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NEWS

Former inmate goes to law school to help other ex-cons



Tara Simmons spent time in prison is now as second year law student at Seattle University. She wants to help former criminals like herself get help to get back into society. LARRY STEAGALL / KITSAP SUN

By *Andrew Binion* of the *Kitsap Sun*

April 16, 2016

BREMERTON — When Tarra Simmons was released after 20 months in prison in 2013, she found that she still had a hefty debt to society waiting for her, and it had been accruing interest the whole time she was behind bars.

She got back home to Bremerton but was unable to find a job that provided benefits and paid enough to support herself and her son. Saddled with more than \$6,000 in court-ordered debt, plus interest, she had to make a decision.

"What do I do?" Simmons, 38, remembers asking herself. "I said, 'You know what? I'm just going to go to law school and change this thing that keeps me from getting a second chance.'"

Now she is about to finish her second year at the Seattle University School of Law and works with a nonprofit called Civil Survival. The group assists people trying to integrate into society after prison and regularly holds workshops in Bremerton.

She has spoken at judicial conferences and in front of state Supreme Court justices about the issues facing those trying to re-enter society. She's also lobbied state lawmakers on measures related to integration after prison.

Many struggling after prison don't see many alternatives, and a significant number end up going back. In fact, state planners have estimated between 30 and 50 percent of all inmates will be back in prison within three years of their release.

Discouraged, feeling helpless to change the trajectory of their lives, Simmons said she knows first hand what it's like.

"A lot of people go back to selling drugs and committing crimes," Simmons said.

DEBT 'TIL DEATH

It's a struggle that Michael Shoemaker of East Bremerton knows as well. The disabled veteran who describes himself as an "old

biker" was released from his last prison stint in 2009, but has been clean and sober since June 6, 2006, or 6/6/06.

"That's part of the reason I won't relapse, I'll never have those numbers again," said Shoemaker. "And believe me, it was a hell of a day."

He pays \$25 a month toward his court fines, which total somewhere in the range of about \$17,000, much of which he said comes from interest.

He can't get a car loan or pass a credit check for an apartment. He is the caregiver for an elderly aunt. Without her allowing him to stay with her, he said he might be on the street.

"I will probably be in debt to the courts until the day I die," said Shoemaker, who along with Simmons has lobbied lawmakers on measures related to re-entry. "Unless I win the lottery."

During the legislative session, Simmons and others advocated for a measure that would have reduced the interest on "legal financial obligations," often shortened to LFOs. A version approved by the state House of Representatives would have cut out the 12 percent interest rate on non-restitution debt, which starts accruing at conviction. But a state Senate version of the measure cut the interest rate to 4 percent. The measure would have also prioritized restitution. The chambers failed to negotiate the difference between the measures before the Legislature adjourned last month. Simmons said advocates for the measure would try again next year.

Simmons formally asked a judge to wave the interest on her \$6,100 in penalties, which in and of itself had grown \$2,700. People can ask a judge to wave much of the interest on their debt

if they make 15 payments within the last 18 months spent out of confinement, Simmons said. A judge who requested he or she not be identified heard Simmons speak and paid off the balance of her fines.

Simmons doesn't have her sights on a career as a corporate or trial attorney, or service as a public defender or prosecutor, but as an advocate working for those in Kitsap going through what she went through: the uphill struggle to return to where she was before she was hobbled by addiction, crime and prison.

In 2011, Simmons' pill and meth addiction, and the accompanying crime trade, caught up to her. She found herself charged with a series of felonies including theft, possession of drugs and a gun. She pleaded guilty and for her last case was sentenced in Kitsap Superior Court to two and half years in prison.

She was a nurse before she was arrested, and having never been accused of wrongdoing at work or stealing medications — she worked over the phone and didn't have direct contact with patients — she kept her license. But when she got close to landing a job, her application got tossed because of her conviction.

Simmons and other re-entry advocates are pushing to "ban the box," or to remove questions from job applications asking about felony history. Simmons said it wouldn't stop an employer from hiring a felon — especially for jobs that deal with vulnerable people — but it would prevent employers from discarding their application out of hand. It's an idea that has been gaining momentum. The city of Seattle banned the question from job applications in 2013 and in November President Barack Obama

directed federal agencies to remove the question from applications for employment.

"At least it gets a person through the first barrier, so they can be judged on their qualifications and accomplishments," Simmons said.

The two reforms work together, she said.

"If a person can get a job, they can pay off their debt," Simmons said. "If they can't get a job, they can't pay off their debt."

Simmons said there are a number of factors that helped her along the way. There were all the volunteers and faith-based organizations who assisted her, the access to treatment for her addiction and her higher power who was looking out for her. Also, when she got out of prison, she had full custody of her son.

"I had him to live for too," she said.

Civil Survival will hold a re-entry workshop at noon on Saturday, April 23 at Our Savior Lutheran Church, 1015 Veneta Ave., Bremerton.



About Andrew Binion

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