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Breaking the cycle of crime—jail—more crime—more jail: This is what AWE is all about.

Grace: A Graced Reentry

We met Grace when she was doing a jail stint that lasted nine months. During that time she completed AWE's courses and was doing remarkably well managing her anger over an arrest that had no basis. Shortly after completing the course, her public defender informed her that the prosecutor dropped charges against her—Grace was not the woman caught on the video camera where the crime occurred. "They made a mistake," he said. "We're sorry."

Grace was more than sorry. She had lost her apartment, her job, and her three children. "I can't even begin to tell you what I feel, Sister Elaine," she told me. "I can't even think straight now, but I know my first priority is getting my children back, even though I have nowhere to live and no job. Small chance my mother will let me do that though." Grace was right. Her mother wisely refused.

I expected a riot of rage to ensue, if not over this but because this was one more thing to deal with. Grace's stress had been mounting for more than nine months. It manifested itself in a number of illnesses. I tried to think of ways to help Grace begin the long, slow climb to regain her children. Thankfully, Grace didn't meet my expectations. When we met for lunch she told me, "I have to keep redirecting this anger. I have to invest it in some positive effort. My children mean too much to me. I can't get sidetracked by something that could separate us even longer."

I watched with amazement as she began her climb. Spending a few nights in a shelter was frightening. She had to sleep with her few belongings underneath her clothing if she didn't want them stolen. There were others things to fear as well. "I hate this place and I'm scared to death," she said. "I'd almost rather be in jail—really! But then I see my children's faces. I know I have to stay. If you can spare me \$60 for a bus pass, I promise to have a job by the end of the month. I know I'm asking a lot—on top of the clothes, food vouchers, and other help you've given, but I always make good on my word. You'll see."

"I'll pay this forward, just wait and see."

The economy was bad. Employers were releasing people, not hiring them. Grace went to the library daily, just the same, and completed applications online. She stopped in at businesses wherever she thought there might be any possibility of someone hiring. Her energy paid off. Her old boss had just fired someone. He was thrilled to rehire Grace—full time!

Shortly afterward, a friend invited Grace to stay with her until she could afford her own space. Grace accepted—with a promise to help this friend if she would ever be in need. During the next five months, Grace visited her children several times a week. She also saved every penny she could save. She had applied for Section 8 housing as well. "You never know. Something might come up." I agreed, but I also knew it wasn't as likely as her old job reopening.

I was wrong. Grace got a call five and a half months after she applied. A small house with three bedrooms would be ready for her at the end of the month. She could now have her children back. "I don't have furniture, blankets, or anything, but I've seen my effort and energy work too many times now to give up," she said. "I'll make it." Grace didn't have to wait long. An AWE supporter said, "We can't wait to clean out our basement." Another said, "We'd love to give our extra furniture to someone who can use it."

On a sunny Saturday afternoon, two trucks stopped in front of Grace's house. Besides furniture, we carried in dishes, towels, bedding, and kitchen utensils. Grace's tears and hugs stay with us. So do her words as we pulled away, "I'll pay this forward, just wait and see." We have no doubt.