



S A D O

**PROJECT REENTRY
TRIUMPH REPORTS
NOVEMBER, 2022**

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STATE APPELLATE DEFENDER OFFICE (SADO)'S PROJECT REENTRY & THE MICHIGAN JUSTICE FUND

In 2022, the Michigan Justice Fund (MJF) supported the creation of a new role at Project Reentry (PR).

Our “Summer Justice Fellow” Brandon Harrington spent many hours with former juvenile lifer clients represented by SADO attorneys to glean insight into their journeys, their challenges, their personal and their collective successes.

Read on to see how PR has made a significant impact in the lives of our clients.

Thank you to Brandon and the clients below for sharing their stories.

ALEX AYALA

JAMAL BROWN

ANTHONY DEPALMA

MICHAEL EDWARDS

BRANDON HARRINGTON

GERALD MERRELL

RONNIE MOORE

EDWARD SANDERS

AHMAD WILLIAMS



*“Each of us is more than
the worst thing we’ve ever done.”*

BRYAN STEVENSON

ALEX AYALA

Alex Ayala, 48, is a former juvenile lifer who served 29 years in prison before his release. Alex was 16 upon his conviction, and 45 years old at the time of his release. Alex believes that his greatest accomplishment to date is his quick acclimation back into society.

The first night he was home, he spent the entire night familiarizing himself with his new smartphone. The only difficulty he recalled was obtaining a state ID because of a childhood name change. Alex is currently gainfully employed and enjoying his freedom.

His greatest desire is to “constantly grow.” He believes that each person has their own path, and that following that path brings the greatest growth. He suggests that returning citizens “take [their] time,” his motto is one of patience and preparation. Alex took his time getting acclimated to society before he started working and moving forward. He believes that his biggest challenge is that he has trouble just being able to enjoy freedom. Nevertheless, he says “Your life is your life, your path is your path ... get used to being free first, [live] for your freedom.” Alex strives to be on a path that allows him to grow and believes that he is only beginning to approach that path.

PR helped Alex in a big way. Even the Comprehensive Reentry Plan made Alex frame his future differently. PR supported him even after his release, affording him the opportunity to keep in touch with likeminded peers. These peers with similar life experiences became his new community. Alex says this community has been instrumental in his successful return home.



JAMAL BROWN

Jamal Brown, 49, is a former juvenile lifer who served nearly 31 years in prison before his release in March of this year. PR assisted Jamal with obtaining his ID and birth certificate. The process was arduous due to a name change. Jamal's SADO attorney, Erin Van Campen introduced Jamal to a church that helped him with his basic needs upon release. Jamal currently works as a painter and has access to transportation to commute back and forth to work. He has relied on members of PR for emotional support throughout his transition and believes strongly in seeking assistance with mental health. Jamal is most proud of marrying his sweetheart. She has truly helped him during his reentry. He also takes great pride in obtaining his driver's license.

Jamal believes that transitioning back into society "is not hard and it's not easy. We have to work hard. Reality is we don't have anything to prove to others. SADO is heaven sent, they helped immensely."

ANTHONY DEPALMA

Anthony Depalma is 43 years old. He served 23 years, 4 months, and 14 days in prison as a juvenile lifer. Anthony was released in September of 2020, during the height of the pandemic. COVID made homecomings difficult for returning citizens, especially those who'd served very long sentences. To make matters even more difficult Anthony was released without his ID and social security card. Anthony found himself in a halfway house in an unfamiliar county. However, Anthony didn't let any of that bother him. He got his paperwork in order and got to work immediately. He obtained his driver's license, purchased a vehicle, and was off and running.

Anthony has transitioned well. He says the hardest point of his transition was being released to a different community than the one he'd left as a teenager. When asked about his most significant accomplishment since being released he simply says "... just being free." That about sums it up. Despite the obstacles, Anthony has taken full advantage of every available opportunity. He is very grateful for PR's involvement and support over the years.

MICHAEL EDWARDS



Michael Edwards is now 48 years old. He spent more than 33 years and 100 days in prison for a crime committed before his 18th birthday. Michael, or “Simba” as he is affectionately known by his friends was released on June 22, 2022 and returned to Flint. He was able to come home, literally, during a family reunion. He reconnected with loved ones almost immediately. “That was a very special day.” He says that PR helped him tremendously. PR assisted him with obtaining a Bridge card, activating his health insurance, and in multiple other areas.

Simba has many plans for his future. He’s currently working at a museum but wants to obtain a second job. He enjoys his time volunteering at the Catholic church’s foodbank. He wants to be involved with improving his community and he especially wants to work on changing the system for juvenile lifers. He is particularly grateful to his SADO team including Jose, Susan, and Jessica Newton.



BRANDON HARRINGTON

Brandon Harrington, 45, recently enjoyed his first birthday in the free world since he was a teenager. Brandon was proud to be named SADO's MJF "Summer Justice Fellow" for 2022. Currently on parole, he was released in November of 2021 to a loving and supportive family. He served approximately 27 years in prison as a juvenile lifer for an offense he committed at 17 years of age.



Upon his release he intended to hit the ground running which is exactly what he did. He got a job after just 13 days, opened a checking account, and obtained his driver's permit. He used his Comprehensive Reentry Plan as his guide the entire time, sticking to it as a saving grace.

