

## ‘You’ve Gotta Change Your Hustle Around’: Ex-Convicts Talk Entrepreneurship at Jersey City Forum

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*From left to right: Rising Tide Capital co-founder Alex Forrester; motivational speaker and founder of Trumpet Family Ministries Winston Trumpet; Friends of the Lifers executive director Annette Joyner and founder Harvey George (photo: Jay Savulich)*

Annette Joyner has just closed her office door, and the phone is ringing. She dispenses with the call and says “I’ve got five minutes for you,” at which point the phone rings again. Between distractions, Joyner employs her significant verbal gifts to sell the idea that former convicts — former drug dealers in particular — are the country’s best salespeople.

Joyner offers herself as a case in point: When she was in the drug business, she ran a tight ship. She woke early, every day, to beat the competition to the street. Her quality control was exacting, and she was unforgiving of sloppiness on the part of her employees. A strong work ethic was her edge in the drug trade, and now that she’s legit it serves her just as well.

As Joyner explains it, the key to success in the legal world is remembering the lessons you learned in the illicit world.

“You’ve gotta change your hustle around, change it into a positive hustle,” she says, delivering the line convincingly, as if it has been well practiced. Or as if she’s warming it up before using it on the 10 people waiting in the converted storefront just outside her door.

It’s Wednesday, November 17, and Joyner is long separated from the drug trade. Now she is the executive director of the Friends of the Lifers Youth Corp., a prisoner reentry organization. (She also operates a catering business on the side.) And the people gathered in the other room are here to attend a panel discussion entitled “Entrepreneurship and the Formerly Incarcerated,” where they will hear that, employment laws being what they are, starting a small business is sometimes a safer bet than looking for work if you have a criminal record.

The notion that, for ex-convicts, starting a business might be easier than finding a job seems incredible, and a sad comment on our collective faith in redemption. Joyner nods at this assessment, but has no time for moralizing.

“It doesn’t seem right,” she says, but that’s the way it is. “As soon as they [people with criminal records] check the box on the application where it asks if you’ve been arrested, that’s it!” She punctuates her point by flinging a piece of paper away blindly, simulating the fate of every job application on which that question was answered truthfully.

After a very long five minutes, Joyner joins three other speakers in leading a discussion that feels more akin to a prayer meeting than a business seminar.

To break the ice, Joyner points around the room, selecting people she knows and asking them to tell the audience what skills they have.

“IT,” a man sitting in the back row says. “General construction,” says another. A woman in the front has been doing hair and nails since she was 16. These skills — humble, practical, reliable — are at the heart of the message Friends of the Lifers is trying to get across. To be entrepreneurial, in this room, is not to invent the next big thing — it is finding a way to earn legal money when every employer in New Jersey has flinched at the word *prison* and shown you the door.

If the event has a unifying theme, it is prudence. Start small, the panelists told their audience. Do something you enjoy. Understand how difficult working for yourself is. Know that you will doubt yourself, and when you do, don’t give up. Earning enough to support your family is not inconsequential. Don’t expect to get rich.

That message was accompanied by a healthy dose of encouragement, and a smattering of inspirational slogans. (“One thing I know: success is not in your past.” “If you don’t have a plan, you plan to fail.”) And the audience responded with hand clapping, head nodding, and the rhythmic, murmured mmmhmm of consensus. The audience offered testimonials, and by the end there were more than a few tears.

Darryl Dixon, 50, is in the second row wearing a burnt orange dress shirt, buttoned to the neck but sans tie. He’s here to pick up advice on how to expand his existing business. By his own account, Dixon is a man of many talents. He can paint, roof, landscape, or do anything else that falls under the rubric of

“general contracting.” He’s not shy about ringing doorbells looking for work, and claims to love his profession so purely that he isn’t bothered when payment for services rendered is not forthcoming.

But given the choice, Dixon would prefer to draw a check. His entrepreneurialism was born out of necessity, not inclination. He is two years clean of drugs, and a little more than a year removed from incarceration. For him, self employment is a way to establish a reputation, and stay on track while time passes and his indiscretions fade into the background.

“It’s a bridge to what I want,” he says.

His dream?

“When I’m 60, I want to be a superintendent for a school, or a large housing complex,” he says. Dixon’s realistic, incremental plan is just the type the panel is pitching.

Seated on the far left of the panelists’ table is Alex Forrester, the odd man out. He is unknown to most of the audience, and the only panelist who does not mention a criminal record.

Forrester is the co-founder of Rising Tide Capital, a Jersey City-based nonprofit dedicated to assisting “struggling entrepreneurs and communities to build strong businesses that transform lives.” And he is the link between this forum and Global Entrepreneurship Week, an international series of events (of which this is one) designed to spur commercial innovation and encourage the efforts of potential business people.

Like the other panelists, Forrester’s speech is a variation on the theme that business ambitions should start humble. You don’t need to invest in a storefront to be taken seriously, he says. The business you start may begin as a part-time endeavor, an adjunct to a job working for someone else. And do something you love, because if you don’t you’ll learn to hate it.

Rising Tide Capital’s hallmark service is the Community Business Academy, an 11-week business planning and management course they offer twice a year. While Forrester describes the academy, he has the rapt attention of the audience. Tuition is \$3,000 a semester, but entirely covered by a scholarship. After graduation, Rising Tide connects a select few alumni to lenders willing to give small, low-interest loans to new entrepreneurs. A criminal record, Forrester says, is not an absolute bar to receiving such a loan.

The event ends after Forrester delivers the line: “When you create a job for yourself or your neighbor you’re the biggest hero in the country.” And when it does, the prospect of attending the Community Business Academy, and then borrowing the capital needed to launch a business, compels most of the audience forward for more information. Annette Joyner may be right that former drug dealers are the best salespeople in the country, but it was Forrester that gave the hardest sell of the afternoon.