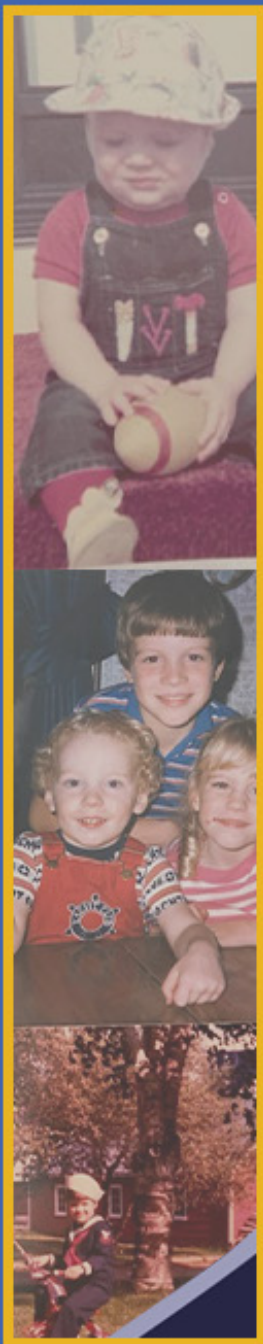


# LIFE AFTER PRISON

TRANSFORMATION BEHIND BARS LEADS FORMER STUDENTS TO LIVES OF SERVICE *PAGES 2-3, 7*



# FORMER STUDENT MAKES MOST OF

Crossroads' donor relations manager exemplifies the promise

A brisk stride, a wide smile, eye-catching bow ties, and a porkpie hat.

This is Robert Woldhuis's signature look. It's the outward expression of his uncontainable vitality. Robert is the donor relations manager at Crossroads. If you are a donor, you might have received a handwritten note of thanks or a phone call from Robert. When he talks with donors, Robert tells them directly how much Crossroads means to students.

"More than twenty years ago, my mom found it in her heart to sign me up for Crossroads. She never gave up on me, and my mentors didn't either," Robert said.

Robert grew up in a family of faith in West Michigan and attended Christian schools, but he says he was always in trouble. Robert burned with resentment when his behavior led to expulsion in the last semester of his senior year of high school. He carried resentment and shame with him when he enlisted in the Army at the age of seventeen. For a time, he found purpose and focus in the Army. He also found happiness as a new husband and father.

Sadly, his happiness was short-lived. Life began to unravel after he left the structure of the military. His marriage fell apart under the stress of having four baby boys in five years. Filled with guilt over falling short as a



husband, Robert turned to illegal substances to quell the pain. Soon, Robert's life dissolved into addiction and crimes to fund his addiction. He stole from family and friends for several years until they wanted nothing to do with him. He bounced in and out of jail for five years.

At the end of his last jail term, he thought he was on a long-term path to sobriety, but his family suffered unfathomable tragedy three days before his release. His two oldest sons were killed in a car crash, and the devastation was too much to bear. Robert quickly fell back on a path that led to prison in Nevada in 2010.

During his prison sentencing, something changed in Robert. "I heard 36 months, 120 months, and I started to think of all the missed birthdays, my parents getting older, the years going by, and I knew I was in serious trouble," he remembered. He

**"More than twenty years ago, my mom found it in her heart to sign me up for Crossroads. She never gave up on me, and my mentors didn't either."**

**– Robert Woldhuis,  
Crossroads' donor  
relations manager**

also had a deep desire to honor the lives of his deceased sons.

Soon, he was living in a six-by-fourteen-foot cell, isolated for twenty-three hours a day.

Under those conditions, "wherever you go, there you are," he said. "You can try to hide, but stuff ends up coming back. You have to face it and find things to involve your mind."

Having started Crossroads Bible studies during a jail sentence several years earlier, he decided to resume his studies. His mother put money in his commissary so he could pay the postage to return his lessons to Crossroads. (Crossroads now provides postage-paid envelopes to alleviate this financial barrier for students.)

He was hungry for a chance to learn, and the Crossroads lessons cemented God's Word in his mind. The letters from mentors

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Every mentor has undoubtedly wondered about past students. Did they continue to grow in faith? Did Crossroads make a difference? This issue of *Inside* features the stories of four former students

who affirm that Crossroads helped them turn their lives around. Now they are free and using their time and talents to serve incarcerated individuals and returning citizens.

***If you are a former student, we would love to add your story to our growing collection. Please mail us a letter or send an email to [stories@cpministries.org](mailto:stories@cpministries.org).***

# F NEW LIFE

## nise of redemption

opened his heart.

“In prison, you have to be very careful about who you let into your life because everyone is out to get something,” Robert said. “The mentors don’t have an endgame other than just being the hands and feet of Jesus. It took my guard down a little to receive those letters. I remember feeling so moved to think this person took the time to speak some encouragement into me and pray over me.”

