

MAKING FREEDOM WORK

By EMILIE VINSON | Photographs by TED WILCOX

George Lang sits in a square cellblock in Minnesota's Dakota County Jail. A worn leather Bible lies open on the 45-year-old's lap, and eight inmates in dull green uniforms surround him.

"God has created us in His image, and our choices—" here, George makes eye contact with each man—"well, that's why we're sitting in this circle. That's why I'm sitting in this circle."

Bold black letters spell "Dakota County Jail" across the back of each inmate. Two guards stand near the door.

George's life in crime—or "in the hustle," as he often says—began early, selling stolen bicycles, TVs and, eventually, illegal drugs. "When my family separated and everybody went their ways, I was 9 or 10 years old," he explains. "I was left to figure out life on my own terms."

This scene—gray walls, blue cell doors, security cameras stationed in ceiling corners—is familiar to George. When he was 23 years old, he spent six months here, in this jail.

But today, George isn't here as a prisoner.

"I'm here as a brother in Christ," he says. "You can go back,



A FORMER INMATE HELPS OTHERS LEARN
THAT TRUST STARTS WITH GOD.



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– GEORGE LANG



George Lang (right) prays with an inmate from the Dakota County Jail (previous page) after explaining FreedomWorks to a group of prisoners (far right). The skyline (above) is five miles from the FreedomWorks location in North Minneapolis.



to that same past you came out of, or you can do something different.”

By the time George was in his 30s, he had been incarcerated three different times. During his last prison sentence in 2005, he decided against returning to Minnesota’s capital city, St. Paul, where his life in crime began. While still in prison at a facility in nearby rural Lino Lakes, George became involved with the Inner-Change Freedom Initiative program, a partner with Cru’s inner city ministry. IFI is a faith-based program designed to help men prepare to re-enter society after their release from prison.

This re-entry depends upon the context of community. George spent time in prison studying Scripture with other inmates, learning things like how to understand authority and be a good father to his four children. And though the idea of community is not a new concept to men in the program—many have grown up in communities of crime—accepting that people want to help them succeed can be difficult.

“The more people I had in my life, the greater the pain. Relationships were—” George pauses, looking for the best words to describe his fears. “They would either abandon you, hurt you, steal from you. They would wound you.”

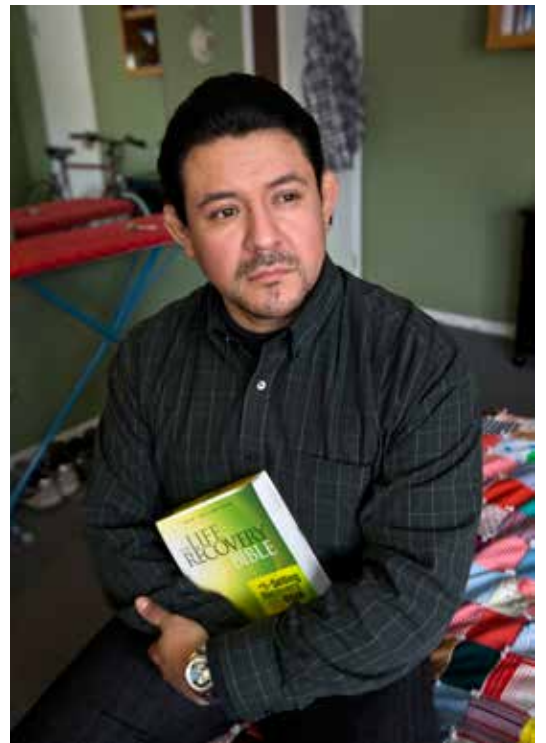
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fter finishing IFI curriculum and coming to the end of his third prison sentence, George learned he could continue growing in the context of community outside the brick walls of Lino Lakes. “The vision that was cast prior to me getting out was a place called FreedomWorks,” George says,

explaining that this nine-month residential program picks up where IFI ends. It meant he didn’t have to go back to the familiar west side of St. Paul, and the past he preferred to leave behind.

FreedomWorks shows former inmates a way to recover through a relationship with God and participation in community. But stepping away from life patterns can be difficult.

The men in FreedomWorks live one mile away from an intersection infamous for the highest murder rate in the city. Home is a boxy brick building in North Minneapolis formerly used for drug deals and prostitution, vices still common in this neighborhood. Across the street, employees carry guns at a small convenience store and, in the parking lot, police cars wait for certain trouble.

