

BAKING A FRESH START

Many Americans with a CRIMINAL RECORD are more likely to go BACK TO JAIL than land a GOOD JOB, but BAKERIES across the country are offering a NEW RECIPE: a SECOND CHANCE.

WORDS SERENA RENNER



Dave's Killer Bread staff

Last August, Ronnie Elrod was featured on the official Instagram feed of The White House. He's pictured leaning over a counter, sporting rectangular glasses, springy silver hair and a collared work shirt with his company logo – Dave's Killer Bread – stitched over his heart. In seven years, Ronnie has climbed the ranks from an ovens operator to the director of manufacturing at the bakery's HQ 15 kilometres south of Portland, Oregon.

The 'BreadQuarters' currently employs more than 300 people and punches out more than 600,000 loaves of bread each week, including the top-selling organic bread in the nation: Dave's Killer Bread 21 Whole Grains and Seeds.

In that White House photo, a half-smile peeks out between Ronnie's salt-and-pepper moustache and goatee. You'd never guess that before getting hired at the bakery, he spent 15 years in prison for dealing drugs and being in possession of weapons.

"I made a lot of poor choices early on in life," reads the Instagram post, which used Ronnie's story to announce that

Dave's Killer Bread had signed former President Barack Obama's Fair Chance Business Pledge – aimed at removing hiring barriers for individuals with criminal records. "In 1986, one of those choices put me in prison. When I got out

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Ronnie Elrod

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This story is surprising when you meet Ronnie, but not when you consider the sheer proportion of Americans with criminal backgrounds. According to a poll jointly conducted by *The New York Times*, CBS News and the Kaiser Family Foundation, men with criminal records account for 34 per cent of all non-working men between the age of 25 and 54. In fact, the US jails more of its citizens – more than 2.3 million inmates – than any other country in the world.

Former inmates face a host of re-entry challenges, from obtaining a driver's license and public housing to, yes, finding employers who will provide a decent-paying job. With such bleak prospects, it's no wonder more than 75 per cent of ex-convicts get arrested again within five years of release.

This is the cycle of crime that Dave's Killer Bread and many other businesses across the country – particularly bakeries – are trying to break. "You can't change the justice system," Ronnie tells me, seated in his Oregon office surrounded by audiobooks and leadership manuals by inspirational speaker and author John Maxwell. "The one thing you can change is what happens when people come home."

Ronnie considers himself "one of the lucky ones" for landing a job at the bakery less than a month after leaving prison. Now with a position in management, he shares his story to help shift the stigmas around people with criminal backgrounds, and mentor others with similar pasts. "Through people turning their lives around and creating lasting change, that skeleton in the closet becomes something to talk about, because there are other people out there facing the same struggles." >



Revent



Greyston staff Dion (L) and Shay



“Now we’re able to say, ‘Hey, look, there’s life after prison. There’s life after addiction.’ We can help you create your own success story by just giving you an opportunity.”

Dave’s Killer Bread currently employs more than 100 individuals with criminal records, paying rates that exceed the minimum wage, with benefits for all full-time staff.

The US government offers tax breaks of up to US\$2400 per employee each year to businesses who hire ex-felons, and that’s not the only value these hires bring with them. Recent research suggests that people with criminal backgrounds may actually outperform their non-offending counterparts – and this finding doesn’t surprise Ronnie in the slightest: “We all know that opportunities for folks like us don’t come along very frequently,” he says. “So when one does, you better take it and run with it.”

But the key motivation behind this unconventional hiring policy is helping people get back on their feet, says company president Marty Nash. This mirrors the experience of the ‘real Dave’ – the co-founder of the company that bears his name. Following an on-and-off relationship with prison over 15 years,

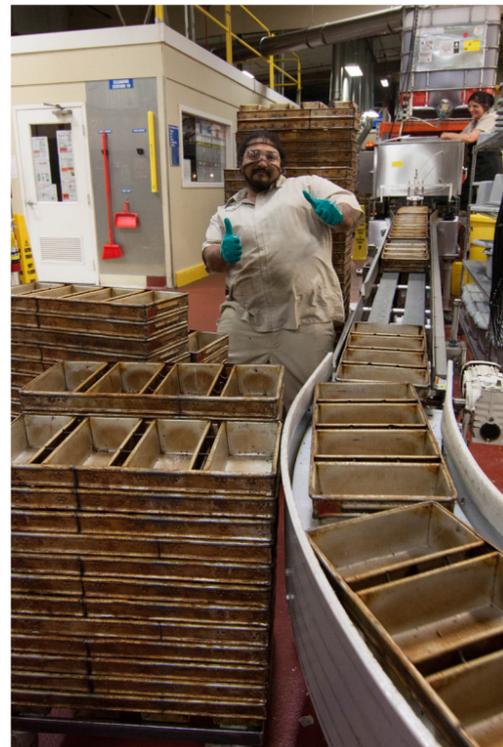
Dave Dahl was welcomed back to the family bakery by his brother, Glenn. The pair transformed the family business into what it is today. Dave left the bakery in 2013 after a reported mental health episode that almost put him back in jail, but the Dave’s Killer Bread Foundation is keeping the mission of redemption alive. Its annual Second Chance Summit brings nonprofits, government agencies and corporations such as Google and

food services company Aramark together to expand the national conversation around criminal justice reform and re-entry, and encourage other businesses to give second-chance employment a shot.

