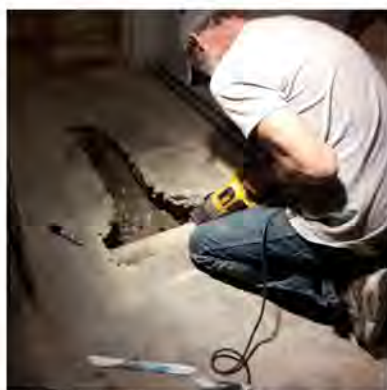


 June 26, 2018 in [Faith in action](#)

Reclaiming Dignity Through Job Training



When **Danny Peters** was released from the State Correctional Institution at Graterford in the spring of 2016, he was one of the fortunate ones—he had a strong support system and determination. But after 35 years in prison, he knew he would need job training and someone to give him a second chance to prove he was not a stereotype, but a man worthy of respect.

What he unexpectedly found was a friend and mentor in **Chuck Pukanecz**, a Philadelphia contractor with a passion to help others make the most of their lives.

Pukanecz, owner of [Center City Contracting](#), has spent much of his time over the past 18 months starting and running the Welcome to Work Program through [The Welcome Church](#), a Philadelphia “church without walls, ministering with people experiencing homelessness. The Welcome Church is a mission start of the ELCA with Presbyterian and Episcopal partners.

His mission is to work with people who are having trouble getting into the workforce and help them return to dignified, self-sufficient lives. To date, those participants have been men experiencing homelessness or returning from incarceration. He is intent on modeling for them, providing on-the-job training, and then encouraging them as they create a new life for themselves.

- [Related: How You Can Help Welcome to Work](#)

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A Warm Welcome



Chuck Pukanecz in his workshop.

Working with **Pastor Violet Little**, pastor and founder of The Welcome Church, and the clergy team, he came up with the concept that he says “made perfect sense on paper,” and in its first year has worked, albeit perhaps more slowly than he would like.

Pukanecz initially envisioned that Welcome to Work would follow a “pay-it-forward” model, purchasing and rehabilitating a home and using the proceeds to purchase another house to rehab, becoming self-sustaining. The idea grew out of the social enterprise and job training work already sponsored by The Welcome Church. “The fertile ground was there and though we’ve been working through

some challenges, we’re looking beyond, to what I initially envisioned,” he says.

Last year **Serenity House**, part of a home owned by Trinity Lutheran Church in South Philadelphia, was remodeled thanks to a \$10,000 grant from **The Diakonos Fund of the Presbytery of Philadelphia**, received in the fall of 2016. Serenity House now provides **living space for four women** who formerly resided at **The Well**, a micro-shelter that provides a place for women who are experiencing homelessness to find a safe place to sleep, compassion and community, sponsored by The Welcome Church. The **City of Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services** and the **Bethesda Project** are partners in The Well.

“... that’s huge for me to see that someone trusted me and relies on me,” Peters says. “I didn’t feel like a man when I came out of prison and didn’t start to feel whole until I had a job ... There’s no better feeling than that.”

In the past year, Pukanecz has worked with six men — women are welcome, there just have not been any, yet — in a limited-time training program. The goal is to assess a participant’s current skills and goals, discern what they need to grow, and then, over 30 to 60 days, give them the on-the-job training and hands-on experience they need to find meaningful employment in the construction field.

His goal in the coming year is to use part of a **\$20,000 Diana Davis Spencer fellowship from the Global Good Fund**

as seed money to move forward with the original intent of Welcome to Work: purchase an abandoned city home, renovate it with trainees in the program, sell it, use the proceeds to purchase another and so on.

As part of that fellowship, Pukanecz met with key potential donors as well as Diana Davis Spencer, herself, at a summit in Washington, D.C., in April. To further refine the enterprise, he also has been teamed with a leadership development coach and an executive mentor.

“This is an exciting opportunity ... coming together as a community to help others,” he says. “I believe this is why I was created. This [helping lead others to their own service leadership] is the one thing I cannot *not* do.”

Building Community

It's impossible to build community in a vacuum, and Pukanecz is grateful for his support system of mentors, consultants and advisors. He calls [the Bethesda Project](#), a Philadelphia nonprofit that provides shelter and programs for chronically homeless men and women, "a great partner."

In the coming year, Pukanecz plans to bring in a master plumber, electrician, carpenter and accountant who will do volunteer training days with his participants. "They will take them under their wings," he says.

"The most important part of this program is the mentorship," says Pastor Violet. "To develop this into a work program for our folks is so important, but things move slowly and there are challenges with this population, in part because many are still on the street.

"The key thing is building community and support so it's not just about doing one, individual, particular job. Rather they would have access to the workplace and opportunity and choice. The transforming issue is the relationships that are built. Our goal is to enlighten people's lives and unleash their potential.

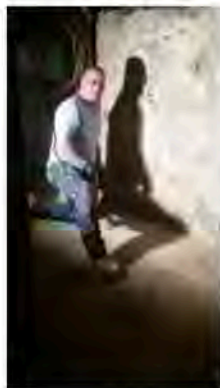
"Our goal is to enlighten people's lives and unleash their potential. People are hungry for purpose, for the ability to work and give back,"
Pastor Little says.

"People are hungry for purpose, for the ability to work and give back," she adds.

Eventually, Pukanecz plans to step away and allow people to "live into their roles of helping people. We are a community of people who do this, and I plan to make a self-sustaining social enterprise of this [Welcome to Work program]."

Within five years, he hopes it is a self-sustaining job training program with volunteer support from tradespeople and professionals. "[I hope] to have a graduate of the program buy one of our affordable houses, be fully back to work and fully self-sustaining ... to bring it full circle," he says.

A Living Example



Peters examines the foundation of the East Germantown site that was the pilot for Welcome To Work

"Danny is the first person I've worked with who was coming out of incarceration and he's been an example of strength," says Pukanecz.

For his part, Peters, who has worked on several houses for women transitioning from incarceration at Muncy State Correctional Institution and has a full-time job in construction, would like to work with Pukanecz again. Welcome to Work motivated him to help others coming out of prison make their own positive transition into the workplace.

"Being given that opportunity ... that's huge for me to see that someone trusted me and relies on me," Peters says.

"I didn't feel like a man when I came out of prison and didn't start to feel whole until I had a job, until I could stand on my own two feet and pay a bill with money I

earned. There's no better feeling than that. If you want to succeed out here, you have to work for it.



Danny Peters at an East Germantown job site with Kathy Brown, who was instrumental in his clemency process.

"I try to share with everybody what I learned from Chuck. Learning a trade is instrumental for men coming out, if they want to stay out. It makes you feel like a human being and like you're participating in society, contributing and paying your own way."

— Brenda Lange

How You Can Help Job Training Through Welcome To Work

Do you have a space you own in Center City that is under-utilized? Can you provide some mentoring in the trades, or in support of administrative functions? Can you provide a low-interest loan for five years or donate financially?

Contact: [Chuck Pukanecz](#)

Brenda Lange is a Philadelphia-based freelance writer.