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GUEST COMMENTARY OPINION

Lift felon barriers so people who made mistakes — people like me — can rejoin society | Commentary

By **MARCUS BULLOCK**
GUEST COLUMNIST | MAY 01, 2021

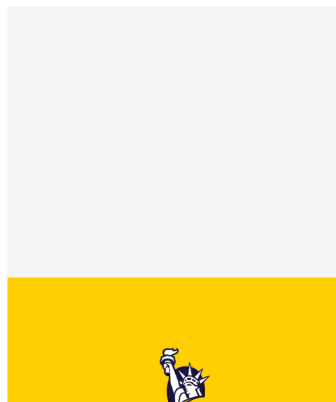


I was 15 when I made the worst decision of my life.

FEEDBACK

My friend and I carjacked someone in a mall parking lot and got arrested. I was still a child when I was sentenced to eight years in adult maximum security prison.

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Like any kid, I just wanted to open up gifts on Christmas morning with my family and graduate high school with my friends. Instead, I spent my teenage years behind bars and left prison as a full-grown man.

But returning home from prison is not the end of your punishment. In many ways, it's just the beginning.

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FEEDBACK



Marcus Bullock, founder of Flikshop - Original Credit: Handout
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Once I served my time, I thought I would get my life back and that I could learn from and grow beyond my bad decisions. But our current system of post-imprisonment punishment left me with a scarlet F — for “felony” — on my chest. For people like me who return home with a felony conviction, nearly every door to becoming a productive, contributing member of society is nailed shut.

When I returned home from prison, all I wanted to do was reclaim my life. I tried to find work, but every application I filled out — from grocery stores to real estate companies to retail shops — all contained the same

question: “Have you ever been convicted of a felony?” I applied to more than 40 jobs before I finally landed one.

But that job-application box is far from the only barrier. Floridians with a felony are prevented from getting occupational licenses or certifications for hundreds of different jobs. They can’t serve on juries. They’re often kept under close surveillance years after release.

We have erected countless barriers and obstacles that prevent returning citizens from truly rejoining their communities. To potential employers and landlords, I wasn’t a smart, dedicated young man with limitless potential. I was simply a “felon” — a label that hangs like an anchor around returning citizens like me across the nation.

And while Amendment 4 — which passed overwhelmingly in 2018 — began the process to restore voting rights to 1.4 million Floridians with felony convictions, countless restraints on the civil rights of returning citizens remain, making it nearly impossible to fully integrate back into society.

That is why it is critical that Florida and the rest of America embrace second chances and create simple, accessible pathways for returning citizens to have their records cleared. It is long past time to, in the words of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, “end disenfranchisement and discrimination against people with convictions.”

If we reimagine justice, we can help returning citizens become positive, contributing members of our communities. I know it can be done — because I’ve done it myself.

FEEDBACK

Through hard work and some fortunate breaks, I managed to overcome many of the barriers that the state and private sector put up in my way. I’m an entrepreneur and have built several successful businesses — including Washington, D.C.-based Flikshop, an app that enables people to send postcard photos to incarcerated loved ones and a business in which I’ve employed many returning citizens to help them reclaim their lives.

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My success doesn't have to be so rare, though. Studies show that just a year after having their records cleared, returning citizens are 11% more likely to be employed and are earning 22% higher wages.

Reimagining justice is the only sensible way forward. The vast majority of people in Florida's prisons today will return home one day, having served their sentence and ready to rejoin our communities. We have a simple choice: continue to hobble them at every turn, wasting their talents and boosting their likelihood of recidivism; or we can help them get a pathway to hope.

Floridians believe in second chances. Returning citizens deserve the opportunity to be a true part of our communities.

Marcus Bullock is the founder and CEO of Flikshop, Inc., a software company that builds tools to help incarcerated people stay connected to their families and build community.

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