“If you take a look at these folks coming out, they want to turn their lives around,” says Marty. “They have the passion. They just need to be given that second chance.”

On the other side of the country in Yonkers, just north of New York City, Greyston Bakery takes second chances to a whole other level. Since it was founded by aeronautical engineer-turned-Zen-master Bernie Glassman in 1982, Greyston has pioneered the practice of ‘open hiring’. Jobs are offered, beginning as an apprenticeship, to anyone who puts his or her name on

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a wait list – no questions asked. From ex-convicts to those with a history of substance abuse, Greyston has taken thousands of people off the streets while also providing community services including childcare, healthcare and culinary arts training to further fight local poverty. But the main event around here is brownies. Greyston bakes nearly 16,000 kilos of them each day for Whole Foods Market and Ben & Jerry’s ice-cream flavours such as Chocolate Fudge Brownie and Empower Mint.

Greyston General Manager Rich Jamesley says baking is a good starter industry for ex-criminals and other hard-to-employ demographics because it doesn’t require much in the way of formal education or high-level skills, and it offers a variety of roles centred on approachable products. “Everybody knows a little bit about baking, right?” says Rich. “Once they see sugar and cocoa and eggs... I think it’s not intimidating and it seems fun. Baking is something that people feel comfortable [with], but the same premise of open hiring and providing job skills could be done in many different avenues.”

A year and a half after her release from jail, Yonkers native Shay, 34, finally got called in for an apprenticeship at Greyston. Before her incarceration, she worked as a home health aide, but a felony charge changed all that. “I’m still ashamed,” says Shay of the incident that put her behind bars. “[When I was in jail] I was like, ‘I can’t believe I’m here.’ But I needed that. It was either that or I could have been dead. I think that God gave me a second chance to get my life together, and I got my life together.”

Shay’s two-year tenure at Greyston began with inspecting brownies before progressing to work on the Whole Foods

line. She now has medical benefits, social media and marketing skills and is training to be a supervisor. She says she feels empowered by the way the Greyston team believes in her, and she’s tried to jump on every opportunity that has come her way. “I wake up every day looking forward to coming here and doing my job,” says Shay. “I feel comfortable talking to [co-workers] about what I’m going through, and they feel the same towards me. It’s been very therapeutic. Of course, the smell is great

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around here, too... I don’t even want to go home sometimes.”

Graduates of Together We Bake, an eight-week personal development and food services training program for women in Alexandria, Virginia, on the outskirts of Washington, DC, echo Shay’s sentiments. The apprentices – who come from backgrounds ranging from homelessness and drug addiction to incarceration and sexual abuse – are united by a love of granola and cookies, as well as their common stories. >





“Something we learnt is that they really need an opportunity to start healing,” says Stephanie Wright, a trained social worker who co-founded the Together We Bake program in 2012. “We don’t do group therapy but the groups we do are more like support groups. The women are helping each other and saying, ‘I was there two years ago, and you’re going to make it through. This is what I did.’ Just having someone believe in you, that’s a huge barrier. They’ve never had that.”

Colida Johnson, who splits her time between working as a Together We Bake program assistant and decorating doughnuts at the Sugar Shack down the road, is a single mother of three. She lives with her children in

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her mother’s living room and has a felony charge for a crime she says she didn’t commit, which required a hefty fine but no time in jail. In addition to offering her a job, Together We Bake provided a supportive space where she could talk about past trauma including repeated incidences of sexual assault.

“I had never spoken about that prior to this program,” says Colida. “It not only gave me a solid foundation to start over, but it allowed me to open up and share that information, because I was walking

around with that every day of my life.” It’s also introduced her to baking, a hobby that’s become a source of income as well as a creative outlet and release. “When you’re mixing the hot oil and honey in the granola and you have your hands in it, that, to me, is relaxing,” she says. “Then if you’re having a bad day and we have to [pound] out the granola on the pans, I’m like, ‘Okay, this doesn’t leave the door but you take the frustration out on the pan.’”

Then, she says, the granola comes out of the oven, golden brown and smelling like spices and honey, and the anger dissipates. ■



Stephanie Wright (R) and a Together We Bake participant

MORE AMERICAN ENTERPRISES FIGHTING CRIME WITH JOBS

DELANCEY STREET

The country’s leading residential self-help organisation for substance abusers, ex-convicts, rough sleepers and others living in poverty offers housing, education and an array of jobs (including driving moving trucks, making furniture, landscaping, catering and running bookstores) in seven states. delanceystreetfoundation.org

HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES

Another veteran social enterprise, Homeboy Industries provides baking jobs, vocational training in solar panel installation, educational opportunities, mental health services, legal counselling and tattoo removal for former gang members in downtown Los Angeles. homeboyindustries.org

HOT CHICKEN TAKEOVER

Based in Columbus, Ohio, this restaurant and food truck took Nashville’s famous spicy fried chicken and turned it into a business providing jobs and support for the hard-to-employ. hotchickentakeover.com

POP! GOURMET FOODS

Launched in 2011, the Seattle-based snack company was inspired by a concoction of microwave popcorn, cereal, melted M&Ms, peanut butter and marshmallows that founder David Israel invented in prison. Now it brings in income and guidance (in addition to joy) for employees who are ex-offenders like himself. popgourmetpopcorn.com