

Executive Director's Corner

It all started when my car blew up!



Concerned Citizens
Against Predatory
Engagements (CCAPE)

"God used this period of time while I was without convenient transportation to open my eyes to some real challenges within my very own community."



Protesting illegal bottle
returns practices

It was early August and the day started out to be typical of most days, I said goodbye to my family and headed off for my work day. On this particular day, my destination was a conference that I was to attend in Wyoming. I was making good time heading South on US131 when a loud bang came from my van. It was soon followed by a cloud of dense, black smoke. I immediately knew that things were not good and, by the grace of God, I nursed the van to the 44th Street exit ramp where it promptly died.

A friend stopped and helped me push it off to the side of the thick traffic. We popped the hood for a quick look and he said, "Your van is shot! The head gasket is blown." He later dropped me off at home and as I shared the day's events with my wife, it began to become clear that life for our one-car family was going to be altered for a bit. Until a new vehicle could be purchased, gone would be the convenience of getting around town with ease and what would we do about groceries.

On my first day without a car, I found myself off to a local convenience store called Fannie's Corner. It is only a couple of blocks from my home. I figured that I could buy a few items and easily carry them back home. While in the store, I overheard the store manager speaking to the shoppers in very disrespectful ways. I was disturbed by what I was hearing and it prompted me to later ask some of my neighbors who shop frequently at Fannie's Corner about their experiences. Unfortunately, what they shared gave me even greater concern.

One particular testimony that grabbed my attention was Fannie's bottle return policy. I learned that bottle returns were limited to just \$3.00 per person and the refund was only available in the form of in-store credit – never cash. I also learned that if customers protested this policy, they were asked to immediately leave the premises. From what I was told, this was not a new policy but had been the practice for quite some time.

Now, having personally witnessed the disrespectful treatment of the shoppers and having been made aware of the illegal bottle return terms, I was feeling called to some sort of action. I shared my experience and findings with Paul Mayhue, Michael Scruggs, Bishop Walter Durham and Bates Place Drop-in Manger, Paul Larthridge. These are men that I have long respected for their commitment to improve our community. Our talk lead to more talks and then a series of meetings that took place at Bates Place in which we discussed how to respond to unfair business practice in our own neighborhood. Eventually, we decided to form a group called Concerned Citizens Against Predatory Engagements or CCAPE. Our plan was simple - confront Fannie's Corner and the BP Gas Station, located up Eastern, and demand that they conduct business in positive ways and conform to state bottle return laws.

My trip to Fannie's had certainly awakened me to problems in our community that my access to convenient transportation had previously shielded me from. Another issue that I had noted when I shopped at Fannie's was the pricing. We all accept having to pay a price for the "convenience" of shopping at a

convenience store. However, in inner city neighborhoods like the one around Bates Place, the price is often shockingly high. For residents without transportation (like me at the time) these convenience stores act as primary grocery stores because it is unfeasible to carry groceries great distances. It struck me that those truly in need of lower prices, the poor among us, too often are stuck paying too much for food. With no large supermarkets ready to break ground in the core city, I wondered what could solve this dilemma. The following Sunday, I shared some of what was going on with the local stores with the congregation at First Church. I asked for prayers for CCAPE, that it would have a positive impact. I also asked for prayers for the poor who for a lack of access, pay too much for groceries. Immediately after the service, several members approached me to find out how they might be used as a part of a solution.

The prayers of His people were answered! Our group, CCAPE, organized a protest gathering at the two neighborhood stores. Approximately forty protestors lined the sidewalks, wielded banners and chanted slogans of encouragement meant to uplift the city. News crews from two television stations covered the story. The protestors were unified in cause and it was a refreshing sight. The protest and media coverage had an immediate response and resulted in positive talks with the management of both stores.

The talks resulted in a Memorandum of Understanding relative to the bottle return policies which both store management and CCAPE will be signing.

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The Rest of the Stories...