This is home, on the corner of 36th Street and Penn Avenue, where bullet holes mark doors and windows of buildings nearby. Inside FreedomWorks, the ex-convicts learn to be trusted and to trust.

Yet, even after spending a year and a half as a successful resident at FreedomWorks, George wrestled with the idea of supportive community. “I just didn’t trust people,” he says simply. Then he was asked to become the program manager—a position that included responsibilities like helping new residents transition into the house, keeping the facilities in order and helping solve the conflicts that will inevitably arise when eight to 12 former prisoners live together in one building.

But it still took another six months for the truth to sink in: “These people don’t want anything,” George concluded, starting to accept that someone finally had his best interest at heart.

“My mentor’s been in my life now for eight years. This guy that I thought, *Well, as soon as I get out of prison, he’s going to be saying goodbye*—it hasn’t happened. He proved me wrong. And the recovery team that I had around me, they’re around me today.”

But even as George has the opportunity to step back into pieces of his old life—like a cellblock in Dakota County Jail—and encourage men toward recovery, he has to fight others’ expectations that eventually he’ll return to old patterns.

George clears snow piled in the alley by his home after a Minnesota snowstorm (top). Arturo Martinez (right), a resident of FreedomWorks, doggedly walks miles through the snow to work each day. Police wait for trouble to happen outside a convenience store near the FreedomWorks building (above).



Several months ago, when he picked up his elementary-aged son, Salvador, for a weekend visit, a speeding ticket sat on his dashboard. George recounts his son’s words: “I guess Mom was right. She said you wouldn’t be out of prison very long.”

In fact, George has been free for more than seven years; he’s spent six of those as program manager at FreedomWorks. On a weekly basis, he leaves behind inner-city Minneapolis to travel to Lino Lakes prison with Cru staff member Wayne Beich, guiding men through the same IFI curriculum he completed. March 2013 marked his 10th consecutive year of sobriety.

Thom Olson, the executive director at FreedomWorks, says George leaves a clear path for other men. “It’s one thing to say, ‘Don’t do what I did,’” Thom says. “It’s better to be able to have a track record where you can say, ‘You know what? Follow me as I follow Christ. Here are some things that I’m doing right now. I’m leaving footprints in the snow for you.’ And that’s what George is doing.”

Statistically, only eight out of every 100 FreedomWorks graduates will return to prison within three years, as opposed to the grim national average of 68 out of 100. But though graduates have remarkably high success rates, roughly half the men who begin the program won’t complete it.

One inmate, Mark, was accepted to FreedomWorks and disappeared within 30 hours. When George and Thom found out that he had been re-incarcerated, they contacted his case manager to communicate that they were willing to re-accept him. The man was shocked. Together, George and Thom drove to pick him up at the



George prays with a man after the FreedomWorks weekly fellowship dinner, where former inmates study Scripture together (above).

What is FreedomWorks?

FreedomWorks is a nine-month residential program located in Minneapolis, Minn. The program provides practical support during the critical days and months immediately following an inmate's release from prison. It includes:

- affordable housing
- biblical mentors
- career advisors
- financial coaches
- sober friends

Through the process, former inmates learn to establish trust with the people around them.

Ultimately, FreedomWorks seeks for these men to reconcile with their families, their communities, and with God, so they can recover the life God intended for them to live and begin investing in other men coming behind them.

"They have to have a sense of belonging somewhere," says Thom Olson, executive director of FreedomWorks. "They still remember where the old neighborhood was. There's still the criminal infrastructure in place, and if they're not grafted into a new community, they're just going to drift back into what they know."

Learn more about FreedomWorks at www.myfreedomworks.com.

prison gate when he was released.

"The message we don't want to send to these guys is, 'We give up on you,'" Thom says firmly. "Because they've been hearing that all their life." This time, Mark stayed four-and-a-half months before disappearing. He's back in prison, but George and Thom have already promised that when he's released, there will be a room waiting for him. Again.

Tonight, George sits across the table from Paul, FreedomWorks' newest resident. He carefully outlines what is expected of Paul during his first few days in the program, and what he can expect from the men he'll be living with as he builds credibility and establishes trust.

George leans forward. "Paul, you're sitting here in this room because we believe in you," he says. And regardless of the outcome, George means every word. ■

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ACTION POINT

Community can help us grow in many areas besides life beyond prison. It assists spiritual growth, as well as recovery from addiction or abuse. What steps do you need to take to find a community of people and experience change?

Prayer Story