

THE POWER OF A HELPING HAND

BY PAULA NOVASH

**“EDUCATION IS
THE GREAT ENGINE
OF PERSONAL
DEVELOPMENT”**

—activist and peacebuilder Nelson Mandela

Mandela’s idea is embodied by UB, an institution dedicated to helping students and community members create meaningful personal and professional futures while giving back and making a difference.

We highlight two programs that empower people in challenging circumstances. By providing resources and support, these initiatives give participants tools to choose their next steps. After all, as Mandela also noted, *“It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another.”*

A NEW START: THE SECOND CHANCE COLLEGE PROGRAM

When UB undergraduate **Marcus Lilly**, 36, came to campus, he had some of the first-day jitters that most students experience. But Lilly brought with him the confidence that comes from being a veteran student: For more than a year, he had been attending UB classes at the Jessup Correctional Institution through the University's Second Chance College Program.

"Prison can make you feel like an outcast," Lilly says. "The program helped me believe I belonged in a classroom."

A 2016 Experimental Sites Initiative of the United States Department of Education's Pell Grant program, Second Chance provides post-secondary education to incarcerated students. Research shows that those who participate in educational programs while incarcerated have a significantly better chance of successfully transitioning into society and finding employment, as well as lower rates of recidivism.

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MARCUS LILLY

"Education changes your worldview and mindset," says Lilly, a Human Services Administration major and Helen P. Denit honors scholar at UB. "You feel empowered in many areas: as a parent, a worker, a community leader."

Expanding educational access to Second Chance students is extremely rewarding, says **Andrea Cantora**, director of the program and associate professor in the School of Criminal Justice. "These are some of the most motivated students I have ever worked with," Cantora says. "Seeing their love for learning and how they strive to excel is inspiring. If we weren't providing this program they would still be trying to educate themselves."

During the fall semester of 2018, 45 men at Jessup, who range in age from early 20s to 60-plus, are completing coursework towards a Bachelor of Arts in Human Services Administration degree. Non-students can also participate in a mentorship and tutoring program developed by UB faculty and staff. "Incarcerated men who are active leaders and role models in the prison community—and who are strongly committed to helping their peers succeed—attend classes with students and help them with their studies," explains Cantora.

The program also provides support as the men return home and begin attending classes. Second Chance Reentry Coordinator **Latonya Epps, B.S. '16**, says the transition period for former inmates is complicated. "It can seem overwhelming," she explains, noting that many of the men are simultaneously searching for jobs, beginning classes, and updating identification and records. "Even dealing with technology is a challenge—most have had limited access to laptops and no internet use, and may need updated skills to submit paperwork and job applications online."

Epps is available to help with everything from providing transportation for job interviews to lending a listening ear. But the most gratifying part of her job, she says, is "welcoming the students to campus—being able to see their excitement, give them a hug and tell them we're glad to have them here."

Lilly is one of the first Second Chance students who has transitioned to UB. But, Cantora says, more than 40 will be eligible for release in the next several years. "We are already anticipating how we can increase support services and involve some of the men who are already on campus," she says.

In addition to his UB studies, Lilly works at Concerted Care Group supporting individuals who are dealing with substance abuse and addiction. "What drives me is to see people do better," he says. And, he continues, having opportunities to help others, especially at-risk youth, is important to him: "I feel I owe that to the guys still inside, who are dedicated to changing their lives."



CHRIS HARTLOVE

LEFT TO RIGHT: Andrea Cantora, Latonya Epps, and Marcus Lilly