



With full-time job, ex-con gains some independence

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DAVID MAIALETTI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Ex-con Colwin Williams can finally breathe easier.

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By Helen Ubinas, Daily News Columnist

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EVERYONE SAYS the same thing: The best thing an ex-con can do is get a job.

Even after spending nearly two decades behind bars, Colwin Williams - the ex-con I've written about since his

release in 2012 - said he wouldn't truly feel free without one. A full-time one.

Well, Independence Day came early this year for Williams.

"It's official," he texted. "I got the full-time outreach worker position!"

Williams, who had previously worked part time as a violence mediator with Philadelphia CeaseFire-Cure Violence, will now work full time for the anti-violence program.

I often wondered when this day would come. As I've chronicled Williams' ups and downs, I sometimes worried it wouldn't come soon enough. Williams, who grew up in Bristol with a single mother, was 25 when he was sentenced in 1993 to 15 to 30 years for multiple armed robberies.

Williams never lacked the smarts or drive. That much was clear the day I met him, just days out of prison. Williams, 46, approached Mayor Nutter at an anti-violence rally at LOVE Park and told him he wanted to help.

It was full steam ahead after that. Williams took on a full load and a part-time job at Bucks County Community College. He reconnected with grandparents who helped raise him, and children and grandchildren who were babies or not yet born when he went away. He spoke about his experiences as often as he could.

"If I can reach a young person with my words or deeds, it helps me heal from the regret of not being there for my own children," he said.

For a while, he tried to do it all - until he realized he couldn't. Overwhelmed by a two-hour commute to classes and mandatory probation programs, he had to leave school. He couldn't land a full-time job no matter how many applications he filled out. He briefly found himself without a place to stay.

It was at these those low points where I worried about Williams becoming yet another statistic. Twenty-three percent of convicted offenders on probation or parole in Philadelphia are rearrested within a year, according to the courts.

"Look," Williams said, flipping through a stack of business cards while we caught up at a North Broad Street doughnut shop, "this is what I carry around. This is what I accumulate. No excuses. See, this is networking. The devil places people in your life; God places people in your life, too. But you have to be willing to change. I can't be in the 'hood looking for a better reality if I'm still on the corner, hanging out and doing the same thing that put me behind bars to begin with."

His resolve paid off. Right around the time he didn't have a place to stay, he was hired as security for journalist Lisa Ling and her film crew while they were in Philly doing a piece on violence for the Oprah Winfrey Network that will air soon.

While he was anxiously awaiting word about a full-time job, he was asked to volunteer for a pilot re-entry program called MENTOR, or Mentors Empowering Now to Overcome Recidivism.

The program, started by Common Pleas Judge Michael Erdos, matches participants with civilian mentors.

"Someone like Colwin is inspirational," Erdos said. "It would have been easy for him to lose hope in himself, not to push forward. But he never gave up, and that's an invaluable lesson for the participants in the program."

Marla Davis Bellamy, director of CeaseFire-Cure Violence, is impressed with Williams, too.

"A young person can look at Colwin and say: 'Well, you've changed your life. I can change mine, too.' "

Already, Williams is making more plans. He wants a car and his own place. He wants to go back to school to get a degree in human services.

"I just want to keep making my family proud of me," he said.

One of the first people Williams called when he got the job was his son Brock, who was just 4 when Williams went away.

"That's a good look, Dad," his son told him. "I'm proud of you."

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