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Issue #8

The STAR Project's **Mission** is to provide the guidance and support that will successfully re-integrate ex-offenders into the community as contributing members of society.

Our **Vision** is to increase community safety and reduce recidivism by assisting persons to successfully transition from incarceration to the community.

Making Connections: Strengthening Our Community Through Partnerships

By Becky Turner, Executive Director

In this issue we will be focusing The STAR Project's most important endeavors: making partnerships in the community, fostering the spirit of giving back through volunteerism, and increasing community involvement.

STAR is an independent nonprofit agency that partners with many other local organizations in order to provide wrap-around, comprehensive services to our clients. We strive to be a "one stop shop" because our clients face so many barriers to the reentry process.

Partnering organizations include the Department of Corrections, Washington State Penitentiary, the Walla Walla Police Department, Walla Walla County, Blue Mountain Action Council, the Walla Walla Housing Authority, Comprehensive Mental Health, Trilogy Recovery Community, Elevate Recovery, Helpline, Oxford International, Serenity Point, Northwest Justice Project—and many, many more.

Our Housing Coordinator, Joseph Field, recently tackled one of the biggest initial barriers to our clients' success: finding a bank that allows the temporary use of a prison-issued identification cards in order to cash checks. Thanks to Joe's outreach—and a sympathetic manager at the downtown Banner Bank branch—STAR was able to get a working agreement in place. This is the first such agreement in STAR's 12-year history in Walla Walla.



In addition to the wonderful community organizations that support and collaborate with STAR's work, we also strive to broaden our visibility on the state and national level. In the next pages, you will read about STAR's efforts on this broader scale. Our work in 2015 on Legal Financial Obligations has caught the attention of the National Public Radio's StoryCorps program and other national news outlets.

Our organization is stronger because of our partnerships, and because we have a phenomenal amount of community engagement. From each of us at STAR, **thank you** for your continued support. Together, we are making a difference in our community.

Client Profile: Lisa—*“I’ll talk to anyone who will listen!”*

By Danica Wilbanks, STAR Volunteer Coordinator and Whitman College Intern

“If you want to create a new world for yourself, you need to go in a different direction,” asserts Lisa Meyer. Lisa has spent the last couple of years serving as a map for people seeking to channel their lives in a new direction. A former STAR client and active member of the STAR community, Lisa reaches out to people she encounters on the bus, at gatherings, or around town. “I can look at people and tell if they’re newly out,” she says, “I tell them about STAR, Helpline-- wherever outreach is.” While the folks she approaches are often defensive at first, she transforms hesitancy into an active dialogue the second she tells them she’s “been there, done that.”

Lisa was incarcerated in 2011 for selling pills. She had just lost her husband and, having recently undergone heart surgery, was in incredibly poor health. She was so sick, she says, that she was agreeable to anything. Unfortunately, law enforcement arrived in Lisa’s life before she could make a change. Notably optimistic, Lisa explains that she learned a lot in prison. She had good relationships with her cellmates and would often help them with their classes. Having grown up on a farm, Lisa was mechanically inclined and frequently surprised her cellmates with her ability to answer their Civil Engineering class questions. They called her “The Dictionary.” While serving her time, Lisa participated in reentry programs and miscellaneous courses. “Reentry programs should be mandatory,” Lisa affirms. “It starts with a handshake. You would be surprised how many people don’t know how to shake a hand.” According to Lisa, participants finished the program having learned important communicative and practical skills. But the class that truly altered the course of Lisa’s life was a class about social security. There she learned about a federal law passed in 2012 regarding legal financial obligations (LFOs). LFOs are the fines levied against defendants at the time of trial that they are obligated to pay back when released from prison. LFOs can include court costs, the cost of a DNA test, lab fees, and other expenses. As they accumulate, they can add up to thousands of dollars. The new law dictates that the court cannot issue these discretionary fines to those on social security or living below the poverty line. However, courts have continued to do so. LFOs are still issued to people who cannot pay them—people who legally do not have to pay them. Lisa happened to be one of those people.



When Lisa was released, she was scared. They “dumped me at a bus stop” with \$40, a box of her possessions, and a bus ticket. With these limited resources, Lisa was expected to create a new life for herself and survive on the outside, all the while dealing with extensive medical problems. As if this task did not weigh on Lisa enough, on top of it were her crushing LFOs. But Lisa had a secret weapon. She knew that legally, she was not obligated to pay these fees. Lisa immediately enlisted the help of The STAR Project. She was given legal counsel and decided to request a reduction of her fine and suspension of payments in court. Her lawyer told Lisa that she was a poster child for the LFO issue. Shockingly, before Lisa no one else had taken this issue to court in Washington State and won. To her amazement, her judge reduced her fines, suspended her payments, and, although she had not requested it, eliminated her interest too! Lisa and her friends at STAR were shocked and amazed. Eliminating those fees was a huge relief.

Today, Lisa is working on bettering her health and has made fantastic strides with her adorable dog, Chica Marie, by her side. STAR is grateful for Lisa’s contributions, and Lisa describes STAR as a safe haven. “I don’t know how people in other counties do it without STAR,” she says, “It’s a place we can go to for anything.” Now, when Lisa engages in grassroots outreach, she also informs newly released people about the LFO ruling that extinguished much of her financial burden. She has referred several people to STAR and recently heard back from a man who had his fines reduced. As the first person to take this LFO issue to court, Lisa has been contacted by the ACLU and StoryCorps regarding her victory. With her tenacity and kind spirit, Lisa continues to direct people to services that can help them live happily and healthily, just as she strives to live.

Volunteering: Doing the Right Thing on Your Own Time

By Andy Owens, Executive Assistant

Many of the organizations in our valley rely on volunteers. This need for volunteers is acutely felt by nonprofit organizations, who usually have staff stretched too thin. How can people volunteer at STAR? There are a lot of ways to give back:

- **Volunteer for our Adopt-a-Highway** campaign, which runs monthly through the summer. STAR adopted the three miles of highway immediately before Dixie.
- **Prepare Wednesday night group dinner**, or volunteer for setup or cleanup.
- **Employers**—contact our Employment Specialist Lenel Parish about holding mock interviews, or attend her employment readiness classes on Tuesdays.
- **Landlords**—contact our Housing Coordinator Joseph Field about attending his Ready to Rent course and providing STAR housing clients with guidance and tips for successful renting.



Calling All Mentors! The STAR Mentor Program is Reborn

By Becky Turner, Executive Director

One of the things that helps bridge the gap between incarceration and successful reentry is having a support system: people who care and hold each other accountable. The STAR Project had a robust mentoring program in the past that was tabled when we moved from volunteer-based operations to employee-based operations. For the benefit of our clients—and our community—we are reinitiating the STAR Mentor Program.

We are currently drafting STAR Mentor curriculum and plan to train mentors in the fall of this year. We hope to have mentors serving in correctional institutions by the end of the year. If you have a heart for service and a desire to make a difference, please give our staff a call at (509) 525-3612 or email info@thestarproject.us.

Get Involved!

There are a number of other ways to help The STAR Project:

- Donate to STAR online at <https://goo.gl/SyAAb1>
- Contact us if you are interested in renting to our clients
- Contact us if you are interested in employing our clients
- Contact us if you are interested in joining our Board of Directors
- Follow us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/TheSTARProjectWW
- Follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/TheSTARProjWW
- Sign up for our newsletter online at <http://eepurl.com/b3nEkv>

Thanks to all of our donors, coordinating agencies, staff, and supporters! We can't do it without your help.

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