

Building a new life

70x7 Life Recovery helps turn 'cycle of incarceration' into 'cycle of restoration and hope.'

By Ann Byle | Photography by Johnny Quirin

Nakajabu Sims' probation officer told him that he was the poster child to see if 70x7 Life Recovery really works. Turns out, the nonprofit does its job well.

Thanks to 70x7, Sims, who has felonies and prison time on his record, is making huge steps toward caring for his family and working at a job he enjoys.

"I had wanted to change my life for a long time but was still straddling the fence. There is something about easy money from selling drugs and doing anything illegal," Sims said. "I sat down and realized I'd wasted enough time, and that one day, I was going to wake up and realize I was too old to sell drugs or work. I didn't want to be that guy."

Sims began attending the classes provided by 70x7, where he met Joe Howard III, the owner of a Junk King franchise who has spent time in jail.

"Naka was in the class, and we hit it off," Howard said. "He approached me on the break and gave me a card. And then followed up with me about a job."



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— Joe Howard III

Junk King owner Joe Howard III (left) with Nakajabu Sims, a former inmate who got a job at Junk King through 70x7 Life Recovery.



70x7 relationship manager Sarah Rhein (right) with Deborah Sutton, a 70x7 Take Charge participant.

Sims admits to some light stalking following a job interview with Howard. He wanted that job, and he got it. He now works full time at the full-service junk removal business.

"He's one of our best guys. I want more Nakas," Howard said.

Sims is just one of the roughly 300 people served each year by 70x7 Life Recovery, whose mission is "turning the cycle of incarceration and its consequences into a cycle of restoration and hope."

The program started as a ministry of Holland's Ridge Point Church in 1996. It began as a 12-step program for addiction recovery, in 2005 shifting its focus to serve those who had spent time in jail or prison. 70x7 became a nonprofit in 2007 and began exploring expansion in 2014. In October 2017, the Grand Rapids office of 70x7 was created when it merged with Criminal Justice Chaplaincy, founded in 1980 by the Christian Reformed Church in West Michigan.

The Grand Rapids offices are located in Kentwood Community Church's Wyoming location, 2950 Clyde Park Ave. SW. The church rents the office and meeting space for the six staff members and Life Recovery classes, which are required of those who participate in 70x7.

New Day Staffing was created in 2008 to offer on-site employment services specifically for 70x7 clients seeking to enter the workforce. It currently works with 23 employers eager and willing to offer jobs to those who have been incarcerated. Howard's Junk King is one of those employers.



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Of the 300 "returning citizens" who come to 70x7 Life Recovery each year, 90 percent are men and 10 percent are women, according to Executive Director Ben Rosa. Referrals come from parole and probation officers, word of mouth, churches and Friend of the Court. Once a referral is made, 70x7 sets up an intake interview and enrolls the client in classes that teach life and job readiness skills over a two-week period. Once classes are complete, the client is assigned a mentor and works with New Day Staffing to find work.

"We are looking out for the whole person, and we understand each person has emotional and relational needs," said Rosa, who also has spent time in prison. "Every day, we make hundreds of decisions, but a person in prison makes less than 50 decisions a day. When they come out, they have to make all these decisions and they have to make them all right. We are scared sometimes of people who have been in prison, but they are afraid, too."

70x7 CEO Tim Koning recounted the story of a client who had been hired for a job and worked on Friday but didn't show up to work on Monday. His mentor found him at his house and asked why he wasn't at work. The client said he figured they wouldn't

want him back. That mentor drove him to work and that client still works there.

"It really takes a village for people coming out of jail or prison," Rosa said. "We partner with mental health professionals, court people, the police, Friend of the Court."

REFERRAL PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES

Kent County Friend of the Court refers at least one or two offenders a week to 70x7, sometimes more, through its Responsible Parent Program, an employment assistance program designed to assist parents who are court-ordered to pay child support but can't afford to pay it.

"70x7 has really been a good resource for us," said Dan Fojtik, director of Kent County Friend of the Court. "Before 70x7, we had a hard time placing people with felonies. Employers don't often want to take that on, but 70x7 bridges that gap for us. We really like it because it helps people keep on track, and those who participate are pretty serious about getting their lives together."

For Deb Martis, case manager for RPP, 70x7 offers much-needed job prep for clients. "Many haven't worked in a while," she said. "I feel like 70x7 is one of our best partners."

Martis also was Sims' case manager when he got out of jail. "She saw me in a different light," Sims said. "She reached out to me and is still reaching out to me. I want better for myself so I can take care of my household."

Other 70x7 programs include Reentry Networking Lunches held monthly at Oakdale Park CRC Ministry Center. The free event offers fellowship for ex-offenders and families, a connection point for church people to get to know them, social service agencies to meet and offer information and resources, and mentors to share a meal with their mentees.

Take Charge is a life skills and support group for women involved with the justice system. Thursday meetings take place at Calvin Christian Reformed Church and include networking time and a presentation on topics related to physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. Take Charge runs three times a year for 12 weeks at a time and features speakers from groups such as Safe Haven Ministries, Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services, Promises of Hope and Arbor Circle.

Participants help with setup and refreshments, take turns



Top: Ben Rosa, 70x7 executive director, speaks with Kent County Correctional Facility inmates during a 70x7 outreach luncheon. Bottom: Ben Rosa (right) with Grand Rapids Police officer Dan Myers.

Want to get involved?

70x7 Life Recovery is looking for volunteers and donors with a heart for those coming out of the correctional system. The non-profit is looking for:

> People to take a risk and start to understand what 70x7 is about. As a business owner, CEO Tim Koning hired those coming out of prison, but it didn't usually work out. He discovered the missing links when he connected with 70x7 and now hires its clients at busi-

nesses he still owns. "It feels risky, but when you get involved you realize these are just regular people. We can make a tremendous difference in their lives and this is so joyful," he said.

> More experts in life skills for the Take Charge women's program. These women, an underserved group, need a supportive environment and information on budget management, parenting skills and other areas.

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giving inspirational readings and quotes, and share information about community resources. The 20-25 women who participate in each 12-week session are referred by probation or parole officers, substance abuse treatment and housing programs, Kent County Jail work release programs and other partners.

"This group gives women the knowledge, skills and support needed to take charge of their lives and emerge healthier, stronger and more confident," according to 70x7 relationship manager Sarah Rhein, who oversees the program.

MOVING FORWARD

70x7's plans this year include starting Stronger Together, a support group for families of the incarcerated. Stronger Together would help families with emotional support, educate them on the legal system and choices to be made, and help them make connections.

"There is a gap in this community that isn't being filled, and Stronger Together will fill that gap for people with a significant other who is incarcerated," Rhein said.

"We want to minister to the family, prepare them to navigate the correctional system and prepare them for the person who will come out of prison," Rosa added.

70x7 has a \$2-million budget for the Kent and Ottawa county offices, with funding coming from New Day Staffing, churches, foundations and individual donors.

"It's a lot easier to open your heart to starving children; it takes a special heart to donate to this kind of ministry," Rosa said. **GR**