

PROGRAM: The Choice is Yours

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By Brian Saunders, The Philadelphia Tribune

Kareem Walton began to speak on a conference call, recalling a moment that changed his life. Walton was a part of a diversion program, The Choice is Yours, through JEVS Human Services. He stopped to get some food on a particular afternoon, making him late for the program. While Walton showed up, he was not taking the program seriously.

That's when Nigel Bowe, Director of Diversion and Re-entry at JEVS, scolded him for being tardy.

"One day, he came over late, he stopped at McDonald's and got something to eat and destroyed it in class," Bowe said. "I jumped on him about it. Right, that day I saw a 180-degree turnaround. And I think he made up his mind that he needed to take the program seriously. I think he thought he had an opportunity that would set him up for life if he took advantage of it. And so everything I asked him to do and expected of him was right in line and then compliant. He had positive reports every time he went to court."

The Choice is Yours program celebrates 10 years of work, offering first-time drug offenders ages 18-30 an alternative to going before a judge.

According to JEVS, "participants join an orientation that allows them to join the one-year program if successfully completed. The program offers a variety of employment, education and life-skills activities and requires community service. In addition, program

graduates are eligible to have their records expunged a year after they graduate from the program if there have been no further arrests and all fees are paid.”

Walton said he thought his life was over when he was arrested on charges related to possession and distribution of heroin.

“I would have been locked up and had a federal record or tons of probation,” Walton said. “My charges were very severe as they were two school zone cases (despite the school not being in operation).”

According to Walton, the program looked out for him and set him up for success and a positive future.

“The whole program was very beneficial,” he said. “The way I was thinking, I was headed down the wrong path. The program helped open up my eyes. I used to think ‘eff everybody and their feelings.’ Now I think about others before myself. Everybody in the program had a major impact on my life.”

Jovid Hernandez was arrested for selling marijuana and became a product of the juvenile courts system.

Hernandez spent two years working before he was laid off. Then, a police stop led to him taking the fall for a friend over an ounce of marijuana. Because he still owed time on previous convictions, he was sent away for a four- to six-month sentence. That’s when a public defender recommended The Choice is Yours to Hernandez.

Like Walton, Hernandez did not take the program seriously. Instead, he thought, why did he need to listen to these people and would use COVID as an excuse to stray away from the opportunity.

Soon Hernandez understood that the program had his best interest in mind.

“Whatever happens, happens’ was my attitude at first,” he said. “But I turned it around. I started giving it my all and turned it around. JEVS is truly on your side, even if you err. They are understanding and changed my life.”

George Clark is the lead Employment Advisor and Case Manager at JEVS.

Being from North Philadelphia, Clark said he desired mentorship and to work with those dealing with early intervention and prevention in terms of delinquency prevention.

Clark said that the next step in the evolution of The Choice is Yours is developing a mentorship component with graduates of the program.

“So we’re looking at developing a mentoring component that we have our graduates come back to be on our focus calls,” Clark said. “That’s what we want to do to develop the missing components that give them a sense that you’re part of the family. And so anyone who has graduated, you know, we welcome them back.”

Even for those who may not have completed the program, Clark says they want them to know they can always stay connected.

Hernandez has stayed connected.

“JEVS became a part of my everyday life,” he said. “I’d spend time Monday at the TCY office, Tuesday at the rec center volunteering, Wednesday at the office, and meeting with a TCY employment advisor on Thursdays. They were behind me. They saw the potential in me.”