

TEN IDEAS ON HOW TO STAY OUT OF PRISON: A ROADMAP FOR LANDING ON YOUR FEET

As Rotary Reentry Instructors who together have taught and worked with hundreds of WCCW women and have served as mentors to others released from the WCCW and living on the outside, here are ten (10) ideas on how to stay out of prison....a roadmap for landing on your feet. These are important because nearly 2 out of 3 women in the Rotary Reentry Employment Training course say they have been incarcerated before—some many times. Give these some very serious thought.....they WILL change your future path in life and be the keys to your success.

1. **CHOOSE YOUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY VERY CAREFULLY:** Most women in the WCCW did not get there alone--- they were involved with someone else---friends, family, boyfriends, etc. Some of these people are still very toxic and restarting a relationship with them can lead to disaster. For some women it literally means choosing to release to another county in another part of the state in order to get away from these toxic people.

2. **SURROUND YOURSELF WITH A SUPPORT SYSTEM OF GOOD PEOPLE WHO TRULY HAVE YOUR BACK:** There are many good people who really do care about you and have your back—but you need to seek them out. They may be a family member, friend, a church group, service organization, college professor, mentor, union representative, or others. Check in with them regularly, seek their wisdom and advice on decisions you make before taking action (for example, buying a car, renting an apartment, taking a job, etc.).

3. **BE VERY, VERY CAREFUL IN FORMING NEW ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS INCLUDING SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS:** When you release from prison you are INCREDIBLY vulnerable--& some are very gullible & naive—especially if in prison a long time. Forming new romantic and sexual relationships right out of prison can be a disaster---& result in a hurt & damaged self-image, sexually transmitted disease, unplanned pregnancy....or all of these. Some people sense your vulnerability & are quick to take advantage of you. Those who truly care about you know you're vulnerable, will respect you & give you time to adjust to the outside.

4. **CONTINUE YOUR EDUCATION OR LEARN A SKILL:** Nearly 75% of women released from the WCCW have a high school education, and 45-50% have small children at home they need to care for. For most women their first job will likely be at minimum wage (about \$10/hour or \$20,000/year), barely enough to support themselves alone, not to mention children. The answer to this dilemma is back to school---trade school (Bates, Clover Park, etc.), specific skills education (culinary, beautician, flagger, carpenter, etc.) or college/university (TCC, Olympic, Pierce, UW, Evergreen, etc.). For most women, if college is the route chosen, a community college for the first 2 years makes the most sense, where they can live at home. Whatever the approach, a family supportable wage of \$20/hour or \$40,000/year is the minimum goal. It is likely your first job will be a minimum wage job—but that is only temporary until you are eventually able to move into a family supportable wage job. **ONE OF THE GREATEST GIFTS TO THE WORLD IS AN EDUCATED WOMAN!**

5. **CONTINUE THE PROGRAMS YOU BEGAN IN PRISON:** The vast majority of WCCW women are in prison due to drug/alcohol related crimes—or property crimes tied to drugs/alcohol--in one way or another. At the WCCW many were mandated or voluntarily chose to participate in NA, Celebrate Recovery, AA, or other programs. If this is your situation, you need to continue with these programs once released and surround yourself with good people in these programs to help keep you accountable. Many women released from the WCCW are required to attend AA/NA meetings regularly—some for up to several months...but be wise...sometimes these can be a gathering place for active addicts and a source of temptation rather than a source of support...so pick your meetings carefully and be very wary of people you discover are active users.

6. **PERSEVERE—DON'T EVER, EVER, EVER GIVE UP:** Landing on your feet when you get out can be very tough—a real shock to some. YOU WILL HIT OBSTACLES AND ROADBLOCKS—count on it! But that's life—we all hit obstacles and roadblocks. Some people call them “challenges to be overcome”. You will hear NO a lot when looking for a job or an apartment. That NO is not about you—it just means they do not have a job or

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apartment at this time. The key is to keep trying & never ever give up. Be persistent & keep moving. Don't let PRIDE get in your way....some women come out of the WCCW "on fire" and when they mess up are afraid to turn to the ones who care about and support them most for fear of letting them down...this is PRIDE talking.

7. **USE YOUR TIME WELL:** Lots of experience shows that HOW YOU USE YOUR TIME IN THE FIRST MONTH AFTER RELEASE SAYS A LOT ABOUT YOUR CHANCES OF STAYING OUT OF PRISON. In other words, using your time wisely is critical. This means disciplining yourself & using your time to look for a job, find housing, get back in school, etc. Set and follow a schedule. Time wasted in front of the TV or internet or constantly socializing with friends can work against you. It is absolutely true that..... "looking for a job is a full time job"because it is.
8. **TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF:** We are all like 5-legged stools—the legs are named 1) physical, 2) emotional, 3) spiritual, 4) social and 5) intellectual. If we are missing a leg, the stool gets out of balance and tips over. Staying in balance can be really, really tough---it is for all of us----but it is one of the real keys to living a good life. This means exercising and eating right—many have come out of prison overweight and out of shape. This means taking time out for yourself and staying rested—physically as well as mentally. When we become fatigued we tend to get sick, cranky, depressed and out of sorts with the world. We call in sick and miss work time. Also taking time to grow spiritually can be huge in your life—it may be the place where you make some lasting spiritual connections, real lifelong changes & good decisions that put you on a path that is truly sustainable. Points 1-5 above touch on some of the emotional, social & intellectual legs of the stool—your relationships with people, your education and continuing the support groups you started at the WCCW.
9. **CHOICES:** Inside the WCCW many daily decisions are made for you by others. When you get out ALL decisions will be yours—100%. This can be absolutely frightening and overwhelming for some.....as simple as "what to eat, what food to shop for in a grocery store, what clothes to buy in a department store, etc.,"and for some women this is very, very scary. All of a sudden...so many choices to make. Take your time with these choices—involve others who really have your back in making these choices. Do not try to go it alone!

Related to choices---know who you are, your convictions and beliefs. Know what you are NOT willing to compromise or submit to that is important to you (physical, verbal or sexual abuse, for example). This is very important as you enter a world that will try to trip you up again. Know what your purpose in life is.....this will help you stay focused. Know what the most important things in life are to you----that you want or desire most. Being very clear to yourself about these will help you stay on the right path and make good choices.

10. **PUT YOURSELF ON A BUDGET AND STICK TO IT:** Managing your money is a BIG DEAL as you will find out very quickly, especially if your first job is at minimum wage. Prepare a realistic budget for yourself and your family if you have children and stick to it. Get help from a trusted friend or family member in putting your budget together.....and once you have it, stick to it. Your budget is a living, breathing document and will change...so review it regularly with everyone involved...especially if it includes a "significant other"both of you need to contribute something to the budget and both of you need to be involved in the budget review process.

Our hope for you as your Rotary Reentry Employment Training Instructors is that you will choose to put these ten ideas into practice in your life. The time to make this choice and begin to implement these ideas is NOW, while you are still in prison, so that when you release you are already on a solid path that will help you to become the person you were meant to be---a woman who is loved, cherished and valued for who she is—a wife, mother, daughter, granddaughter, friend, professional and lover of life and all things good and wholesome....and a positive contributor to others and to society. Hopefully this class can help prepare you for the journey called "the rest of your life."