

REENTRY HOUSE PLUS

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path back into society through jobs, develop community with other men in reentry, and discover a new sense of self-worth.

After a failed attempt to open a house in a rented facility, Reentry House Plus spent two years teaching the SWIT principles to men and women of Orange and western Durham counties. During that time, Peterson and other members searched for a house in the Hillsborough area, while securing the donations. In March 2021 — at the height of Covid — the group purchased a home that could meet its needs. After weeks of repairs and renovations, Reentry House Plus welcomed the first men to its house in Hillsborough.

In early 2026, the organization hired Bobby Harrington as its first full-time Program Director. And last month, Reentry House Plus celebrated its fifth year as a nonprofit for justice-involved people.

Its success is undeniable, and the life-changing work has positively affected many, regardless of how they’re involved with the program. Statistically, 95 percent of people in state and federal prisons will eventually return to their communities. A full 40 percent of people released from prison will return within three years. Eighty-percent of Reentry House Plus graduates have remained out of prison.

“The reality is, people are coming back home,” Harrington said. “You can’t ostracize people. A lot of times, people don’t want to commit crimes. They just don’t have the support that a lot of other people may have to help them to get established and to be productive in society. Some people will fall in between the cracks. But I feel like if we come together as a community — I’m big on community inclusion — that means us coming around people to support them and their success. We see a lot better out-

comes for people coming home from prison because we’re willing and able to be more rehabilitative instead of punitive. Because that’s how prison is set up; it’s punitive. It’s not rehabilitative at all.”

Harrington knows this because he has lived it.

“I’ve been to prison six times,” he said. “Not because I was a bad person. I just lacked guidance. But when I came home in 2011, I made the change and I haven’t looked back since. I went from being a volunteer to an employee. I’ve been doing this type of work for a little over 10 years now.”

His decade of work included being Program Manager for the Reentry base transitional housing program for Restorative Transitions; working at the UNC School of Medicine - Formerly Incarcerated Transition Program; the Transition to Community Living Initiative with Alliance Behavioral Healthcare; and work as a case manager/peer support at Community Care Services.

Throughout his career, Harrington has gained valuable training and experience in providing guidance and helping formerly incarcerated men navigate finding the services that can support their efforts to successfully reenter society. And while those skills have been invaluable to Harrington, he credits some of his impact to his time in prison.

“I would say my own personal lived experience with recovering after incarceration has been very effective for me,” Harrington said. “Having lived experience and then actually establishing myself as a productive member of society. Going through the steps, going through the trials, the ups and downs, and being able to meet people right here where they are.”

It also has helped to be a charismatic leader who is deftly able to network and build partnerships.

At Reentry House Plus under Harrington’s direction:

- All men received an RHP wel-

come backpack with bedspreads, pillow, toiletries, and other items found to be helpful when joining the house.

- All men met with the LRC (Local Reentry Council) who set them up with a complementary welcome package that includes some clothing and gift cards for several local establishments and Uber. Most significantly, the LRC also helped with payment of some housing fees in the first weeks of a man’s entry to RHP while they are working on getting established and seeking employment.

- Residents were connected with UNC FIT for healthcare and/or mental health support, and — if needed — substance use recovery support.

- More than 25 House meetings have been held and more than 75 individual assessment meetings were held between RHP residents and the program director for accountability and encouragement.

- All residents have been connected to the Food Bank of Central and Eastern N.C. with assistance for SNAP benefits.

- The house continues to receive weekly hot meals and groceries from a consortium of “Food Angels.”

- All men were connected to Orange Works that works to aid in finding employment and have found employment at a competitive wage. Those whose jobs are considered part-time have been given assistance to add other part-time employment to attain “full-time” status.

- Three men have received bicycle helmets and accessories through the Durham Bike-coop.

- Four residents are working with the Orange County license restoration program to help the men to recover their driving privileges.

With Harrington’s guidance since joining Reentry House Plus, the organization’s processes have become more formalized, with a focus on personal accountability. A three-tier personal advancement program was implemented that tracks successful completion of life goals for each man

in his year at the house.

Tier One tracks elemental needs starting with connection to health, social services, support teams with a Licensed Peer Support Specialist, SNAP benefits, and substance abuse counseling. In addition, the group assures that the resident has a phone, bank account, Social Service card, and establishes a base-line budget, among other things.

Tier Two includes having stable employment, a birth certificate, a revised budget and is following healthcare and substance abuse protocols.

Tier Three must be attained before “Graduation” from the program and includes continued stable employment, a diver’s license and insurance, and access to affordable housing.

All of Reentry House Plus’ current residents have achieved a Level Two status within their first four months.

