWARD

*Sister Terry Dodge, Executive Director of Crossroads in Claremont, California, a six-month rehabilitation program for women returning from incarceration, was the recipient of the 2010 Minerva Award for women of California “who serve on the front-lines of humanity.” Notable Minerva Award recipients include Oprah Winfrey and Sandra Day O’Conner. Sister Terry was awarded for her courageous efforts in reducing recidivism and for giving aid to a population that is largely forgotten and unforgiven.*

**JESSE DUTHRIE:** With the holidays coming soon, is there anything

**special you do with the women inmates to help them celebrate?**

**SISTER TERRY DODGE:** We look for all opportunities to celebrate. We need to find the good in life. I’ve had women who’ve never had a Christmas tree or a wrapped gift. I remember picking up a woman on Christmas morning and in the stockings we had were little boxes of See’s Chocolate. It’s the specialty chocolate in California. She was so excited she sat down and ate the whole box of candy before moving on because it was such a treat.

**DUTHRIE:** How does the community get involved?

**DODGE:** The community has been extremely generous with providing for the women during Christmas time. I’ve got a grammar school in El Monte that collects toiletries and towel sets and they’ll deliver that so we don’t have to buy those things for the women. Another group of women buy new towel sets for when women come into the house.

My board members and their friends take on a person and purchase gifts for them so she has gifts to unwrap under the tree. There will be Christmas dinner. The graduates are invited to

come back and have dinner with them. The family situation is not always an option for them. Everyone must be here for the holidays, and if people have family that is suitable for them to go visit, it would be the following weekend where they can go visit and celebrate with them.

**DUTHRIE:** How did Crossroads get started?

**DODGE:** Crossroads started in 1974. It was incorporated by a group of men and women who were Match Two sponsors. Match Two was a visitation program where they would match a person on the outside with a person on the inside. This particular group would go together to visit women at the California Institution for Women. I think it’s interesting that two of those members were dairy farmers and they raised four foster boys along with their own four children. One of their foster boy’s mother was in CIW at the time and when she was released she was brought to the farm and she was able to stay there and work until she could get on her feet. That shows how long ago it was because you’d never have a foster mother and his mother at the same place now. They were there when it started and they were instrumental.

**DUTHRIE:** How did you get involved with Crossroads?

**DODGE:** I came in 1989. When I arrived it was a group home with supervision. The women were required to work and attend twelve step meetings. It was basically a group home where women could get on their feet and we could help find resources. We had a state contract that provided a per diem for women. But in 1998 or so we were notified that there was going to be a change in the parole boundaries. All of Los Angeles County was going to be one parole region. My worse case scenario would have been completely losing the funding.

We went through the difficult process of being a certified drug and alcohol program. We had to create a formal curriculum for the women. The Crossroads I came to in 1989 is very different than the original Crossroads. It is now a licensed drug and alcohol residential facility.

**DUTHRIE:** And that makes sense because the national statistic is around 80 percent of women entering correction facilities have some sort of alcohol or drug addiction.

**DODGE:** In California it's even higher than that.

**DUTHRIE:** There are now currently three houses up and running. What is the selection like in getting a spot?

**DODGE:** It is first come, first serve. It's difficult because the first come first

serve process goes back to 20 years of letters from women in prison asking to come to Crossroads, and now some of these women are finally being released.

**DUTHRIE:** How did you get involved in the prisoner reentry community? What was your motivation?

**DODGE:** My bachelors degree is in education. I was a teacher for 12 years. On a personal level, my brother was in and out of jail and prison. When he was serious about making a decision to change his life, I did more than just visit him and buy him cigarettes. I looked into what resources were available. What I found was a tremendous amount of judgment. They looked at a person's history, not on how they wanted to change and what their hopes and dream were. I was terribly frustrated with the process because I knew there was a change in my brother but I knew it was different this time. It was out of this experience that I wanted to work with reentry, and be the contradiction to everyone by believing in their hopes and dreams. Believing that change is possible.

**DUTHRIE:** We do face a lot of those social stigmas as well here in Connecticut. When you're working with the women, how important is it to develop a personal relationship?

**DODGE:** We're a small agency. We're basically working with 12 women in the primary program. They can't fall through the cracks. We treat women as women. We don't work with murderers, prostitutes, burglars, felons, whatever

label you want to put on a person. We work with women. It's that mentality that makes a tremendous difference. We create family for women so they can see the choices in life. It's one thing to tell them what to do, but another thing for them to see their options. That's what makes the difference with our program.

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***“We treat women as women. We don't work with murderers, prostitutes, burglars, felons, whatever label you want to put on a person. We work with women.”***

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We walk a fine line between being compassionate and empathetic. Definitely the majority of women are from a lower socio-economic status. It's simply taking time with a person. It's those small steps. How to get to point A to point B. Because a person's an adult, we make assumptions. It's taking the time to make sure a person knows how to go about doing everything. How do you make dinner? How do you clean the house? Many of these women didn't get that type of training growing up.

**DUTHRIE:** Some people seem to develop a prison mindset after years of incarceration. What is the reward when you see women coming out and changing their mindset?



