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Author of "15 to Life: How I Painted My Way to Freedom"

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From Prison Greens to Green Jobs

Last week a unique program was launched by the Osborne Association's Green Career Center to help former prisoners who want to become productive citizens by finding them ["green jobs"](#).

"The national financial and climate crises have forced us all to reconsider how we use our precious resources, and there is no resource more precious than people," said Elizabeth Gaynes, Executive Director of the Osborne Association. She believes that with the right training and support "people leaving prison can re-purpose their lives and contribute to growing a Green Economy that benefits all of us."

I first met Liz Gaines in 1990 at Sing Sing prison when I took a parenting course through their Family Works program. It helped me tremendously in effectively maintaining a relationship with my young daughter. The Osborne Association believes that over-relying on imprisonment as the only response to crime is a costly and counterproductive approach that fails to take into account people's basic capacity to change.

Osborne's Green Career Center recently received \$2 million in federal stimulus money in September 2009 to provide job opportunities and support services to formerly incarcerated persons. Enrollment will be followed by 2 weeks of soft skills training and 4 weeks of hard skills training in marketable skills, such as environmentally-friendly construction and weatherization. Osborne will then place its participants in career-track jobs in the Bronx that pay living wages. To accomplish this, Osborne has partnered with local Bronx employers like Frank Cruz of DEC Green, as well as organizations like Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA) Local 10, who are providing Osborne's participants with training and are one of the few LIUNA locals to specialize in green construction.

For the Bronx, a community that has a 14% unemployment rate, job training opportunities in this growing sector couldn't come at a better time. We all recognize the importance of work in our lives, and employment is a requirement for those under parole supervision. However, the unemployment rate for people on parole is more than six times the general population. In fact, fewer than one out of six people on parole have a full time job with benefits.

The road following imprisonment is not an easy one. I know because I have walked it. When I was released 13 years ago from the living nightmare of imprisonment, I found that returning to the real world was both frightening and unbelievably difficult.

When I shed my state-issued green prison uniform my main concern was the question that every prisoner facing release thinks about: "Will I be able to survive life on the outside?" For me, the top priority for a prisoner returning to society is getting a job -- which aids tremendously in the transition from being a prisoner to becoming a productive tax paying citizen.

The Osborne Green Career Center program demonstrates that there are policies our nation can adopt that can foster a more effective criminal justice system and a safer and more just society. To find out more about the Green Career Center, call 1-718-707-2706 or visit [The Osborne Association](#)

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