

From Reentry to Reintegration<sup>1</sup>  
by Larry White (part 2)

At some point, I took a deep breath and tried to figure out reintegration for myself. I tentatively dipped my toe into the life of the city. I joined two other men who, like me, were newly released from decades-long prison sentences and made forays to a big supermarket not far from where we lived. We were accustomed to prison shopping — basically checking off items on a printed commissary list — and were completely overwhelmed by the wide array of foods spread out before us at the supermarket. With our one cart, the three of us would mainly just stand and gawk, so much so that a store manager once asked us if there was a problem.

I would take the subway here and there. At first, I was so self-conscious that I thought everyone was staring at me and thinking, “He just got out of prison.” I would look down at the floor and literally break out in a cold sweat.

I started venturing to places in my scrapbooks. I love jazz, and I began attending lectures, movies, and rap sessions at the National Jazz Museum in Harlem. I always enjoyed myself, but I didn’t know how to strike up a conversation with anyone. At the end of a museum event, I’d briefly watch with envy as others in attendance easily mingled with each other, and then I’d leave. But as I walked down the street after one event, I passed a woman who had been in the audience. She actually stopped me and started talking about how she’d enjoyed the event. It was a real conversation; it made me feel good. I began to think of other places I might go, other people I might meet.

In prison, I attended meetings sponsored by the Quakers. So, I found my way to the Quakers on the outside. Members invited me to dinner; they took me out. They helped me make

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<sup>1</sup> From: The Hard Journey Home: Real-Life Stories About Reentering Society After Incarceration

connections. I had also followed and admired the work of the Prison Action Network (P.A.N.), an advocacy organization that works on behalf of the incarcerated and their families in New York State. I got involved with that organization and soon became one of its leaders, lobbying legislators, meeting with senior parole and corrections officials, and developing programs for the incarcerated. I even helped to draft legislation intended to help gain release for thousands of deserving incarcerated men and women in New York State who keep being denied because of the nature of their crimes.

My circle of contacts and friends grew ever wider. I created a supportive social network. I became part of a community.

When I walked out of prison, I told men I left behind that I would not forget them. I told them that I'd be back. And I have gone back, with programs, ideas, guidance, and support. I would feel lost if I couldn't be there for them, in one way or another. But as I head back to my new community at the end of a prison visit, I give thanks that I made it out alive.