**DODGE:** I disagree with that statement. I think that's the image that the media puts out there, not that there's an element of it. My experience working with the women going inside the prison and getting to know them-- anyone of us could be in their situation. Yes, there is an element of standing off and not being taken advantage of. But the images being portrayed in the media is not what I find when I go in the prisons. We work strongly on changing that image. That doesn't mean that there isn't verbal violence or difficulties, there definitely are. But what I've found going in the prisons is women no different than myself. Had I been in the same circumstances, I can't say that I would not have made the same choices they've made.

**DUTHRIE:** If you had a word to say to our readership out here in Connecticut, what would it be?



***“The work I do is not exceptional. If it seems that way, it's because not enough people are doing it.”***



**DODGE:** I say this all the time that people give me so much credit. I think it's misguided. I don't think I'm doing anything exceptional or out of the ordinary. Granted it's not always an easy situation to be in. We all want a place to live. We all want someone to care about us. We want

an opportunity to work; we want an opportunity to go to school. The work I do is not exceptional. If it seems that way, it's because not enough people are doing it.

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# Origami

## CHRISTMAS

*One Woman's Commitment  
to Christmas Spirit*

By Casey Coughlin

"I started my addiction, drinking and drugging, when I was thirteen-years-old and it continued throughout my adult life," Kathy Wyatt says. Now released after serving nine years in York Correctional Institution, Kathy describes her upper-middle-class childhood as nothing short of average; complete with private schools and summer vacations on Martha's Vineyard. Her father died when she was young and was buried on Christmas Eve, marking that day in Kathy's mind nothing short of tragic. But after the grief had passed she made a sincere commitment not to let her father's death darken the joyful holiday.

She dropped out of high school months before graduation and made a life for herself in sales. Lying on job applications by including some college on her resume, Kathy admits, "I had a secret life that my family didn't know about. It was exhausting to say the least. I portrayed one person and I really was... I didn't know who I was I guess, looking back on it. When the accident happened, everything just crashed."

In October of 1999, Kathy stayed up all night using cocaine. The following afternoon she went to the mall, ran errands, and took several Xanax to fight off a head ache. On her way home,



KATHY WYATT WITH HER POODLE MIX, THE SUMMER AFTER HER RELEASE AT WINDHAM RECOVERY COMMUNITY CENTER

while waiting to make a left hand turn, she collided with a motorcyclist. The driver of the bike died and in 2001, Kathy was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

"It's what had to happen for my life to change."

Kathy knew the key for her staying sane in prison was to keep busy. She became involved in every activity available and completed her high school diploma, gained certifications in typing and culinary classes, and was hired by different teachers to be their

aide. She gained entrance into Wally Lamb's writing workshop and helped facilitate the Alternative to Violence Program, which taught the women how to resolve a potentially violent situation in a non-violent way.

It was the women Kathy interacted with in the Alternative to Violence Program that really motivated her to make Christmas special. For one exercise the participants would be asked to draw their happiest childhood memory and then their most painful. "Say there were 20 girls, 17 of them would have Christmas as the most

painful memory. I always thought of Christmas as a wonderful time. So every Christmas, wherever I was, whatever tier or unit I was in, I always made a big deal.”

who worked in the main school that I needed green construction paper – so under coats and everything (a few sheets at a time) they got me all this paper. At that time I was living in Industries,



***“Say there were 20 girls, 17 of them would have Christmas as the most painful memory. I always thought of Christmas as a wonderful time. So every Christmas, where ever I was, whatever tier or unit I was in I always made a big deal.”***



While in prison Kathy discovered she had a talent for drawing. So to decorate she would draw pictures of reindeers and stockings and cut them out with nail clippers and distribute them to the women in her unit to color while she went to work. “They would sit around and color and everyone would get excited.”

which didn’t have any partitions, it was just bunk after bunk after bunk. I had all the young women in my class create a Christmas tree branch and we made this big beautiful green tree on the wall. It was huge. I would have anyone who got a card all year round or neat paper that they didn’t want any more give it to me. I would just cut it up with nail clippers and put it together like a mosaic, so that’s what the presents would look like.”

She smiles as she says, “I would buy Christmas cookies that would come in special Christmas packages and I would put them outside the doors of the girls. And this one young girl came up to me and said ‘Miss Kathy this is the first Christmas present I have ever had.’”

An unpredictable element in Christmas decorating is end of the year lock downs, a week long period when the entire prison is searched top to bottom for contraband. For the entire five to seven day period all activities are cancelled and all the women are held in their cells. Kathy recalls one Christmas, “I remember one time in Zero Building we decorated, again with the construction paper, smuggling, smuggling, piece by piece we made paper chains. The tooth paste they give you if you’re indigent is terrible tooth paste but makes great clear glue. That’s what we used to glue things. Usually

Other years Kathy would plan months in advance to purchase her neighbors small presents from the commissary. Because she was limited on the amount of items she could buy, Kathy would have to start early, collecting extra chapsticks and address books and sticking them away for later.

“One year we made this amazing tree. I was a teacher’s aide and I told my friends

[the guards] would leave them until Christmas Eve, but this one year they had a lock down right before Christmas and they came through and destroyed all of our decorations.”

