

REACHing for Success



John Caldwell, a recent graduate of the REACH program in Meriden, is destined to become one of the program's great successes.

REACH (Re-Entry Assisted Community Housing) is a statewide, scattered-site supportive housing program for individuals re-entering the community from the correctional system. Case managers work with clients to find appropriate housing and jobs and to develop the skills needed to maintain successful, independent lives within the community.

John entered the REACH program in November 2014 and has been working full-time at a warehouse in Meriden since September 2015. In December he moved into his own apartment. John has

John Caldwell with case managers Samantha Dodge (left) and Nadia Karachristos in his apartment. "It feels good when I come home from work to have my own place."

clear plans for the future, which include finding a better job, finishing school, and finding something to invest in.

Now 31 years old, John grew up in Hartford and worked for a while in his family restaurant. As a youth he had some minor infractions with the law, but never anything serious.

But in 2010, a domestic dispute with the mother of his two children resulted in a prison sentence. He was paroled at the end of 2013, after having served 37 months, and went to a halfway house in Hartford. There he learned about the REACH program. He applied, was accepted at the Meriden location in November 2014, and began working with Nadia Karachristos and later with Samantha Dodge.

"John is a prime example of how our program can benefit somebody," Samantha says. "He's very self-motivated and has been very successful, in spite of all his struggles. He needed little encouragement to do things. He'd come in every week and say, 'Sam can you help me apply for this job?' I didn't have to chase him. He was always doing something. If he wasn't going to Adult Ed, he'd be coming here. He knew what he wanted and kept going for it."

"Even in jail I was always doing things," John says. "I went to school, I took classes in computer graphics, and I went to every program voluntarily."

"When I was at the halfway house I went to Adult Education classes, took advantage of training opportunities at Easter Seals in Middletown, STRIVE, and the Chrysalis Center. I got training in Masonry and also got Forklift and OSHA 10 licenses."

Because John is highly motivated and has an excellent work ethic, finding jobs was relatively easy. But finding a job at which he could stay more difficult.

The issue was not lack of motivation or poor work habits. The issue was Connecticut's public transportation system. Because John considered Hartford home, he looked for—and found—jobs near Hartford. But he was living in Meriden, more than 20 miles away. Connecticut Transit's inter-city service is sporadic after the early evening hours, and a person without a car has a very difficult time with inter-city commutes.

"It took a while for him to realize, that because he lives in Meriden and doesn't have a car, he couldn't work in Hartford," Samantha says.

"One of the jobs I had was in Windsor Locks," John says. "Getting there on the bus was really hard, and I had to quit after a month."

Nadia observes, "In the beginning John was looking for work in the Hartford area because he didn't know anything or anyone in Meriden. Eventually, he agreed to go to Easter Seals for employment assistance and they helped him obtain his current job. When he was ready to move out on his own he reached out to staff at The Connection Counseling Center, where he was attending groups, and they referred him to the Federally-funded Access to Recovery and State-funded Basic Needs programs for housing assistance."

His current warehouse job is a 10-minute walk from his apartment and the REACH offices are 15 minutes away.

And John has dreams.

"I want to own my own business—something that's creative and makes money—maybe something in the food industry. But I really like construction—especially masonry. I like the idea of working for someone—and also being able to do work on the side.

The money is important to John—not only because he needs to support himself, but he also wants to care well for his children, a boy and girl, now eight and six.

"There's also my nephew and niece." He pauses, grins, and says, "Kids cost a lot."

"John has been a breath of fresh air for me personally," Samantha says. I have guys get who jobs, discharge, and move in with family, or go to another program or halfway house. Some go back to prison. John is in his own place. When it comes to John, I'm speechless. You're one of a kind."

Nadia observes, "John is focused on doing well. In the past year he had roommates who were using, three different parole officers, and two different case managers, but he was able to not let that affect his success. Now that his life is stable he plans to go back school to get his GED."

Samantha says, "With John I think better things are coming—he has the mindset to understand that everything will come if he keeps working at it. There's no doubt in my mind that he'll do very well."