Among the challenges that can face a program like Reentry House Plus is the stigma that often faces previously incarcerated people, particularly when the housing is in a neighborhood community. Harrington said overcoming that barrier begins with educating the community members and organizations.

“At the end of the day,” he said, “that’s what it’s about — having real conversations, having hard conversations sometimes too, and just showing people. That’s why I let the guys know, a lot of times, it’s not only about you; it’s about the people coming behind you as well. The way that we uphold ourselves and the way that we show up in society is going to be a big contributor to how the people behind us are going to be affected by that.”

“We also have a annual celebration picnic for the supporters and neighbors and others,” Peterson adds. “It’s open to anyone who would like to come.”

In the fall, Reentry House Plus will have fundraising auction. The dates are Oct. 7 through Oct. 30. To learn more about Reentry House Plus, you can go to its revamped website at reentryhouseplus.org.

ENO ARTS MILL

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programs that run out of the mill. But after Chantal, much of the mill space was a giant pool of steamy mud and ruined original art.

“We had just started a little gift shop idea for the entry area of the Arts Mill, like two months before the flood,” Murray said. “Of course, it all ended up in the dumpster.”

There’s no contest when it comes to facing off with Mother Nature, but the community outpouring of love and devotion — and donations — for its arts center enabled the Orange County Arts Commission to call it a draw. Just over one year after the devastation, the Eno Arts Mill will welcome artists, neighbors, friends, family and art lovers back through its doors, to experience what can be done in the aftermath of tragedy.

“The outreach from this community kind of is what got me through this last year, because it hasn’t even stopped,” Murray said. “People who didn’t know we existed learned about us through that. There are people that are continuing to send us donations because now we’re on their radar. They’ve learned about the work we do, and beyond just flood relief, like they want to support what we do in the community. I have loved Hillsborough since the day I landed here, and when I opened the mill in 2021, there were so many people. It’s been supported since day one, but when the flood happened, that’s when I was like, ‘Wow!’ I could not believe the number of people that showed up in 105-degree weather, wading through swampy, God knows what water, helping us clean and do nasty work.”

Murray added the donations the mill received enabled it to reimburse its artists for all of their losses due to Tropical Storm Chantal. The money also has enabled OCAC staff to attend nearby leadership workshops.

“We decided right after the flood that we were going to use this as an



DALE EDWARDS/NEWS OF ORANGE

The renovated and reconfigured entry to the Eno Arts Mill.

opportunity to take a breath and rethink how we do things and try to do it smarter,” Murray said.

The mill renovation also has allowed OCAC to rework areas of the space it uses and to be more purposeful. In addition to updates and structural improvements, the mill has rearranged office and conference space. The artist studios have been reconfigured, and there will now be a large area devoted to ceramics classes, which is expected to be complete shortly after the reopening

of the mill.

On Friday, the Eno Arts Mill will present Chrysalis: Resilience | Renewal | Transformation, and will be a reunion of Eno Arts Mill studio artists who were impacted by Tropical Storm Chantal. There will be local food trucks, art-making activities, and live music from Liquid Pleasure. The August 7 event is certain to be emotional.

“Oh, absolutely,” Murray said. “After Chantal, we did post-processing with Tori Reynolds, a local therapist

and poet. “She offered her services for free, which was amazing. But you know, it’s just so funny how different people are. Some of our artists were just so devastated and traumatized, and still get teary-eyed when they’re talking about it. And then some of them were like, ‘Eh, it’s just stuff.’ It’s just the difference in people. But more of them were of the former. They were watching their work float away. It’s been hard for them.”

One of the artists, Hillsborough resident John Dempsey, lost several pieces of his art, but was able to salvage some of his paintings and even restore a few pieces.

“I had a box that was filled with framed watercolors, prints, drawings from a show that was in Flint, Michigan, at the museum there,” Dempsey said. “Of that collection, maybe five or six pieces were irretrievably lost. Everything I couldn’t move out was tossed.”

Dempsey, who had for several years rented studio space at the Eno Arts Mill, now has his workspace in an extra room at his house. Dempsey was among the artists who Orange County compensated for their losses.

With all of the effort to preserve and repair the mill, Murray said there’s not a lot that could be done to keep the art space from flooding again, but that in the history of the Eno Mill, nothing like what happened last July had ever happened before.

“I want to believe the chances of that happening again are low,” she said. “We bought as much metal furniture as possible. Other than the stuff in the lobby, literally, like almost everything is either plastic or metal. I’m not storing valuable things on the floor. We just don’t have another option. It took us so long to find this space. Orange County is not like Durham. We don’t have all these old, empty warehouses. So this space has really been perfect for us.”

The Eno Arts Mill Grand Reopening is from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., August 7, at 437 Dimmocks Mill Road in Hillsborough.