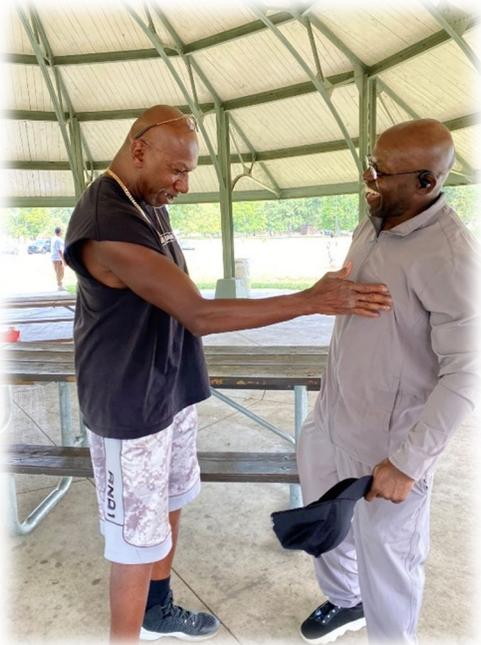
Inside, Brandon spent most of his time educating himself and working towards rehabilitation, even though he was not expected to be released from prison. Brandon earned a paralegal certificate from Adams State University and successfully completed numerous state offered courses such as custodial maintenance technology, business education technology, Microsoft's Digital Literacy Program and ACT Work Keys. These programs are all geared towards teaching employment skills to offenders. Ultimately, Brandon earned an Associate's degree in Business Management prior to his release. He always likes reminding everyone that he graduated with a 4.0 GPA.

Upon Brandon's release, he obtained a job in an auto plant even before he acquired his driver's license. From there, he opened a savings account with the help of his mother and received his first debit card, a learning curve in and of itself.

PR had a huge impact on his successful transition – he was introduced to Bob Schwartz from Here to Help in addition to other organizations. These organizations helped provide Brandon with basic items such as clothing and work boots. He also was able to secure a bridge card with PR's assistance.

Brandon has had several jobs including his current position with SADO's PR as their MJF Summer Justice Fellow, which he truly enjoys. He was able to secure his commercial driver's license and now works for a large distribution company as a commercial truck driver. His relationship with his family is healthy and he's even been able to spend his first Father's Day with his daughter which he thought "... was the coolest thing ever." Brandon's motto is simple "Shoot the ball, you might make it". He learned this saying years ago from an older cellmate. By all accounts, Brandon's transition has been a successful one.

Brandon also has several future goals and plans that he wants to accomplish. Ultimately, Brandon plans to use his degree and open his own commercial cleaning business. He believes that "returning citizens" must build a future for themselves and that by pooling their resources, they can do just that.



GERALD MERRELL



Gerald Merrell is 49 years old. He served more than 30 years in prison as a juvenile lifer. He was released at the end of 2020 and is scheduled to complete his parole supervision in December, 2022. PR was a critical support in Gerald's homecoming helping to identify his housing placement. He was able to obtain employment in an automotive plant where he manufactures car seats. Gerald has several plans for his future. He wants to obtain his driver's license, volunteer to help youth, and even start his own non-profit that is geared towards helping "at-risk" youth. Gerald's passion for helping young people is what drives him day-to-day.

RONNIE MOORE

Ronnie Moore spent 39 years in prison as a juvenile lifer before completing his sentence and discharging. His discharged status meant that he couldn't rely on the Michigan Department of Corrections for any assistance after his release. Ronnie was released on August 21, 2020, late in the evening to a dreary homeless shelter in Detroit. With very few possessions, Ronnie faced an uphill battle. Fortunately, the MDOC had already contacted PR where Jose Burgos, Reentry Coordinator and others were able to assist Ronnie. Ronnie is handicapped and is wheelchair bound which made his homecoming even more difficult. Despite his initially troublesome release, Ronnie was able to get into a wheelchair-accessible group home. Ronnie hopes to find employment soon. Through his trials and tribulations, Ronnie has remained hopeful and as determined as ever. Ronnie believes that PR's support has been invaluable since his release.

EDWARD “BARAKAH” SANDERS, MSW

Edward Sanders, who goes by the name “Barakah,” was incarcerated in 1975 at the age of 17 and was released in 2017 at the age of 60. Barakah spent decades in prison law libraries upon being introduced to the field of law by Vietnam veterans during the early days of his incarceration. During his time in prison, he obtained an undergraduate degree in behavioral studies and a certificate in paralegal studies. Upon his release he also obtained his Master’s degree in Social Work from the University of Michigan and began to work for the university. Barakah then found employment with the Washtenaw County Prosecutor’s Office in their Conviction Integrity Unit. Barakah is currently planning on going to law school (and earned a reference letter from SADO). Barakah’s reentry has been extraordinary, but he will be the first to tell you “... others can do it too.” He gives a lot of credit to SADO and PR for his successful transition. He’s very grateful for all that was done for him and realizes that he can help with a plethora of great ideas while supporting his peers.



ABOUT PROJECT REENTRY

SADO launched Project Reentry (PR) in 2016 in response to the unique and immediate needs of Michigan's juvenile lifers. The PR team works in coordination with SADO attorneys and staff.

PR's primary goal is to help achieve positive outcomes for clients. PR uses four primary tools toward goal achievement: the development of Comprehensive Reentry Plans (CRPs), the facilitation of monthly Reentry Workshops, the production of a Reentry Guidebook, and the publication of a monthly Reentry Newsletter (The Drum).

In addition, PR is available to assist clients and other returning citizens with day-to-day challenges. PR is in regular communication with clients and other returning citizens and directs them to available resources when they face challenges with housing, employment, and medical and mental health care. Even when clients do not reach out to PR for assistance, PR contacts clients regularly to maintain contact.

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(313) 256-9833

