

## **Is There Hope on Hi Hope Road? A Prison Welding Training Program Offers Offenders a Second Chance**

by Carolyn Harvey  
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Shontese Renfroe Wilson is adamant that she never wants to see the visitors at her work again.

As the Job Training Coordinator at the Gwinnett Correctional Institute in Lawrenceville, Georgia, Wilson runs vocational programs that offer the “visitors”--offenders at the medium- to minimum-security facility--a fighting chance at success after prison. The prison, located on the ironically named Hi Hope Road, houses 800 offenders.

I’m speaking to Wilson today on the phone. Prison security and inmate privacy concerns prohibit me from visiting in person. Cher Brister, Director of Continuing Education at Gwinnett Technical College, arranged our meeting, and sits with me in a quiet conference room on the Gwinnett Tech campus on a hot summer morning.

Wilson’s background is in public service. She started her career working with juvenile offenders charged as adults, coordinating job training programs. She now works with the all-male population at GCI, many of whom are incarcerated for violent offenses like rape, armed robbery, and murder.

She is quick to support the offenders. Her experience tells her that offenders are completely dedicated to bettering themselves during their time in prison, because they never want to return.

“No one wakes up in the morning and says, ‘I don’t want to be successful.’ There’s usually situations that take place that hinder [offenders] from reaching their highest potential,” she relates. “Obviously, they know that it’s not successful, the route they’ve been taking, so they are eager to have access to another opportunity and a successful life.”

One opportunity Wilson offers the offenders at GCI is the welding program. Developed with nearby Gwinnett Tech, it answers the need that employers have in Gwinnett County and throughout Georgia for dedicated, skilled employees who want to work. For these offenders, a strong ethic of hard work is essential for success even before they’re hired.

“Our facility...is a prison workcamp, which means that...when they come to our facility, they’re going to have an assigned detail. That assigned detail starts usually around 6:30 to 7:00 o’clock in the morning. So they know that they’re supposed to be dressed, have breakfast, and be prepared to actually go to their work,” Wilson explains. She also says there’s no financial gain for the offender, which actually makes them work harder, saying they are “determined” and “eager to actually put their skills to use.”

In Gwinnett County, offenders are often assigned to work details maintaining county parks and roads, trimming the relentless kudzu and pruning colorful crape myrtle trees in the over 400 square miles of Gwinnett County. But it's the dignity of work--having a job, being relied upon, serving a purpose, and seeing immediate results--that Wilson believes is key for these offenders to have success once they are released from GCI and returned into society.

"I'm passionate about it because I want to make sure that these offenders have an opportunity to be just as successful as the person [who didn't offend]...because they're going to live in my community," declares Wilson.

Wilson's voice is clear and direct. Her no-nonsense, practical approach to leadership is honest and to-the-point, but is never lacking in praise for the offenders who reach success after release.

"When we had the graduation the other Friday, [and Wilson] has the graduates turn around and there were community leaders in the audience," says Brister. "Their families are there, you know, instructors, friends, and she says, 'This is your future workforce. Take a look at these guys, because these guys are going to be your neighbors [who] are going to be working with you, and now they have this skill, so you know that they're going to be on the right track.' So that's great. That's one of my favorite parts of the graduation."

### *Local Solutions*

According to the Georgia Department of Corrections, there are 52,000 felony offenders housed in 34 prisons across the state--prisons just like the Gwinnett Correctional Institute. While each prison is charged with offering rehabilitation services to prepare offenders for release into society, there is no standard offering for vocational education across the state.

Part of this is by design. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 provides funding to help people with job training and placement. In Georgia, WIOA-funded services are provided primarily through the Technical College System and regional workforce development offices. The Technical College System of Georgia works with area employers to develop the workforce needed in each locale. Because industries differ throughout the state, each region's needs are different. There's no one-size-fits-all solution.

But what usually does work are jobs in the construction trades--but, as Wilson discovered, only certain segments of the construction trades. Since welders almost never work in a private residence, welding was a great choice for this program, according to Wilson.

"With welding, there's very little background checks done. And on top of that, a lot of our offenders already came with some type of experience," she says.

With an average starting wage of \$20 per hour, Wilson saw the tremendous opportunity offered with welding. She then spoke with employers to gauge interest in hiring ex-offenders. Only a few were open to it. She concentrated with those employers to build the welding program at GCI.

To enroll in the welding program, offenders must first have a high school diploma or GED. They then enter a 16-week certificate program taught in a welding lab on site at GCI. Classes are held in the afternoons, after the work details are completed, and features a lab and equipment welders use in the field. The goal is to create a training environment as realistic as possible. Offenders are also given soft-skills and employability training.