After two years of solitary confinement, he spent the final years of his sentence at a work camp in Northern Nevada, building fences and fighting wildfires for the state for one dollar an hour. The fresh air and physical activity renewed him. The time at the camp gave him an opportunity to get rooted in sobriety and knowledge of the Bible. It gave him a chance to practice the way he wanted to live after his release.

This time, when he boarded a bus home to Michigan, he knew things would be different. His parents gave him shelter, and he humbly agreed to abide by their rules because he wanted them to know they could trust him.

Caring supporters helped Robert get back on his feet. He got a job through a man from his parents’ church who had written letters and befriended him while he was in prison. Another man from the church mentored him after his release and paid for Robert’s entry into a 25K run to give him a physical challenge to plan for.

Running became the perfect physical outlet.

*(Story continued on page 7)*

## FROM LIFE SENTENCE TO REENTRY WORK: FORMER STUDENT SPARED BY GOVERNOR’S PARDON



Darryl Woods

In 2018, Darryl Woods had exhausted all possibilities through the courts of being released from prison. He had argued since 1990 that his conviction was based upon fraudulent testimony.

His future depended on a request placed in front of the then governor of Michigan, Rick Snyder, on Darryl’s behalf.

“I had a life sentence, and by the stroke of a pen and the grace of God, I was given an opportunity to walk out of prison doors,” he told *Detroit News* in 2019.

Darryl has used every waking moment since his sentence was commuted to make the most of this second chance. He is deeply engaged in reentry programs in southeast Michigan, and he sits on county-level and statewide boards that address issues related to incarceration and substance abuse.

*(Story continued on page 7)*

## PRISON SENTENCE LEADS TO VOCATION IN CHAPLAINCY, SERVING WOMEN BEHIND BARS



Vanessa Gardner

When Vanessa Gardner went to prison, she told her daughters that they would start over when she got out and never talk about prison again. Instead, Vanessa found her life’s work in Texas prisons, serving men and women behind bars. Since her release, she has earned a master’s degree in prison chaplaincy and certifications in pastoral and reentry counseling. Her resume contains a lengthy list of volunteer and paid work in these areas.

Mentors who attend our monthly virtual community gatherings are familiar with Vanessa. She led gatherings twice this year to help mentors understand the emotional journeys of incarcerated men and women. She also trained mentors on the unique emotional needs of women living behind bars. It’s her way of giving back to Crossroads for the many gifts her Crossroads mentors gave her.

“I always looked forward to receiving my course packet. Even when I did not receive other mail, I could always rely on my Crossroads correspondence material,” she said. “This allowed me to delve deeper into studying God’s Word. I became not just a hearer of the Word but a doer. I gained a belief and a comfort that I was a part of the household of faith.”



# STUDENT FINDS NONPROFIT FROM BEHIND BARS

## Foundation aims to keep children from following parents to prison

Our highest hope for our students at Crossroads is that they will return to their communities as redeemed men and women. But what about the students who might never go home?

For those students, we pray that they become involved with the transformative work God is doing behind bars and that they serve as His agents of redemption and renewal.

Michael Dotson has lived out this vision of restoration inside the Tennessee prison that has been his home for more than twenty-five years. Sentenced to life behind bars with no chance of parole until 2046, Michael has accumulated a long list of accomplishments: Tier 3 Crossroads student, community college graduate, volunteer with a program for at-risk youth, and, most remarkably, founder of a nonprofit that aims to break the cycle of incarceration.

From behind bars, Michael established Break the Cycle Foundation, a public foundation that strives to help break the intergenerational cycle of incarceration. “My experiences have led me to develop a passion to make a profound difference by helping prevent other children from making the same mistakes [I made],” he said.

Michael first encountered the power of giving back when he was allowed to volunteer with a program for at-risk youth in the community near his prison. The children were at risk partly because they had a parent behind bars.

**“I witnessed countless fathers at the altar, crying out in prayer, asking God to prevent their children from following them to prison.” – Michael Dotson**

“After having countless children run up and hug me, sobbing . . . over the absence of their fathers and the pain of their situation, the burden became overwhelming,” he said. “In addition . . . I witnessed countless fathers at the altar, crying out in prayer, asking God to prevent their children from following them to prison.”

Michael saw himself in those children. His journey toward incarceration began in his childhood. He attended fifteen different schools as his mother tried to keep Michael’s father from knowing where they were. By the time Michael finally got to meet his father, he was too filled with anger, bitterness, and distrust to allow his father to get close to him. He began hanging out with people who were making destructive choices. At nineteen, when many people his age were just beginning college, Michael was sentenced to life in prison.

