

Valerie has been in and out of prison since the age of 22, and she's soon to turn 40. She's faced four incarcerations, the longest being two and a half years, for drug possession, theft, and prostitution, all acts to obtain one thing: her next drug fix. After her first three releases, Valerie, armed with a bus ticket and \$50 provided by Florida State Corrections, boarded a Greyhound bus headed to her hometown of St. Petersburg, Florida. There, she would return to the same people, house, and drug use habits that led to her incarceration. Valerie realized, after returning to prison for a fourth time, that a change was needed to prevent her from falling back into old habits.

Determined to avoid St. Petersburg, she attended a prison reentry fair that aims to display various reentry programs and the services they offer. Rebecca Davis, founder and Executive Director of R.E.S.T.O.R.E. Duval, participated in the fair and spoke with Valerie about the support her organization provides. Upon her release and being selected through the application process, Valerie moved to Jacksonville, Florida, to live at the R.E.S.T.O.R.E. house.

Unlike many reentry homes, R.E.S.T.O.R.E. hand-selects residents motivated to improve their lives. not wasting resources that other women could utilize. Many homes accept any candidate and charge an initial \$200 application fee and a \$150 rent deposit. Valerie described their motivations as check collecting rather than helping residents succeed. Often, reentry houses offer a place to stay with no additional resources, making recidivism, the tendency to reoffend, a high possibility for residents who cannot find a job due to their status as a convicted felon. If residents cannot meet the strict expectations and costs, they're evicted and replaced by a new resident, often returning to the same circumstances that led to their incarceration. Rebecca understands that change cannot be forced, which is why she selects women who want to succeed. Valerie matched the outlook necessary, explaining that she came to R.E.S.T.O.R.E. "ready to

go!” This determination was immediately tested, as the prison issued a one-way ticket to Georgia that Valerie believed was a one-way ticket to Jacksonville. She realized the mistake well on the way to Georgia, and called Rebecca to update her on the situation. Valerie is certain that most reentry homes would have told her to figure it out or lose her spot, but Rebecca paid for her Uber to Valdosta, Georgia, personally picked her up, and drove her the rest of the way to Jacksonville. Valerie knew instantly that R.E.S.T.O.R.E. was the right place for her, and, inspired by Rebecca’s kindness and compassion, said, “I’m going to be the best resident you have!”

There are currently two R.E.S.T.O.R.E. reentry houses, each a four-bedroom, three-bathroom house that comfortably accommodates six ladies, two per room, and one house manager. Each house is located near multiple bus lines, making transportation accessible for residents without a driver's license. Before construction, Rebecca gathered suggestions from future residents on what they would like in the space. Based on their input, she included extra storage under the beds and a personal closet for each resident. Valerie now lives in the second reentry house and has earned a single bedroom with its own TV, a privilege granted to those who take initiative within the program. A new quadplex apartment building is now under construction to offer affordable rent and full amenities to R.E.S.T.O.R.E. women who are ready for independent living. While Valerie looks forward to moving in when the time is right, she’s thriving and content with her current situation.

Rebecca spends the first three days with residents once they arrive at the R.E.S.T.O.R.E. house. This helps them get settled and set up for success. They start at the local Sheriff’s office to register as a convicted felon, then go to Walmart for basic clothing and undergarments. Each resident is provided a laundry basket full of what Valerie describes as “every hygiene item you could need,” and three large bags packed with clothing to wear until they can purchase their own.

Valerie mused that classy women donate the clothing, and the high-quality items help residents “look good, feel good, and do good.” Rebecca even purchased a cellphone for Valerie, eliminating communication and job search barriers.

R.E.S.T.O.R.E. makes great efforts to prioritize internal growth alongside external resources, implementing programs such as Operation New Hope and Optimism to the Future to equip residents with tools to succeed. Operation New Hope is a job training program that teaches professionalism, requiring residents to arrive in business casual attire. This program helps them obtain IDs, birth certificates, and other necessary documents. Additionally, residents who complete three months of job training get three months of their program fee covered, providing an opportunity to save money and job hunt without stress. Optimism to the Future is a monthly workshop that allows residents to build their skill set for the future. This month's lesson centers on the importance of customer service both personally and professionally.

