



## Making the Commitment to Turn Their Lives Around

The men of the Better Futures Minnesota<sup>1</sup> tell their stories

Jermaine, now 31, has spent most of his life behind bars.<sup>2</sup> At 13, he was incarcerated for murder. Sentenced as a juvenile, he was released at 19, but returned to prison again and again for crimes that included unlawful use of a weapon and armed hijacking of a vehicle.

On his last trip back to prison, Jermaine knew it was time to make a lasting change. “I ran into some obstacles that led me back to jail, and while I was in jail, I was looking around and looking around,” he says. One thing became clear to him: “I’m not supposed to be here, what am I doing here?”

After hearing about Better Futures Minnesota from fellow inmates, he connected with Jeff Williams, who recruits men into the program. Better Futures Minnesota, a project of Better Futures Enterprises provides a package of housing, employment and support services to the at-risk population it serves in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn. Most of them are African-American. Read the [Progress Report](#) for more information on Better Futures.

“I actually got out on a Saturday and called his phone at 5:30 in the morning. I was expecting to hear one of them, ‘Hi, you’ve reached Jeff Williams, my business hours are from 9 to 5, Monday through Friday,’” recalls Jermaine. Instead, Williams himself answered the crack-of-dawn call. “That was real big, so I got a little comfortable there.”

*The “we’re there for you” approach is characteristic of what Better Futures offers men who are willing to make the commitment to turn their lives around.*

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<sup>1</sup> Better Futures Minnesota is the new name of the former NetWork for Better Futures. It is a project of Better Futures Enterprises.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the men in this profile have asked that their real names not be used. Jermaine and Vincent are real names.

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## FROM THE OLD WORLD TO THE NEW

Most of the men transitioning through the Better Futures say its emphasis on personal resiliency has helped change everything about their lives outside prison, taking them from the old world of the streets to a new world as respectable citizens.

Vincent, who had been locked up for 17 of his 40 years, says that when a man gets released from prison, he may think, “Well, I really don’t want to go over there and do that negativity, I don’t want to hang out with that crowd of people, but really what are my options?”

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Both Better Futures staff and other participants help provide some answers, but each man is ultimately expected to take charge. “I believe it takes strength, determination and a plan,” says Norman, age 37. “Better Futures can offer us everything, but if we don’t have a plan, or we don’t have strength and determination, then none of it will work.... So I think it starts with us and what we want to do.”

George is one of the willing. “I’m a taxpayer now,” says the 39-year-old man. “I got job skills, everything from demolition and snow removal, all type of stuff I do I learned through Better Futures. They are a real positive with me in my life.”

One thing George learned is that sometimes, “It is okay to be broke. When you are in the other world and you broke, you ain’t going to be broke for long.” But doing an honest day’s work is different—it means waiting for the pay that comes with it. “You really got to humble yourself when it comes to money, you got to budget, really budget. In the old world, I used to do what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it. Right now, I can’t. I got a son I got to take care of first, he get everything before I do. .... A paycheck is a paycheck. Wait on it.”

Jermaine, who has just moved into the first home he has ever been able to call his own, also feels that he’s on the right path. “Yesterday, I signed the lease, got the keys and my very own apartment, so life is just great. I’m smiling, I’m happy.”

But he knows the lure of familiar and risky paths has not entirely vanished. “The old world was like the bad life, the old life. Where I think I was winning, I was living in fear. Didn’t want to be around this person, didn’t want to be around that person, too paranoid. The working world is a little better, but every time you think about that old world, that is the challenge, to stay on this side, because it is so easy to go to the other world.”

That’s Sam’s struggle, too. At 21, he is the youngest participant of Better Futures and since his release after three years of incarceration, he has focused on meeting entirely new expectations. “I was tired of gangbanging, I was tired of doing the negative. I knew if I came out [of prison] I would probably be killed or probably wind up killing somebody, or just doing something that was going to hurt somebody.”

But knowing that he could still be ambushed by old temptations doesn’t make the alternative path all that much easier to follow. “I’m not going to lie, it’s very, very hard. The life I’m used to living.... It’s way different from working now.”

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—Sam

## **A COMMUNITY OF MEN**

A slogan often heard often around the Better Futures is “no one of us is more able than all of us.” It speaks to the power of community, which is on full display every Monday and Friday evening when the men come together to talk frankly.

“I looked forward to those meetings because coming out of incarceration, not having a support system, could easily deter me or anyone to make the wrong choice or decision,” says Vincent. First a participant in Better Futures, and then a staff member, Vincent has since become a recruiter and personal empowerment facilitator at Twin Cities RISE!, a partner agency that provides work skills to low-income individuals.

“Having someone who you believe cares to say, ‘Hey, here is another perspective, maybe look at it like this, or did you think about that?’... It was everything. It was everything.”

Positive peer pressure is another important tool. “If someone is slacking, you can always tap him on the back and say, ‘Come on man, let’s do this.’” says Jermaine. “That’s the spirit of the program. There is always going to be someone there that is going to do that.”

By surrounding the men with others from similar backgrounds who share a determination to change, Better Futures creates a safe place to acknowledge vulnerability. “It becomes a community instantly,” said Norman. “To be able to see men actually being vulnerable and open and able to communicate... was definitely encouraging. I just took it and ran with it.”

Getting Sam on track is something of a pet project for the older men. “Everybody supports me ‘cause I’m the youngest one, they ride my heels a lot,” he says. “They don’t want to see me fall off. I try to push myself and push others... I don’t see too much negative around me, everybody supports me, everybody supports each other. I never been around an atmosphere where everybody just push each other.”

## LOOKING AHEAD

A common theme among the men is that Better Futures creates possibilities.

George has been able to bring his son to live with him. “When I left, he was three months old, when I came back he was three years old, so I missed a whole lot. I’m not trying to miss anything else, tell you the truth, I don’t plan on missing nothing else.”

For Sam, it has really been about learning how to grow up. “Before I came in prison I was a little boy, I was 18. Now I’m working through Better Futures, I feel like I’m becoming a man.”

“You come to Better Futures not really sure of what to expect,” says Vincent. “But then once you are in it, you understand. ‘Wait a minute, there is opportunity for me here to be that man that Sam talked about or to be a citizen or a taxpayer or to be a better parent, a father.’ That is huge for someone coming out of prison.”

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