Because the welding program uses WIOA funds, federal guidelines mandate a one year of graduate tracking. Wilson follows the graduates for two years, focusing on job placement and job retention. To date, the two classes of welding graduates--25 offenders in all--have all found jobs upon release, with 88% of those individuals still working after the first year, or in another WIOA-approved program. Other prison job development programs maintain a retention rate of 81% after the first year.

Without the partnership of Gwinnett Tech, the prison welding program wouldn't exist. Brister credits this to the "flagship" status of Gwinnett Tech within the Technical College System of Georgia, and the relationships that Gwinnett Tech maintains with employers and the Atlanta Regional Commission. "You have three very big state institutions working together," she says. "It's the whole package."

### *National Reach*

According to the National Center for Construction Education and Research, a Florida-based advocacy and training organization advocating for the industry, ex-offenders are becoming a reliable pipeline for construction trade workers. Two such programs are accredited by NCCER in Colorado and Louisiana, with thousands of graduates. While the Gwinnett program isn't nationally accredited, it is backed by a recognized curriculum.

The demand for skilled tradesworkers like welders is high. Industry estimates show that 20 percent of construction tradesworkers will retire in the next decade, and that millennials will make up 75 percent of the construction workforce by 2025. NCCER is also quick to point out that in the past, the majority of construction trades knowledge was passed in a mentor-mentee relationship. That takes working in close quarters with someone, much like an apprentice would shadow a master worker in the past. When offenders are in construction trades training programs, they are a captive audience.

"These type of opportunities basically give the offenders access to a different mindset," says Wilson. "So while they're actually going through this program, they're usually on the end of their sentence and they want to have something to help them change the way that they've been doing things in the past."

Wilson also recognizes the uphill battle that offenders face. Not every employer will be keen on hiring an ex-offender, she concedes. A solid education, backed with a Gwinnett Tech credential, is just one part of the solution. Brister says that tapping into the program's advisory board--local to the Gwinnett community--is also key.

"So luckily for us, we've got a good solid board of directors that can go out into the community and help us even more...And do you feel like having the backing of that board of directors who's active in the community helps too with the legitimacy of this program? Oh yeah...I could set up a program where I'm going to train people to groom dogs or whatever. Right. But if I don't have any connections, is it really going to go anywhere?"

Even legislation like "ban the box" initiatives, designed to omit questions about felony or misdemeanor convictions on employment applications, are not always as effective as intended.

"...[Ban the Box] does not stop an employer from asking you whether or not you've been incarcerated or been convicted of a misdemeanor or felony," concedes Wilson. "[Employers] have the right to ask you whatever questions they choose to in the interview...But we try to [develop] about a 30-second summary when the offender goes to an interview...and the employer asks you, 'Have you ever been convicted of a misdemeanor or a felony?' Now's the time that you take that 30-second summary. And you sell yourself. 'Yes, I have. However, I served my time and during that time, these are the skills that I've actually gained.'"

Because of the success of the welding program at GCI, Wilson steadfastly believes in second chances. "We have all required them," she says, "and we all should get them."



The Hi Hope Road street sign hangs over busy SR 316 in Lawrenceville, Georgia. The Gwinnett Correctional Institute is located near this intersection.

Photo taken by C. S. Harvey, July 25, 2019.



Entrance sign to Gwinnett County's prison.

Photo taken by C. S. Harvey, July 25, 2019.



Directional sign at Gwinnett County's prison.

Photo taken by C. S. Harvey, July 25, 2019.



Warning sign by high fence and barbed wire at Gwinnett County's prison.

Photo taken by C. S. Harvey, July 25, 2019.





A high fence and barbed wire surround the perimeter at Gwinnett County's prison.

Photo taken by C. S. Harvey, July 25, 2019.



Bright orange work busses ferry offenders to county parks and roads all over Gwinnett County every day. Offenders work their detail daily and attend classes in the afternoon.

Photo taken by C. S. Harvey, July 25, 2019.



A prison work bus is parked at the Gwinnett Environmental and Heritage Center in Buford, Georgia.

Photo taken by C. S. Harvey, July 25, 2019.



Offenders, in white uniforms, speak with prison and parks officials at the Gwinnett Environmental and Heritage Center work site. Offenders constructed this shed in the rear of the historic Chesser-Williams House.

Photo taken by C. S. Harvey, July 25, 2019.