
Employer puts his faith to work

'I was trying to be a good Christian'

By BETTYE WELLS MILLER / The Press-Enterprise
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Alan Taylor had worked at Coronado Stone Products barely a year when he was convicted of armed robbery and sent to prison for five years.

When he was released two years ago, Taylor said, he knew whom to ask for a job - his former employer, Mel Bacon.

"Mel hired me back," Taylor said.

Today, Taylor, 39, is a forklift operator at the Fontana company that makes manufactured stone veneer. He helps lead voluntary Bible studies during the morning break at work. He says he is a better husband and father because Bacon gave him a second chance.

The 67-year-old Bacon has given many men a second chance in the past six years. More than half of the 400 employees at his plants in Fontana and Perris have served time in prison.
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Some of the workers also live in six clean-and-sober-living houses Bacon supports through his Good News Charitable Foundation.

Bacon's commitment is unusual, said Jeff Fagot, the state Department of Corrections regional parole administrator. While some religious groups help find jobs and run halfway houses for parolees and recovering addicts, it is rare for a business to do so, Fagot said.

"Not a lot of folks seem to be interested in the welfare of parolees," he said by phone. Bacon "provides an opportunity to work and living arrangements. . . . I've been pleased with what I've heard about him."

How It Began

Hiring parolees was an act of faith for the veteran businessman who started his multimillion-dollar, tri-state enterprise in his garage 45 years ago.

Bacon said he became a Christian eight

years ago while he was having trouble with a former business partner.

"I was trying to be a good Christian, trying to figure out God's will," Bacon said. "One morning I had a strong feeling I should hire a different kind of people."

Not long after, federal immigration officers told Bacon that 90 of his employees - nearly half of his workforce at the time - had fraudulent green cards. Some of the workers he hired off the streets to replace them sold drugs, he recalled.

So Bacon began recruiting employees among jobless people seeking food and money from area churches. He soon discovered that many of them were recently paroled from prison or were struggling to overcome drug addictions.

He hired a minister to help interview job applicants and began voluntary Bible studies during the morning break.

Sober-living houses came soon after.

The results have been unexpected, Bacon and senior plant managers said.

People drop in daily to thank Bacon for helping a relative or friend, or because someone they know is getting out of prison and needs a job. Inmates from all over the state write asking for a job.

Workers have become closer, offering rides to and from work or collecting money for someone with a special need.

'A Lot More Tolerance'

Many employees who haven't been to prison or drug rehab mentor workers who have, said Marijean Baughman, an assembly board trainer.

"There's a lot more tolerance," she said.

Employee turnover remains about normal in a high-turnover business - less among the residents of the sober-living houses, plant managers said.

Sales have quadrupled in six years and continue to grow in ways Bacon said can't be explained by a stronger economy.

"God is blessing the company," he said.

"Sometimes it's challenging to work the way we do here," said Bob Iratkovic, who has worked for Bacon for 17 years and is

the production manager. "Then you'll get these amazing testimonies. The first time someone's been out of prison at Christmas in 20 years, or seen their child in 10 to 15 years. The challenge is they're parolees who will have to leave to see a parole officer during the day, or attend group meetings or court-ordered anger-management classes."

Bacon is a very giving person, he said.

"The difficult part is running a business and a ministry at the same time," Bacon said. "But it is rewarding. You wind up with some good people. You have some bad ones. . . . Most do not want to go back to jail. They want jobs. . . . This is something God chose me to do."

Sober Living

Clean-and-sober-living houses provide a home and structure for more than 50 men referred to Bacon by parole agents and drug courts. Not all of the residents work for Coronado Stone Products. Bacon provides transportation to mandatory church services. Residents do chores and attend substance-abuse meetings and Bible studies. Parole officers inspect the houses for contraband and the residents for substance-abuse violations.

"They need structure," said Galen Greenwalt, Coronado human resources director and a part-time pastor at The Vision Plus church in Glen Avon. "Those who come out of incarceration have a difficult adjustment. When you have someone telling you what to do every moment of their lives, they don't need freedom. They need structure."

About one in five of the residents commits another crime or violates probation, said Ann Simonetti, who formerly managed the halfway houses.

"Some people need a second or third time around before they do well," she said. "Most are successful. A few can't stop using drugs. . . . I've seen a lot of guys come here who were down on their luck. Now they're clean (of drugs), they have their kids back, they have jobs."

Nationally, about one-third of parolees reoffend and return to prison, said Drew Molloy, president of the American Parole and Probation Association.

More than 600,000 people are released from prison every year, Molloy said by phone. Bacon has addressed the two most critical needs most of them face, he said - a

job and a place to live.

"Most offenders are going to go back into the community," he said. "When the offender comes out, if they are able to secure employment, a stable residence and access to the services they need, and are supervised by a parole officer, they are going to make a better adjustment to the community and have less inclination to get involved in criminal behavior. It makes the community safer, and they're contributing to the community."

When parolees are hired, said Scott Ebersole, general manager, "we try to tell them we're less interested in what they did in the past than what they do here."

Duane Lockwood, 44, resided in one of the sober-living houses for three years after he was released from prison. Last year he moved into his own home. He has worked at Coronado for four years and is a lead man in shipping and receiving.

Starting Over

"When I came out of prison I had nobody and no place to go" after serving seven years for burglary and manufacturing methamphetamine, Lockwood said. His mother died while he was in prison, and the daughter who was 10 when he was convicted had become a young adult during his absence. His siblings didn't trust him.

"I've been sober 11 years," Lockwood said. "I have my own place and a nice car. . . . I have a fiancé. I've built my relationships with my brothers and sisters again." He sees his daughter and his 16-month-old granddaughter frequently.

Now off parole, he helps counsel new residents and is grateful for the chance to rebuild his life.

Some of his siblings have started going to church, he said, because "they see what God did for me."

Without the second chance he got from Bacon, Lockwood said, "I would be back in prison."

Work as Ministry

Bacon has come to treat his business like a ministry, teaching people how to work and lead productive lives, employees said.

"This is something Mel felt called to do," Iratkovic said. "The rest of us didn't

understand in the beginning, but followed along. . . . Before the change, (employees') personal welfare was never No. 1. Now he worries about individuals above everything else."

Adrian Yniguez, 27, whose parole officer told him about Bacon 18 months ago, said he didn't expect to resume his trade as a welder after serving more than two years in prison on gun charges.

"Mel gave me the chance to show what I know," he said.

Bacon also loaned Yniguez \$2,000 so his family could catch up on utility and other bills that went unpaid during his incarceration. Yniguez repays the loan \$25 a week and has worked to reduce his family's monthly utility bills significantly.

"I needed financial stability," he said. "If it weren't for Mel catching me up I would still be in a hole."

Taylor said Bacon has helped him live a productive life and grow in his faith by permitting prayer and Bible study at work.

"I need my spirit to be filled," he said. "It's vital to my Christian life and personal life. Without Christ I'd be dead or in jail for life."

More businesses should hire parolees, Bacon said.

They are not the most skilled workers he has employed, he said. However, "It is the most appreciative workforce I ever met in my life."

The way Bacon runs the company won't work for every business, Ebersole said.

"This is not an easy program to measure," he said. "Rewards come in different ways. Companies can always make more money. If that's what's driving you, then this is not for you."

However, every business could hire one or two parolees, Bacon said.

"Watch, and learn" ,he said.