

Ohio Prison Reform Is a Model for the Nation

By [George Will](#) | Sunday, 13 Sep 2015 08:35 AM

The man at the front of the room in the prison here is talking about the institution's culinary and hospitality training that will help some of his fellow inmates "give back to the community."

He will never get back to any community; he is serving a "double life" sentence. But because he is not going anywhere, he can provide leadership to those who are.

Some will go to the 35 Cleveland restaurants that are eager to help themselves, and reduce recidivism while doing so, by hiring those who learn in prison to serve the food plate from the left and to remove it from the right. Small things learned inside can help people stay outside.

Here, amid Ohio farmland planted thick with corn and churches, Gary Mohr's work of reclaiming felons is working, with many assists from the churches. His title, director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, needs another word: "reintegration." Meaning the preparation for re-entry into society of people like Walter Atwood.

He is 37, a tall, thin African-American who played Othello in a prison production assisted by nearby Oberlin College.

He has been incarcerated for almost 21 years, since being convicted of, among other things, aggravated robbery, attempted rape, and attempted murder. His next parole hearing is in 14 months, but whenever he returns to society he will be ready for restaurant work, even, he says proudly, "in 'the front of the house,' as a host," perhaps wearing white gloves, and certainly trained "so you don't infringe on patrons' space or time or emotions."

He would, however, prefer to find work using graphic design skills learned here in a computer lab run by Michael Brown, 33, who lost an eye somewhere along his bumpy road to this institution.

Ten years ago, to get out from under the consequences of other bad decisions, he says he "made a bad decision." The robbery resulted in a 12-year sentence.

Director Mohr, 62, a stocky bundle of energy who wears his big heart on his sleeve, is a devout Lutheran who preaches the gospel of reintegration from pulpits around Ohio. Martin Luther said salvation comes from faith rather than good works, but Mohr figures good works can't hurt.

He started in corrections 41 years ago as an Ohio State undergraduate, paid \$2.54 an hour to teach "prisoners twice my age the letters of the alphabet." Today he oversees 50,300 inmates in 27 institutions. He is particularly proud of the 12 programs devoted to preparing inmates, who work up to 10 hours a day, for life outside.

Some are translating books into Braille, others are learning to handle two 18-wheelers provided by Masury's P. I. & I. Motor Express, which needs the drivers.

In other shops, inmates make toys and children's clothes for local churches to distribute on missions and stuffed animals for children from families shattered by the incarceration of parents.

Says one inmate, "We lay down at night and think, 'We've done something other than what we did that got us here.'" Another says, "We used to think time started when we got released. Time starts now."

This afternoon, Mike Swiger, a local minister, is helping teach computer skills, which he says are nowadays necessary even for operating a forklift. "Ex-offenders," he says, "are more credible" as teachers. He finished college while serving 17 years, some of them here, for accessory to murder.

Until recently, released prisoners were sent home, if there still was such a place, wearing gray sweatshirts and sweatpants.

Now, a nearby house, once abandoned, overflows, thanks to local churches, with donated clothes suitable for job interviews. "I didn't know how to get dressed anymore," said a departing inmate. "I hadn't been dressed for 20 years."

The church volunteer (asked who provides these clothes, she crisply says, "God does") who helps run the house says released prisoners would apply for a construction job and be told, "You're hired — now go buy some boots." But steel-tipped work boots can cost \$150. So each leaving prisoner gets a pair.

America, with less than 5 percent of the world's population, has almost 25 percent of the world's prisoners. Mohr cannot change the overcriminalization of American life that has been accompanied by unreasonably severe sentences. But a new pair of work boots can help soften the effect of mass incarceration.

The crimes that earned the men here their punishment violated America's standards of decency. But those standards, Mohr believes, require us to help these men redeem the remainders of their lives.