

# Work 'on the outside' helps inmate in return to society

By Pam Chickering Wilson Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, June 18, 2015 8:19 am

JEFFERSON — Incarceration isn't merely about keeping people locked up. Its prime goal, rather, is to rehabilitate offenders so they can make better choices when they eventually are released.

Nick, 32, of Watertown, landed in the Jefferson County Jail as a result of substance abuse problems that led to check fraud.

The Watertown man, who asked to remain anonymous, since has been released from jail and is supporting himself. He credits his work-release experience and other anti-recidivism programs at the jail with giving him a better chance as he reintegrated into society.

Nick entered the jail in May 2014 and, as a nonviolent offender, he qualified for Huber work-release privileges while in jail. He started out with community service work, and proving himself reliable in that context, then went on to apply for jobs outside of the jail.

Nick said he's very grateful to Tyson Prepared Foods of Jefferson for taking a chance on him, thus providing him with a way to pay off his debts and build positive community contacts before his official release.

At Tyson, he works in sanitation, cleaning the equipment that the Jefferson plant uses to make pepperoni and deli meat. It doesn't sound glamorous, but it's a really important job — one screwup could threaten food safety at the plant, Nick said, so he takes it very seriously.

His opportunities for volunteer/community service at the jail began fairly swiftly. Nick helped clean the jail at night, mopping floors, cleaning the visitation booths and doing laundry, and readying the work clothes for other Huber inmates.

He also worked at the Seeds of Hope Community Garden, a cooperative project of the Jefferson County Jail and the Wisconsin Dream Center, a local faith group.

The Wisconsin Dream Center has the use of a farmhouse and huge garden out in Sullivan, where inmates can come to plant and tend fruits and vegetables. The idea of the community garden, which started a couple of years ago, was to give inmates positive experiences, teach them skills they could use in their lives, help them support themselves and their families and give back to the community.



## GREEN THUMBS

GREEN THUMBS — Among the recent anti-recidivism efforts in which the Jefferson County Jail has become involved is the Seeds of Hope garden in Sullivan, now entering its third year. Inmates work alongside community volunteers, coordinated by the faith-based Wisconsin Dream Center. Participating inmates work three days a week during the summer for five hours a day. The community garden recently kicked off its new season, which will stretch through October. Donating plants for the venture are Jelli's Market, Peace of Eden Farm and High Meadow Farm. For more photos click here. — Daily Union photos by Pam Chickering Wilson.

Nick said that the community garden did all of that for him. He really enjoyed getting outside and being with people, and he even started to appreciate the talks he had with the volunteers from the faith group running the project.

“What shocked me was the group that hosted the garden project, it seems like they are so happy,” Nick said. “The volunteers don’t have much, but they don’t seem to need much as long as they could be helping people,” Nick said. “I guess I didn’t realize how happy people could be just hanging out, having relationships with one another and doing good things.

“I loved being outside the whole time I was gardening, but even better was all of the conversations we’d have while gardening and when we got together afterward, building relationships,” Nick said. “I still keep in touch with some of them. They’d make us a meal and made sure we knew we were always welcome to come back.”

Nick said that it felt good to know he had a larger support group. That’s really important to inmates, who might not have any friends or contacts outside of those involved in the same behaviors that landed them in jail.

Getting a real job was another really important step for Nick.

“When I was authorized to get out to apply for jobs,” Nick said, “I cut the newspaper ad from Tyson out and let the (jail officials) know I wanted to apply for that job.

“I had to sign in and sign out and I was allowed 45 minutes to go across the street and fill out a job application,” Nick said. “Later, I got an email saying Tyson wanted to hire me.”

He took the job at Tyson in August and has continued working at the Jefferson plant since his release from jail in October.

Having a responsible job in a supervised environment and an income before being released back into the community made a big difference, Nick said.

“Five years ago, I went to rehab,” he said. “I spent one month as an inpatient, but then when I got out, I went right back home into my old environment. I didn’t have a job or anything. That makes it hard to get back into society.”

He noted that a lot of people who end up in jail have ongoing financial problems and bills they haven’t paid. Having a paycheck while still incarcerated helps inmates who have shown a certain degree of responsibility to get out from that hole and gives them a better chance for a fresh start.

In addition, he said, it’s a graduated approach to independence.

“Going from one extreme to another can be hard for people,” he said. “If you are in jail and you get out to work, you’re not going from incarceration to total freedom. It’s a stepping stone to getting back onto your feet.”

Thanks to his Huber privileges and his job at Tyson, Nick had some money saved up in the bank once he was released from jail. He still had to pay Huber fees, but he was able to set some of his pay aside to take care of past debts and ensure a cushion for the future.

The jail also makes drug rehabilitation services available to inmates. While this didn’t play a big part in Nick’s experience, he said he totally supports these programs and thinks they should be available for any inmate who

could benefit.

“I’ve been sober for a year-and-a-half now,” Nick said. “If I had any advice for people in the position I was in, it would be to take things one thing at a time. Going from being locked up to complete freedom doesn’t work. It’s better to take a stepping-stone approach and take advantage of whatever’s available to you to help you take those steps.”