She says the feeling of surveying the scene after the lock down was like when the Whos woke up Christmas morning after the Grinch had stolen all their decorations. Kathy and the other women band together and never let it get to them. Instead they would find humor in imagining the vertically challenged guards struggling to jump up and tear down the chains. “I always said we would rebuild. And we did. Always.”



***“But I made every single ornament out of origami. Just so I remember.”***



Nine Christmases later, Kathy is now out. She obtained a job at a drug rehabilitation agency called CCAR, which strives to put a positive face on addiction recovery. She has a small poodle mix that joins her at the center every day. She is sober and dedicated to helping others change their lives. Now Christmas is different, it honors the women still inside. “Last year was my first real Christmas out of DOC since I went into prison, and for my apartment I bought a little tree, potted, and I bought little tiny lights to put on it. But I made every single ornament out of origami. Just so I remember.”

# Striding for SUPPORT

*A Coat Drive that Provides*

By Casey Coughlin

In a module office behind Quinebaug Valley Community College sits the headquarters of STRIDE, a non-profit organization that provides wrap around services to its participants coming out of prison. STRIDE first works to reach its clients behind bars by running a reentry workshop five times a year in a handful of prisons across the state. The program then follows their participants after release: aiding them in housing, employment, education, and family reunification. For Program Director Julie Scrapchansky and her small staff, the holiday season can bring a mixed bag of emotions.



***“It all started with one of our participants who had two children who didn’t have any way to get coats. A lot of the programs that were out there last year for children’s coats are not there this year.”***



When talking about what the holidays are like for their clients, Julie says, “I think it is bitter sweet for them. For those individuals that are in [prison]



STRIDE'S WINTER COAT DRIVE FLYER

and truly are remorseful and want to be with their family it is kind of heart wrenching. For those that are outside it's astounding. They are just so happy to be reunited with their families and it is a really beautiful thing.”

Last holiday season, in attempt to address the Department of Corrections winter release procedures, Julie's staff teamed up with the Student Council at Quinebaug Valley to organize and run an adult coat drive. The problem ex-offenders faced when being released was not having seasonal clothing. If they were not taken into custody during winter months they would not be given a jacket upon release. Seeing this as a problem for their own clients, Julie and her staff ran a coat drive which was met by the community with tremendous support. So much support, in fact, that they were able

to give a coat to every client who requested one and had enough extras to donate to three other prisons.

This year they decided to do something different. “We just thought about the children because it's Christmas and they sometimes don't have warm jackets to go to school with. We decided it would be more humanizing to give something to the children that they may not have.” Catherine Menounos, a STRIDE Job Developer adds, “It all started with one of our participants who had two children who didn't have any way to get coats. A lot of the programs that were out there last year for children's coats are not there this year.”



JULIE SCRAPCHANSKY, STRIDE PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Catherine, one of two Job Developers at STRIDE meets with around 50 clients weekly in the northern half of the state.

She helps them gain and maintain employment. STRIDE's goal is to assist ex-offenders reentering the community to gain and maintain employment for at least three consecutive months. Julie proudly tells me their clients' recidivism rate is dramatically below the states average (47%) currently hovering around 14%.

support programs. Catherine connects her clients with toy drives like Tommy's Toy Drive ([www.toysfortots.org](http://www.toysfortots.org)) or more commonly helps her clients make plans to refurbish items. "If your child wants a bike, instead of borrowing money, you can get one and fix it up making it brand new and special. So it is trying to be creative but also realistic."

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***"I think it is bitter sweet for them. For those individuals that are in [prison] and truly are remorseful and want to be with their family it is kind of heart wrenching."***

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For Catherine, seeing her clients struggle around the holidays is stressful. "If [the clients] don't have a job or just recently got one, it's the pressure of 'How do I provide a gift?' So the conversations are more around, 'You're not a failure because you don't have 20 gifts under the tree.' They do feel really excited and happy but then they also feel like they have to make up for lost time. So we really try to head that off ahead of time with having the discussion of what is a realistic expectation, where can you get stuff, what you can do instead so that they can feel like they can provide the Christmas that they want to provide."

The coats that are being collected will go to children with parents that are incarcerated or who are participating in the STRIDE program. Because of economic hardships more families are looking to utilize these drives more than ever. Julie explains, "We have had a lot of people calling from the community asking for a jacket, and [we] try to explain to them that the program is being run specifically for incarcerated moms and dads. Unfortunately there is no other programming that we are aware of happening."

For more information about STRIDE's coat drive please visit their website at: [www.qvcc.commmnet.edu/stride/index.asp](http://www.qvcc.commmnet.edu/stride/index.asp)

Catherine worries that the stress of the holidays may lead her clients back into unhealthy patterns or drug use. She works early with them to set a plan that is obtainable and provides additional support services like referring them to AA or other community addiction

***Next issue,  
February 2012:  
FOCUS ON  
ADDICTION***

***RELEASE will be taking  
a short winter break  
in January, but will  
resume publication in  
February. During this  
time we will still accept  
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for your support!***

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