

# Pathway to success through Suffolk Workforce Center

By James Thomas Jr.  
Virginian-Pilot correspondent  
© May 31, 2015

Anthony Robinson, 44, and Joseph Riddick, 25, graduated from a jobs training program last week at the Suffolk Workforce Center with as much pride and hope for a bright future as any graduates.

Both, however, are recently released from prison and will likely face a much tougher time on the road to success than other grads. Edward Collum, founder of Opportunities for Change at the Center, thinks he's found a way to improve the odds for ex-convicts - one that could even lead them to running their own businesses.

Robinson and Riddick are among the first graduates of Pathway, a prisoner re-entry program started by Collum in January. It's a six-month course on jobs preparedness skills such as resume writing, basic computer, interview techniques, personal and psychological assessments, financial planning and jobs searching.

The program can extend for two years or longer to learn a skilled trade, obtain follow-up jobs and business coaching and know the importance of volunteering and community service.

Robinson has been in and out of prison for almost half of his life. He's only lived in Suffolk since September after transfer on a parole plan from a Delaware prison where he spent his last six years.

He acquired a General Equivalency Diploma while incarcerated, learned bricklaying and flagging at roadside construction sites, but he's only had small stints of actual job experience. Robinson is unmarried but is in arrears on child support for 13 children. A Delaware judge told him if he didn't have a job by a June 3 court date he's going back to jail.

Riddick, a Suffolk native, returned home in December after spending the last nine years at a state prison. He, too, earned a GED, took courses in horticulture, landscaping, plumbers' helper and culinary arts.

Both men have court fines, have been excluded from jobs because of their criminal past and neither has a driver's license.

"I believe that men coming out of prison should be in a program... to get them certified in a vocational skill... auto mechanics, carpentry, plumbing, upholstery... electronics and HVAC when the money's available," Collum said.

Pathway and other jobs training programs under Opportunities for Change are

supported by donations and in-kind services, Collum said. The Center provides classrooms, instructors, workbooks and office space. Tidewater Community College donates computers through its Computers for Students Success initiative.

Students from local colleges and universities help as tutors and classroom assistants. Local business owners have agreed to become job coaches.

DAAU Enterprises, a nonprofit business consultant firm on Market Street, is one of the first stops for Pathway enrollees. Owner Jennifer Branham and interns from Paul D. Camp Community College, Old Dominion and Norfolk State universities help enrollees with intake, assessments and computer skills. Branham, a member of the Opportunities board since 2014, also provides grant writing services and has a personal stake in the program.

"I have a son who is incarcerated and I want him to come out and use the resources the programs offer... to help him obtain employment," Branham said. "I hope the program can be a segue into success for him."

Collum co-founded Opportunities for Change with his wife, Donna M. Roncarti, in Alexandria in 2008 with their savings. A second program was launched in 2012 when the couple moved to Suffolk. Roncarti passed away in February.

The faith-based ministry was established to help the unemployed, underemployed or incarcerated. It receives some grant money from the Catholic Diocese in Richmond and St. Mary's Catholic on South Broad Street.

"I'm an alcoholic; I'm a druggie. I've been in and out of jail," Collum said. "I also tried suicide - twice. It'll work because it worked for me."

Entrepreneurship is the ultimate goal of the program, Collum said. "We founded it to teach people entrepreneur skills so they don't even have to fill out an application. That was the reason for (OFC) and that's still our goal."

Shortly after graduation day for Robinson and Riddick, the Pathway office emailed to say Riddick had been hired to work in the kitchen at a local restaurant. Robinson is still looking for work as his June court date draws closer.

"I don't want anybody who calls himself a man to live the life I've lived," Robinson said. "If I could stop one person from doing what I did what happens to me would be worth it."

Admittance to Pathway is quarterly. The next enrollment is in July. Call 934-7710 or visit [www.oforc.org](http://www.oforc.org) (<http://www.oforc.org>) .

James Thomas Jr., [ttomas205@aol.com](mailto:ttomas205@aol.com)

Log in



Write a comment

0 Comments

Sort • Subscribe • RSS