Valerie is a waitress at a local steakhouse and says that the restaurant likes to hire R.E.S.T.O.R.E. women for their hardworking and reliable nature. Though pouring and serving alcohol is a requirement for Valerie's job, she hasn't felt the urge to drink or use drugs. She attributes this to the mental health and substance use counselors at R.E.S.T.O.R.E., who helped her “heal from the inside out.” Additional literacy and education services are available for residents seeking to increase their knowledge, gain confidence, and create future career opportunities.

Strict rules are common in many reentry homes, such as an 8 PM curfew and no contact with the outside world for 60 days after arrival. This creates additional barriers for residents who work late or have loved ones they've been waiting to see. Oftentimes, it feels like prison again, so people leave and return to the same bad habits. R.E.S.T.O.R.E.'s rules are designed to

eliminate barriers and grant residents the freedom they need to succeed. Curfew is typically 10 PM on weekdays and 11 PM on weekends, but an exception is made for residents working the night shift. Instead of having to reconfigure their work schedule to meet curfew, they're expected to be home an hour after their shift ends to account for bus travel. Valerie clarifies that though this flexibility is a great privilege, "there's enough rope to hang yourself with," so residents must hold themselves accountable. Rebecca is clear that no second chances are afforded within this program. The organization prides itself on being supportive, but excusing every mistake stalls progress for all residents.

While visiting the R.E.S.T.O.R.E. house in May, I immediately noticed how clean it was. Not a crumb was on the floor, or an item out of place. I was shocked to hear that despite this level of cleanliness, no chore list existed. Provided with a clean space, air conditioning, computers, wifi, and one meal a day, residents appreciate their resources, respect the space, and clean up after themselves. With no time limit at R.E.S.T.O.R.E., residents are permitted to stay as long as they need to get on their feet and transition into independent living confidently and comfortably. R.E.S.T.O.R.E. has a 0% recidivism rate for graduates, a statistic that is virtually unheard of in reentry programs. With a focus on maintaining the dignity and freedom of every woman, Rebecca gives residents the tools they need to thrive post-incarceration. They even received luxury Coach purses on Valentine's Day as a reward for their hard work. Valerie is now looking forward to a long weekend at a beachside Airbnb that Rebecca booked. It's an opportunity for residents to celebrate their progress and relax.

When people hear labels such as "convicted felon" associated with the previously incarcerated, they think of dangerous criminals incapable of change who cannot contribute to society. This attitude is societal exile, encouraging those who have been incarcerated to

perpetuate their incriminating behaviors. Rebecca approaches things differently, upholding that everyone, regardless of their past actions, is deserving of dignity and a safe space to grow. When residents are provided with resources and services that uphold their best interests and maintain their dignity, a successful transition back into independent living is not just possible; it's likely.

Valerie came to R.E.S.T.O.R.E. with the understanding that, having been incarcerated four times for drug use, she fits the repeat offender profile. Determined to avoid a fifth incarceration, she frequently reminds herself, "I'm not going back." She created new roots at the R.E.S.T.O.R.E. house, becoming close with a friend's family in the area, and serving as Rebecca's assistant because of her helpful nature. She expresses her gratitude to God and R.E.S.T.O.R.E. for helping her discover that "life is great sober."

While in prison, Valerie joined the Joy program, a faith-based program that helps inmates build a relationship with God. She remains in contact with the program director, whom she considers one of her best friends. They meet up for breakfast when she passes through Ocala, Florida. This is the longest Valerie has been sober after prison, and the longest she's held a job. She expresses her gratitude for her current situation, saying, "I'm thankful to R.E.S.T.O.R.E. for changing my life." Now saving money, Valerie has discovered a love for shopping. Her current favorite store is Carters, because (with the biggest smile on her face), her son in Sarasota is expecting a baby in October.

Valerie's son recently hugged her and expressed his pride in her progress, an act of forgiveness that meant a lot to her. She carries that moment with her as she strives to be the best Grandmother and Mother she can be. Valerie's advice for those still struggling with addiction is this: build a relationship with Jesus, maintain distance from drug users and drug accessible places, and build a strong sober support system. At the end of our conversation, Valerie

explained that although not currently in a position to donate, she can spread awareness and advocate for change in those still struggling with addiction. She is living proof that change is possible, because even after a million chances, one finally stuck.