

They've been inside, so they can reach youths about staying outside

For most of her life, Loutricia Gibbs-Tolbert had to battle demons that were bent on making her a statistic.

She grew up in a single-parent home in Folkston, Ga. She rarely saw her father, a five-time convicted felon who spent most of his time in prison. She



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was molested as a child and, for the most part, felt unloved.

But the demons didn't get to Tolbert then. She beat them back at age 19 by earning an associate's degree in

business administration and later a bachelor's degree in education. Tolbert was on her way to defying odds that would have doomed anyone else.

Then, on Dec. 18, 1999, all the demons that had been haunting Tolbert since childhood came spewing out.

In a burst of anger over a relationship that went bad, she shot a woman in the leg. The shot severed the woman's femoral artery.

The woman almost bled to death. And Tolbert was sent to prison for three years.

"I had problems with abusive relationships, and an absent father," Tolbert, now 34, told me. "I wasn't drinking or doing drugs, but I had been holding all of those problems inside. ... I was the type of person who tried to hold everything inside."

Still, Tolbert didn't let her demons win.

In prison, she found Christ. But she also found something else: A desire to do whatever it took to not go back there.

"When I was in prison, I would see people who had been released come right back," Tolbert said. "There were also people who had been in prison for 10 years or so, and when it got close to their release date, they would do something ... to keep themselves locked up."

"I remember praying: 'Oh Lord, please don't let that be

me.'"

The desire to avoid life behind bars is something that Tolbert and her husband, Charles, who is also an ex-offender, hope to instill in other ex-offenders, as well as in the scores of youths for whom the specter of incarceration is so prevalent, they either believe that it's not a big deal or that it's unavoidable.

They've been trying to do that through a ministry called "Die-rections."

The name is spelled in a way to encourage ex-offenders and wayward youths to allow their criminality and defeatist ways to die, and then to take up a new direction. Tolbert and her husband, who are members of Titus Harvest Dome Spectrum, perform poetry and skits to audiences at schools and institutions — and even at the Ritz Theater.

"We want to build a platform and audience to use poetry and drama to give people hope," Tolbert said. To find out more about Die-rections, go to www.dierections.net.

Despite the demons that threatened to derail Tolbert's life early on, I told Tolbert she was blessed.

She was blessed with the determination to go to college and to make something of herself despite her problems.

Her college success introduced her to possibilities in life. And unless drugs or alcohol get in the way, most of the time people who experience that kind of success don't succumb to a life of incarceration. They know that something is better out there for them.

So Tolbert's challenge, through her ministry, will be to provoke others who are on their way to prison to uncover those possibilities about themselves; to push them toward their moment of clarity so that, like her, they see prison as a dead end and not a revolving door.

Judging from my talk with her, it sounds like a challenge that she'll be up to.

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