(Washingtonp.1)

The pair married while Washington was still in prison. Washington's father, who remained a faithful prayer warrior and supporter throughout his incarceration, officiated the ceremony.

In addition to taking hold of his faith in prison, Washington took advantage of community college classes and earned an associate's degree before his release. The degree helped him secure a job at Zondervan Publishing House just three days after his release. While at Zondervan, Washington continued to pursue education and went on to earn both an undergrad and master's degree from Aquinas College. And today, Professor Clifford Washington is adjunct faculty at both Grand Rapids Community College and an Associate professor at the University of Phoenix, West Michigan Campus.

Washington realizes his story does not read like most of the stories we hear about former prisoners, or returning citizens, as they are referred to as today. He credits his faith in God and the unwavering support of his wife and family with helping him make the adjustment.

"A lot of people are hopeless [when it comes to life after

prison]," he says. "But change is possible. It's not easy. It's not glamorous. But it's possible. I'm evidence of that."

For his day job, Washington is uniquely prepared as the Coordination Manager for the Prison Reentry program located in the Community & Residential division of Pine Rest. In this role, he is working to help other people make the transition from prison life back into society.

"[The returning citizens] need a place to stay, food, clothes—somebody has to take care of them. Most have burned the bridges with their family, friends and significant others," Washington explained.

Washington's team helps provide those basic necessities, but he has found that the key to long-term success is to get those he works with involved in a supportive community, since so many have lost their outside contacts during incarceration.

Washington's transition work including discussions about the need for a supportive community actually begins well before release. Monthly treks to Bellamy Creek Prison in Ionia are the first step in building the authentic relationships that might very well prove to be the difference in re-offending or not. The monthly visits are conducted by a team that is made up of representatives from various branches of law

enforcement and other reentry stakeholders including Bates Place Executive Director, Bryan Blakely, Sr. The men, many who have not experienced freedom for decades, are strongly encouraged to connect with Bates Place upon their release so they can immediately begin to build a supportive community.

"[Bates Place] is a hub. Everyone who walks through their door has some type of need. I wish we had a Bates Place on every corner," Washington said. He went on to share how important it is that Bates Place provides a safe environment for folks to share their journey and gain access to resources and guidance. Cliff also sees the importance of the faith component at Bates Place and the built-in partnership that exists with neighboring, First Christian Reformed Church. "The support found at Bates Place and the opportunity to be enfolded by a faith family can be the difference in making it on the outside," he stated.

As Cliff Washington's life story testifies, a prison sentence need not be a life sentence. A strong faith in God and a supportive community can be life changers — life givers.

~Grace Ruiters
Grace is a junior at Calvin College, majoring in English

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With the bottle return issue moving in the right direction, the access to lower priced groceries was still on my heart. With the support of eager volunteers, Bates Place created a brand new program called the Bates Place Food Express. The Express will operate each Wednesday and it involves volunteers transporting neighbors to outlying supermarkets where groceries can be purchased in larger quantities and at lower prices. The shuttle trips will be absolutely free and even include some assistance in getting the grocery bags from the car to the client's front door. For those with limited funds, the Express will help stretch precious resources and is a true answer to prayer.

God used this period of time while I was without convenient transportation to open my eyes to some real challenges within my very own community. A blown head gasket has mobilized community leaders, put a halt to some unfair and illegal business practices and it became the catalyst for the formation of a new food transportation ministry. And it all started when my car blew up!

~ Bryan Blakely
Executive Director

Wish List

Every gift to Bates Place helps us serve people in some way. We also offer donors the opportunity to support us in more tangible ways:

50# Bag of Popcorn-\$38 Sam's Club
Lrg. Kitchen Garbage Can w/Lid
Ream of Card Stock
Ream of Yellow Paper

Ream of Orange Paper
Box of Pens-Black Ink
4 Inch Binder/Used
100 ct. Box of Sm. Envelopes

100 Roll of Stamps-\$46
2GB Thumb Drive
Scotch Tape
Stapler