“I truly believe that prison not only saved my life but has been the best thing, other than my personal salvation, that has ever happened to me. It has forced me to deal with the pain of my past and surrender it at the foot of the cross,” he said.



***Michael gives the commencement address for the class of 2021, graduating summa cum laude with his associate’s degree in business administration***



“I truly discovered there was a purpose in the pain and how God uses the pain of our past to help us guide and comfort others as they are experiencing many of the same things we once did.”

Crossroads became part of Michael’s life in 2015. He signed up to fulfill his desire to learn more about Scripture and possibly pursue a seminary degree.

“The Crossroads mentoring program has played a tremendous role in helping me draw closer to God,” he told us. “Reading and studying the Word of God, along with prayer, has allowed me to grow a more intimate relationship with my Lord, and the Crossroads Bible studies have played a pivotal role in helping me draw closer to Him. Having a personal mentor is the linchpin to the success of this program. Not only do they hold me accountable to remain steadfast in my studies but they are always willing to pray, guide, and encourage me throughout my studies. My mentor is often the only positive bit of encouragement I, or many other Crossroads students, have during our incarceration.”

In addition to his life experience, research into the effects of incarceration on children inspired Michael to create Break the Cycle Foundation from behind bars with the help of a local businessman. Michael also plans to complete a bachelor’s degree and a master of business administration so he can run his foundation.

While Michael didn’t expect to walk free until 2046, he might get his chance at freedom sooner. He was recommended for release by the Tennessee Board of Parole Executive Clemency Unit in September 2022. The committee forwarded the recommendation to Governor Bill Lee. Michael now waits to hear if the governor will act on the board’s recommendation for his immediate release.

## PELL GRANTS OPEN DOORS TO COLLEGE

Michael Dotson completed an associate’s degree in 2021 thanks to expanding access to higher education in prisons and the partial reinstatement of federal education grants. Upcoming changes will ensure that more incarcerated individuals get the opportunity to attend college behind bars.

People with criminal records have limited access to federal student aid. From 1994 until 2015, incarcerated students were prohibited from receiving Pell Grants. In 2015, the US Department of Education started the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative in a limited number of prisons. Michael’s associate program, run through Dyersburg State Community College and established in partnership with the Tennessee Higher Education in Prison Initiative (THEI), became eligible to participate in the Pell Grant initiative in 2020.

In April 2022, the initiative nearly doubled in size, with two hundred colleges now offering programs behind bars. The US Department of Education cited studies showing that educational opportunities in prison reduce recidivism and are associated with higher employment rates.

Opportunities will expand again in July 2023, when Pell Grant eligibility will be restored to its 1994 levels.

As evidence of the effectiveness, Michael’s cohort graduated with the highest collective GPA in the history of their college. Alumni of the program boast a zero-percent recidivism rate.

“From an early age, many of us were told we came from nothing and we would never be able to achieve anything,” Michael told his fellow graduates in his commencement address. “We are repeatedly told convicted felons will always struggle and will never be able to achieve the American Dream. Yet, despite this, there are already businesses and nonprofit organizations that have been birthed from this program, with many more in the planning stages.”



# DYNAMIC PASTOR SPARKS RAPID ENROLLMENT GROWTH IN COLOMBIA

*Director of International Ministries Brian Kamstra (right) visits Hans Daza (left) in Colombia in March 2022*



Hans Daza met the Lord twenty-three years ago, and he has had a hunger for His Word ever since.

“In the first six months of being a believer, I read through the whole Bible four times,” he told us in an interview. “It was a passion from the beginning to serve the Lord.”

Before becoming a pastor seventeen years ago, Hans had a successful career at Banko Colombia, a well-known financial institution. “I was all set to be manager of a big office at thirty,” he explained. “I was positioned to be a successful manager, but at thirty-one, I was called to full-time ministry.”

Hans joined the Bible League of Colombia, where he worked for more than a decade with over 1,500 churches throughout the country before joining Crossroads. Through God’s grace, and because of his national recognition within the churches of Colombia, Hans has been able to grow Crossroads

Colombia exponentially—from one hundred students in 2017 to over one thousand students across six facilities today. The key ingredients in the rapid growth are Hans’s belief in the value of the program and his ability to convey the value to others. “If I don’t know my product and enjoy it myself, I can’t really be a good salesman,” he explained.

When Hans sits down with pastors to describe the benefits of the program, most respond enthusiastically. “It has helped [mentors] to understand the privilege of their freedom and of serving someone like them that is on the inside of prison,” Hans said. “By participating in the Crossroads program, churches will be active, and congregants will be able to train themselves, devoting themselves to Scripture as they study alongside their students.”

Much of Crossroads Colombia’s growth can be attributed to the students themselves, who hold a

95 percent completion rate.

