**‘Correcting the Narrative’ campaign comes to Green Bay**

by [Editorial Student](https://news.uwgb.edu/author/stunivcomm1/) · September 27, 2023

GREEN BAY – Shannon Ross was 19 years old when he was sentenced to 17 years behind bars for reckless homicide.

One of Ross’s favorite quotes, from former boxer Mike Tyson, sums up his feelings on spending virtually half his life in prison: “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.”

Few quotations ring truer for Ross, who has done his best to atone for his crime, both inside the prison walls and as a formerly incarcerated man. Before he was released from prison in 2020, he spent much of his time considering the beauty and buffoonery of being human: the flaws, the forgetfulness, the sometimes “mind-bogglingly stupid” actions that can land people in prison. There aren’t “bad” versus “good” people, Ross says, but the criminal justice system tends to reinforce binary thinking like this.

This mindset led him, 11 years into his prison sentence, to develop and write the newsletter called The Community, which offers people in prison resources and ideas for the future when they return to society — neither of which are readily available living on the inside. That’s why Ross launched the project [“Correcting the Narrative,”](https://thecommunitynow.us/correcting-the-narrative/) a campaign that grew out of his newsletter-turned-nonprofit [The Community](https://thecommunitynow.us/) that aims to empower people with a criminal record.

And from 6-8 p.m. Wednesday in the Phoenix Room of the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay’s Union Building, 2430 Campus Court, you can hear from Ross and Green Bay Police Chief Chris Davis for a free panel and screening of “Correcting the Narrative.”

You can register [online](https://www.eventbrite.com/e/correcting-the-narrative-screening-and-panel-at-uw-green-bay-tickets-699279954167) for the event.

Ross is fortunate to have had family support and no history of adverse childhood experiences, a distinction he feels is important to make, considering the incarcerated population carries [a much higher burden of childhood traumas](https://compassionprisonproject.org/childhood-trauma-statistics/) than the general population, according to The Compassion Prison Project.

“A lot of folks around me inside were trying to make it day to day, week to week, year to year,” Ross said. “They had no idea what they were doing when they got out.”

**Resources and support can make a big difference for people with criminal records**

When Davis was a patrol officer in the Brentwood-Darlington neighborhood of southeast Portland, Oregon, known colloquially as “Felony Flats,” he said he dealt often with a chronic offender, to the point where he knew the guy’s mother and brother.

Davis ran into him in downtown Portland and he looked radically altered from sobriety: he appeared clean in every sense of the word. He was in a transition program following a recent stint in prison, had a job and declared to Davis, “I’m never going back to that lifestyle.”

But he didn’t have supports in his life and wound up living in a neighborhood laden with street drug activity.

“That temptation was always there for him,” Davis said. “And the next time I saw him, he was strung out and not doing very well.”

Seeing him in various stages of his significant methamphetamine addiction over the years changed Davis’ outlook. What could it have looked like if the man had had the right support and treatment options?

Not having programs and resources to support someone’s re-entry into society, Davis said, is a matter of public safety.

“For him to go back to prison after all that meant somebody had to be a victim,” Davis said. “There had to have been a crime committed, which meant somebody suffered harm. And it could have been avoided.”

After a prison sentence, the collateral consequences — the legal term for the restrictions imposed on a person after they’re released from prison — [impact a person’s employability 72% of the time](https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/after-the-sentence-more-consequences/national-snapshot/), according to the Council of State Governments’ Justice Center, a national nonpartisan think-tank.

In Wisconsin, the impact is even greater: W[isconsinites with post-release restrictions](https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/after-the-sentence-more-consequences/state-reports/state/?usState=wisconsin) struggle with employment 74% of the time.

It isn’t simply that a criminal record can negatively impact someone’s ability to establish housing or get a job, but there’s the mental baggage, too. The stigma associated with being incarcerated is its own heaviness, not just for how other people see them, but for how they see themselves.

For there to be anywhere from 70 to 100 million people living with a criminal record in the United States also means millions more who are in those people’s lives. And for Ross, that’s an important consideration, too.

“If you’re judging someone else so hard for something they do, the mistakes they make, well, when that happens to you or your loved ones, you’re going to have a very difficult time understanding how to grapple with them doing terrible things,” Ross said. “So, how can we expand our humanity?”

**Correcting the Narrative has the potential to change perspectives**

People who commit crimes are also human beings. It’s the big message that Ross hopes every screening emphasizes through compelling storytelling.

The movie itself comprises 45 minutes of stories from people living in the shadows of a crime who have since found success in the world.

Ross recalled a few memorable panelists of the Correcting the Narrative campaign. There was the formerly incarcerated woman who now works in a minimum-security prison. There was the man who used to work in a prison who spoke of how ineffective some aspects of the system are and how we can do a lot better.

“A lot of the policies, a lot of the hiring practices, a lot of the rental denials that exist are because of fear and a narrative that just is not seeing human beings — it’s seeing problems that really don’t exist,” Ross said. “We’re making problems just by seeing problems.”

If someone is able to find a job following a prison sentence, housing is the next barrier and can be the blow that sends someone back to prison. One study from the [National Low Income Housing Coalition](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57a0c10346c3c4c4a2f46b9d/t/580a365f03596e9f6d59e217/1477064289730/Why+housing+matters+for+criminal+justice+reform_NLIHC2016.pptx.pdf) found that people who received stable housing were more than 60% less likely to be reincarcerated within a year of release.

By contrast, one survey from the same organization found that nearly 80% of people were considered ineligible for or denied housing due to their own or their loved one’s conviction history.

Davis said that these systemic rejections can pile on negative self-perceptions. It’s not hard for someone denied rights like housing, voting access and employment opportunities to lose sight of their own values, Davis said.

Davis hopes people are able to see past convictions, because, as he has learned from his life in law enforcement, human beings are really complex.

“There’s this narrative that you get convicted of a felony, you go to prison, and that’s just with you for the rest of your life. Well, that’s not really true,” Davis said. “Maybe I can lend my voice to that conversation, just from the position that I have, and it resonates with the community a little differently.”

Recognizable attendees of previous Correcting the Narrative campaigns include former Republican Gov. Tommy Thompson and Debra Gillispie, founder of Milwaukee Mothers Against Gun Violence.

“They’re all saying the same thing: We can do a lot better here, this isn’t working,” Ross said. “People need to be seen differently for us to solve these problems.”