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## **Commentary**

Do we want ex-cons to strike again?

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I want you to meet my friend Shawn Hendricks. We are different-like Stevie Wonder says, "Ebony and Ivory." But it's more than that. Our life experiences and challenges have been extraordinarily disparate. Our story begins with a remarkable man, Tom Binford, whom I was privileged to know well and whom I admired not only for his business acumen but also for his strong sense of community. I called him Mr. Indianapolis. He called me boss. For seven years, he wrote a weekly column for IBJ. He was a trusted friend and adviser.

When Tom died, Kai, his widow, asked me to deliver a eulogy at the funeral. That eulogy, which appeared in this newspaper, came to the attention of Shawn Hendricks, who had maintained a written correspondence with Tom. Having lost his original pen pal, Shawn started writing me.

Shawn's letters were long and rambling. That could be expected of someone who spent a lot of time in solitary confinement. Shawn was an inmate at the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility in Carlisle.

After a few exchanges, I sought professional advice. I consulted a member of the parole board, who advised me strongly not to engage this prisoner, adding the warning that only bad things would result. I persevered. Shawn and I continued our correspondence for a number of years and, when he was finally released, it was a pleasure to meet in person.

The re-entry experience is frightening. The world changes: Constantinople when they put you in, Istanbul when they let you out. Shawn had to accomplish some basic tasks immediately: finding housing, employment and wheels. He bunked with his sister while laboring at a number of menial, low-paying jobs. I gave him a used car.

It wasn't until Shawn secured a position at Christamore House under the tutelage of Olgen Williams that he began to take some interest and pride in his employment. That also brought stability, including enough income to share housing with his romantic interest and to trade up on an automobile. Shawn has held this position at Christamore House more than a year.

In an effort to help Shawn with these challenges, I sought assistance from a number of people in city government and in non-governmental agencies, including faith-based institutions. I concluded there

was little interest in placing ex-offenders who have served time for violent crimes.

Mentorship rarely works unless it is intense. Shawn and I talk at least once a week and usually spend a couple of hours on Saturday walking the Monon Trail. Our discussions cover a broad range and inevitably I am able to impart and accept advice.

There is no reason to be surprised when we hear about folks like Shawn returning to prison. The easy path for ex-offenders is to do what they are proficient at.

From the limited experience I have outlined above, I offer the following suggestions for reducing recidivism:

Place an adequately funded organization in charge and hold it responsible. The organization might be state-, city-, church- or other not-for-profit-agency-based.

Institutionalize the mentor relationship I described. Ex-offenders need to be assigned a volunteer in addition to a parole officer.

Provide a financial subsidy to ex-offenders to enhance the probability of a successful re-entry.

Establish an employment clearinghouse to evaluate ex-offenders seeking employment and to advise potential employers who wish to tap this pool.

Shawn is a good man. Shawn will make it. He would have succeeded without me, but I like to think I have made his transition easier. Recidivism is a heartbreaking and expensive problem that affects law enforcement, prison administration, social services agencies and much more. Solving this dilemma will not only help society, but also save the souls of our fellow man.

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