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NEW DIRECTIONS

'Better, not bitter'

If not for blind luck or maybe divine intervention, Charles and Loutricia Tolbert might still be behind bars.

But they are not.

This is the quintessential story of fall and redemption — of two people who, in the depths of despair, summoned up the grit not only to turn around their own lives but also the lives of others.

Metaphorically speaking, it's about turning lemons into lemonade. ...

By all appearances, Loutricia Gibbs was doing well.



Loutricia Tolbert

The studious little girl from Folkston, Ga., had grown up and was teaching school in Orlando. She had no police record, not even for a misdemeanor. Her life appeared normal.

But a rage had quietly burned inside her since childhood — and one night, during the Christmas season, it suddenly exploded.

There was a confrontation with another woman, one she knew quite well. When it was over, the other woman had been shot in the leg.

'Prison needs you'

And Loutricia, her still-young life shattered, was entering the gates of prison, dispirited but with the words of her lawyer still ringing in her ears.

"Loutricia," he had said, "you don't need prison."

"Prison needs you."

Time passed slowly.

She stayed busy, taking anger management classes, attending chaplain services and — mostly — praying.

And thinking. Constantly.

She finally concluded that the lawyer was right; God had given her a mission.

"After almost taking a life," she says, "I wanted to help save others' lives."

She became a junior chaplain. She counseled other inmates and played a role in the formation of prison self-help groups.

She, in her own words, became "better, not bitter."

That was the turning point of her life.

Free, at last

When released on probation three years later, she was a changed woman.

Many convicts drink to celebrate the first night outside of prison walls.

Not Loutricia. She headed straight to Jacksonville and, that evening, attended a service at Titus Harvest Dome Spectrum Church.

Why go to a city where she had never lived? God told her to do it, she says.

Why go to church? She wanted some prayers.

Why *that* church? It was across the street from a distant cousin's house, where she stayed for a while.

A fateful meeting

She soon took a retail job, frequently offering counseling and words of encouragement to troubled customers.

Then, one day, Charles Tolbert walked in — and her life, and budding ministry, took another dramatic turn.

"I had just gotten out of prison," Charles recalls.

He had been a drug addict — an incorrigible one, or so it seemed at the time.

Charles already had been in prison four times when, in 2001, he was charged with eight more felonies.

He was facing up to 150 years behind bars. But, through a little luck and a lawyer's legal maneuvering, he got off with 28 months.

When he emerged from prison that last time, after having spent 14 of the past 24 years behind bars, he



Charles Tolbert

was a changed man.

Like Loutricia, Charles felt a call from God.

He, too, was determined not just to stay clean but to help others avoid his mistakes:

Charles came to Jacksonville — his sister lived here — and, being homeless, was allowed by the church to sleep in a home under construction on its property.

"I met Loutricia at the mall [where she worked] and began sharing my testimony to her," he recalls.

"She asked what church I attended, and that's when we found out that we went to the same church."

They discovered something else in common, too — prison — and soon they were encouraging each other's ministries.

A bond was formed.

Die-rections

His shopping trips grew more frequent and their conversations more intense.

A romance was budding. So was a joint ministry.

It's called Die-rections. You have to "die," or abandon, your old ways before having a new, better life.

A couple from the church asked them to speak at a high school. Pretty soon, they were giving talks at various schools and churches, including their own.

And drawing big crowds. At least 5,000 heard their first testimonial at Harvest Dome, says Phillip Brown, assistant to the pastor.

Both also were mentoring troubled people on a one-on-one basis — people like Kinshasha Valdes-Knotts and Timothy Bryant, who joined the two for a recent interview and gave their own testimonials.

One of the lessons of the Jacksonville Journey is to capitalize on the role models illustrated by the Tolberts.

Redemption, not repeated incarcerations.

A dark, lonely highway

Their message:

Failure to cope with bad experiences in childhood start many people down "those dark, lonely highways of destruction."

As Loutricia says, "Hurting people hurt others."

Let go of the hurt, and straighten yourself out morally, before it's too late.

Both came from single-parent homes, and the emotional scars had caused them to "act out" — the first step in a downward spiral.

The obvious message: Get married before having children and stay married. Protect your offspring psychologically and give them proper gender role models.

Watch your appearance, they say; people judge you at first sight.

And learn how to conduct yourself properly in all surroundings.

Their testimonials — a mix of preaching, poetry and drama — are effective.

And, hopefully, many lives have been forever changed.

'They also could fit you'

If not, they warn, there will be consequences.

"I found out behind bars that those blue [prison] uniforms are not tailor made," Loutricia is fond of saying.

"Just as they fit me, they also could fit you."

There is a "lock 'em up and throw away the keys" mentality in this state.

That's understandable; if convicts aren't incorrigible when they enter the system, many become that way by the time they get out.

But not all. Some, with a little encouragement, can turn out like the Tolberts.

And people like that need to be on the outside, keeping others on the right path.

Inspired by faith and encouraged by others, they set out to make a difference.

And they have.