

Former inmate who turned life around works with at-risk youth at Trenton-based Isles



Andre Thomas (right), Training Manager, Isles' Center for Energy and Environmental Training talks to Jim, the boyfriend of the home owner, while doing an inspection on Wednesday, February 26, 2014 of a home that they had a furnace and water heater installed on South Walter Ave. in Trenton Martin Griff / The Times of Trenton

For The Times of Trenton By For The Times of Trenton

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FOR THE TIMES

Andre Thomas remembers when his life changed. He was sitting shackled on a bus at age 23, looking down a long road and seeing Leesburg State Prison in the distance, and saying: "Oh no, this is serious. This is not gonna be it for me."

Thomas, now 44, said that was when he resolved to change.

"When I was in prison, something happened to me. I had this spark, this newfound insight on how I wanted to live my life," said Thomas, who was incarcerated for five years for dealing crack cocaine. "I was determined to change my life when I was in there. It was at that moment when I made a conscious effort toward change."

During his five years in prison, which ended in 1997, Thomas participated in classes of all kinds, from construction to behavior modification.

"I wanted to come out and make a difference," he said. "Any motivational speaker, I would gravitate to those things. And I started helping inmates with issues. I became like the counselor in prison."

While in prison, Thomas would visualize the life he could have — the life he has now created for himself. Those imaginings are what guided him along the path of change. "Wanting to change is one thing. How to do it is a whole 'nother ... you have to commit to it," he said. "I used to visualize myself mowing my lawn at a house that I bought legally. And I visualized it to where I could taste it and then I had to draw up this blueprint on how to get there."

After getting out of prison, Thomas worked at Rite Aid and then in warehousing at Kmart. His first job in youth development, however, was with Millhill Child and Family Development Center in Trenton. Thomas also volunteered with a Millhill group called the Male Summit committee, going to schools and speaking with at-risk youth. While working with Millhill, Thomas met Marty Johnson, the president and founder of Isles, which led him to his current job.

Today, Thomas works as a training manager at Isles Inc., a community development and environmental organization in Trenton. Founded in 1981, Isles works with at-risk youth and offers environment- and energy-related job training.

Thomas started working with Isles' YouthBuild program in 2001, but in 2009 he switched gears and began working for Isles' Center for Energy and Environmental Training, training employees from all over the state in energy auditing, insulating and air sealing, and lead remediation. Since 2009, Thomas has trained more than 900 contractors on how to approach homes in a lead-safe manner.

Transitioning from working with at-risk youth to environment training, however, wasn't easy for Thomas. "I transitioned to CEET without knowing anything about the environmental field and building performance, so being able to make that change — starting out as a baby and being able to progress — I think was a good highlight for me," he said. "I kind of had to jump out of the boat and see if I could swim in another arena."

In 2001, Thomas joined Isles as the operations manager for the YouthBuild program, which is a program that reaches out to at-risk youth in Trenton.

"We reach out to those folks that are slipping between the cracks," Thomas said. "The goal is to really help them not just to get an education, but to also learn life skills. Because what I've learned in my journey is that just an education doesn't make you a good person. It's how you live your life and having morals behind it and I really wanted to teach the kids those things."

But to Thomas, helping at-risk youth has meaning beyond just teaching kids life skills — he's teaching kids who remind him of a younger version of himself.

"I grew up in the '80s, and they were some challenging times. For a young person growing up in the neighborhoods that I grew up in, we called it 'the crack era' and I got caught up in that," he said. "I wanted to

make fast money. And I think (for) a young mind that's trying to find himself, that's the easy way to lure you."

Thomas grew up in a single-parent household, but his father was a regular part of his childhood. In fact, his dad was his baseball coach as a kid, and they saw each other regularly. But when he got to Trenton High, Thomas made some choices he now regrets.

"When I got into my early teens I started to kind of drift away, and in my household love was more or less understood than expressed. I think I was well provided for. However, I don't think my mother and dad saw me coming," he said, laughing.

"I was just the average kid growing up in Trenton with some of those challenges where you have drug trade right there at your disposal," he said. "And as a young person, I made that choice, and I had other options."

A life on the streets dealing drugs seemed to be the only way of life open to him, he said.

"At one point I couldn't see myself past the streets," he said. "That's all I saw, and I kind of abandoned any dreams that I had as a young person and I became this street thug. But I had moments. I had moments where I would ask, 'Where am I going with my life?' But what happens is you had those quiet moments and then the music comes on and you kind of abandon that thought. Your boys come around and you abandon that thought. And sometimes, you don't like the quiet, because your life confronts you."

In fact, it wasn't until Thomas was in prison that he could take the time to reflect.

"I didn't really know what I was going through till I got to prison and I could reflect," he said. "I was learning things and I could say, 'So this is why I made those decisions.' And learning that made me really helpful to young folks that I know are confused and trying to find themselves."

Over the years, Thomas has influenced many lives working for both CEET and the YouthBuild program. To Dante Sanders, Thomas is more than just a mentor and role model — in many respects, he's like a brother.

"At the beginning he was more like a role model," Sanders said. "But as I got to know him and got to know where he came from and the things he'd been through, I began to look toward him like a brother, mostly because most of the things that he went through I was actually going through at the time."

Sanders graduated from the YouthBuild program in 2006, but to this day he still looks at Thomas like an older brother. In fact, whenever he needs advice or is making a big decision in his life, he'll always give Thomas a call.

Sanders, now 26, just bought his first apartment. But he said that without the YouthBuild program he'd probably be locked up or dead.

"Before I joined YouthBuild, I never pictured myself getting past 21. But here I am, 26," he said. "I think if I didn't have YouthBuild really teaching me discipline, and being consistent with my school work and developing me — turning me from a boy to a man — I don't think I would have been in this position to have a home."

Sanders refers to Thomas as a humble man, but according to Marty Johnson of Isles, Thomas has a lot to be proud of.

“He’s had enormous impact at Isles,” Johnson said. “He brought a street credibility to working with young people who had dropped out of school and were in the same shoes as Andre had been in previously. He found a way to connect with them ... he’s touched literally thousands of lives.”



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