

# Investments and Dividends: My Chance Encounter

*By April Pottorff, AIA*

It's a lovely fall day – I am wearing my black leather boots that are in need of some TLC. I am at the airport, headed home from the AAJ conference. So with an hour and a half to spare before my flight, I decide to get a shoe (boot) shine (and yes, women occasionally get a shoeshine too). The personable fellow working the stand assures me that the shoeshine will only take 8 minutes and welcomes me. I tell him there is no rush – I have plenty of time before my flight. I hop into the chair, he commences with the task at hand and small-talk conversation ensues, neither of us knowing where it will lead.

“Where are you headed”?

“Home, Lexington, KY”, I reply.

“What brought you to St Louis?”

“Work. I attended and spoke at a conference.”

“What do you do?”

“I am an architect”.

“What do you design?”

“I specialize in the planning and design of justice facilities”

“Like courthouses”?

“Yes... and jails, correctional, juvenile detention and treatment facilities.”

After a moment of thoughtful silence he says, “I grew up in the hood. The guys I ran with as a kid are in prison. I had my share of problems, but I got past them. I shine shoes and I also repair shoes – it's is a skill that I was lucky to have learned when I was 17. I am fortunate.”

I reply, “You are. If a juvenile hits the system their likelihood of encountering the system as an adult greatly increases”.

“I was addicted to heroin – I've been clean for 4 years” he says. “It was so hard to break free, it is so addicting”.

“Wow, that's great - good for you. The majority of individuals in prison are incarcerated due to substance abuse issues. In my work we advocate the importance of treating the core issue rather than punitive measures. Other factors such as literacy...”, but, before I can continue he says, “Funny you mention literacy”. He then proceeds to openly share his story with me – it is laced with pride and accomplishment.

He tells me that by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade he found himself struggling in school, unable to keep up. Embarrassed, and influenced by peer pressure – it wasn't cool to succeed, so he stopped trying. Thanks to classes he took while incarcerated he now reads at a 5<sup>th</sup> grade level. He is very proud of his accomplishment – it is a

hard earned bragging right of which he should be proud. He reflects on the death of his mother when he was 5 and imagines how that had an impact on his life's trajectory. He shares his experiences of stealing money from his grandmother and shop lifting – all in support of his habit. He served time in prison more than once, for two to three years each stint. He tells me, "I finally just got tired of it – I had to make a change". At that point, I shift the discussion to his post-prison experiences.

"Was it difficult to find employment?" I ask.

"After my release I was offered services to assist me in finding a job and I was working with them, but, because of my skill I found one on my own. I am not allowed to work inside the secure area of the airport until I am conviction free for 10-years. I can work at the shoe repair shop as long as I stay clean".

I inquire, "Do you, or have you considered counseling inmates? Wardens and providers tell me that programs led by former offenders are effective." Although he is not involved in a program like this, he reflected on his own experience with treatment and counseling and said, "I would rather hear from someone who has been through it than from a counselor with textbook experience".

At this point another customer arrives and my 8-minute turned 20-minute shoe shine is complete. The shoe shine costs \$7 but I give him the \$22 that I have in my wallet, shake his hand, tell him to keep up the good work, and I head to my gate.

During my flight I reflect upon the conversation. I reflect on the presentations, ideas, and rich discourse that took place at the conference, all centered on the theme of Social Justice - restorative, rehabilitative, and sustainable. The desire to positively impact those whose lives intersect the justice system fuels my passion for my chosen line of work - all in support of a sustainable justice system at multiple levels: the community; the individual; the environment.

I arrive in Lexington just after midnight. It is now 2:52 am – I could not go to sleep until I put pen to paper to share my story, or more appropriately, his success story. I am touched and encouraged by my chance encounter – the shoeshine guy is living proof that our time and efforts invested in advocating for a restorative, rehabilitative and sustainable justice system does pay dividends.

So Charlie, thank you for the privilege and opportunity to meet you – I wish you continued success and many blessings. Godspeed.

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