

WORKING TOWARD A NEW FUTURE

How a United Way-funded social enterprise helped a young woman get her life back on track. ♦

"I played every sport when I was growing up. As I got older, I decided to focus on basketball. It was very exciting and allowed me to learn life skills. I was a social butterfly. One coach kept coming to my games and eventually, he offered me a scholarship. I transitioned from high school basketball straight into college and it completely changed my life.

My father died when I was seven, so my mom was both a mother and father figure for most of my life. But even though my mom was there, she was working hard to support us so that we could live in a decent area. Really, I raised myself. When I was 18, my mom went to live in a different country. I had to live with my sister, who I didn't know well. I had to become an adult quickly.



Unfortunately, I got mixed up with the wrong friends, which led me to getting into trouble. After that, I was incarcerated for a year and a half. I was so devastated making that first phone call to my coach. I said to him, "I don't want to lose everything."

I was scared about going to prison. Prison is a really challenging environment full of uncertainties. The only people you have to talk to are the inmates that you live with. But this experience changed my perspective. It showed me there are people in prison who have potential and just need a helping hand. I learned skills that I never thought I could, and I used that time to rethink my life.

When I got out, it was very hard. I struggled to find full-time work. I thought, "How can I get involved in my community? How can I prove to myself and show society that

I have something to contribute? How can I show that I'm not a bad person?"

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A girl who lived in my halfway house told me about the coffee shop where she worked, a social enterprise funded by United Way. Social enterprises are businesses fuelled by profit and purpose, and they help people like me get back on my feet. I told myself that if I got the opportunity to work there, I would use it to make a change in someone's life.

Eventually, I did get a job at the coffee shop, and I've never looked back. Today, I work there full time, helping other people coming out of incarceration to find employment in the community.

Getting this job made me so happy. I felt empowered - it felt amazing that someone actually gave me a chance. I already had a good, supportive environment from my family and friends. Now I have a good job too. I can actually survive. I can regain my independence and make something of myself." -Zoe



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