“When a student finishes their Crossroads courses, they are encouraged to recruit another person,” Hans told us. “And they often come back with twenty. . . . One student who was transferred between facilities during the pandemic has since helped enroll 120 students at his new facility.”

When looking toward the future, it isn’t the number of students that drives Hans to expand the program. His goal is to promote the quality of the service that Crossroads provides.

“I’m convinced that the Word of God changes lives, and the Crossroads material is effective for doing that,” he said. “If we wanted to have a lot more students, we could. But I need to be responsible. It is important to assign each mentor a maximum of two students. . . . The success of Crossroads comes from having a mentor who writes to them and continues to care for them.”

## THREE WAYS TO PARTNER WITH CROSSROADS



**Mentor**

Encourage men and women behind bars while you study the Word together



**Give**

Support Crossroads with a gift



**Pray**

Lift our volunteers, staff, and students to the Lord in prayer

## FORMER GANG MEMBER SERVES RETURNING CITIZENS



Sithy Bin

Sithy Bin became incarcerated in 2005, given two life sentences for accidentally wounding an innocent bystander in a gang shooting in California. The practicing Buddhist was in a deep depression, and he became suicidal when he realized that he might never know freedom again. During this dark season, Sithy stumbled upon a Christian prayer book and was introduced to the faith that would change his life.

“I wanted to learn more, so I signed up for several Bible studies. I took three simultaneously, and all three contradicted each other. It was so confusing because one was Evangelical, one was Seventh-Day Adventist, and the third was Jehovah’s Witness,” he shared.

To add to the confusion, he had friends who were Muslim and

believed in Jesus but didn’t believe He was the Messiah. Sithy eventually discovered The Urban Ministry Initiative (TUMI) and Crossroads, and he credits both ministries for getting him on a clear path of study.

“With those little booklets and letters from Crossroads, I learned more about my faith, and it cleared up a lot of confusion,” he said. “I loved the mentors because it is so important to interact with people on the outside. This interaction shows that people care about prisoners as human beings.”

A change in California’s sentencing laws in 2018 gave Sithy his freedom. He now serves believers who are reentering their communities after their release from prison through his job at Testimony Ministries.

Although Sithy is free, he is currently fighting deportation to Cambodia. He asks for prayers that immigration courts will allow him to remain in the United States.

### *(Darryl Woods’s story continued)*

Darryl’s hard work behind bars prepared him for his life of service today. He grew his leadership skills by leading his prison’s NAACP chapter, and he immersed himself in Bible study. Over the years, the support of Crossroads mentors helped him grow in his faith and get through the devastating losses of his mother and grandmother and several failed appeals.

“In those moments, to know that someone was praying for me made a difference. Their letters offered different Scriptures that let me know I wasn’t forgotten,” he said.

Darryl also worked hard to be a better father. He is grateful to have a warm relationship with his children and grandchildren today.

“My son was one [year old] when I went in. He was thirty when I got out,” Darryl said. “He was the one who came to retrieve me when I was released. My son yearned for his father all those years. When he came to get me, he wept like that one-year-old baby when we met.”



### *(Robert Woldhuis’s story continued)*

The strenuous physical activity was the thing he needed to keep him sober, and it provided him with supportive friends who ran with him. Running led to the opportunity to share his story with others. It gave him the chance to meet his future wife and finally experience a harmonious marriage. Friendships formed through running also led him to the woman who would hire him at Crossroads Prison Ministries in early 2022.

“Getting this job at Crossroads was a full-circle moment,” Robert said. “Now I get to steward people who are passionate about our ministry. It is amazing to give back to the people who helped me get where I am today.”

***Robert calls himself Crossroads’ chief thank-you officer because he spends many of his work hours extending gratitude to donors through handwritten notes and phone calls. Robert says his life is evidence that Crossroads makes a lasting impact.***



**CROSSROADS**  
PRISON MINISTRIES

*Crossroads connects people in prisons with mentors from churches to develop Christ-centered relationships as they study God's Word together.*

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## [INSIDE]

See how Crossroads transforms lives inside and outside prison walls



## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



**Michael D., TN**

“I have spent years working through Bible studies from Crossroads. It has been an integral part of my incarceration and helped me to develop the discipline to study God’s Word daily. The Bible studies have helped me grow in knowledge and develop a closer relationship with Jesus Christ. The faithful mentors have always remained an encouragement to me. . . . Words cannot express, nor can they begin to put into proper context, how influential this has been in my life.”

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

WHERE ARE THEY NOW? FORMER STUDENTS NOW SERVE IN MINISTRY  
WHILE SERVING LIFE SENTENCE, STUDENT FOUNDS NONPROFIT FOR AT-RISK CHILDREN  
INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCARCERATED PEOPLE TO EARN COLLEGE DEGREES