

Ex-con's rebound, offers guide

Special to Sentinel-Voice

MINNEAPOLIS (NNPA) - Misfortune occurs in each of our lives. However, depending upon our perspective, misfortune actually can be a blessing in disguise. In Arron Barker's life, a series of unfortunate events occurred. As he looks back on the events one-by-one and then as a whole, Barker believes that what happened in his life happened for a good reason.

"The bad things that happened to me were a wake-up call to guide me in a new direction and offer me the good life that I should have been living all along," Barker said.

Arron Barker was 16 and living with his mother and siblings in Detroit when his mother died in 1985.

"I was too young to understand, and I didn't handle it well," he said. The only thing that Barker remembers is jumping on his bike and riding off. "I must have blacked out because I don't remember anything else."

Barker says that from that point on everything in his life changed. He stopped playing the drums, stopped playing football and stopped communicating with his family. Instead of turning to family members for comfort or to ask questions about his mother's death, he turned to the streets — the mean streets of Detroit.

The older guys that hung out on the streets took him under their wing and taught him how to steal cars. "I was fascinated. I realized that I could make \$1,500-\$2,000 stealing cars and selling them to chop shops. But after a year, I began looking for something bigger," Barker recalls.

By age 17, Barker was selling cocaine. For the following 11 years, Barker traveled back and forth from Chicago to Minneapolis "dealing" cocaine between each city and state. In 1989, Barker met and married his wife. He says that he tried to stop dealing to have a normal life with his wife, but he was in too deep.

In 2002, he was caught. Police had set up a sting and caught Barker selling 126 grams of cocaine for \$10,000-\$12,000 to an undercover officer in South Minneapolis. "When I was caught I felt as if a huge weight was lifted off my chest," Barker said with a sigh and a smile. "No more hiding and no more looking over my shoulders wondering who's watching me and who's going to catch me."

Arron Barker was sen-

tenced to prison for 98 months for first-degree sales of narcotics. "Prison was the best thing that could have happened to me, because it helped me do what I had wanted to do for a long time — change the direction of my life."

While in prison, Barker earned his GED, earned a cabinetmaking degree, and participated for six months in an intensive program, in which only one percent of the prisoners who enroll actually complete, called the Challenged Incarceration Program at Willow River, a prison in northern Minnesota.

After he completed the CIP program in March 2007, Barker was released from prison to his home and his wife and was placed on Intensive Supervised Release for the remaining one year of his sentence.

Barker began to search for a job. He turned to the Minneapolis Urban League for help, fearing his job search would be challenging at best. He began working with Linda Whittler-Price, a program service specialist who has been very successful during her 12-year career in helping people with multiple barriers to finding jobs.

"Changing the direction in one's life, especially from an ex-offender to an employee at a company, is difficult. No matter how stellar an inmate is while in prison, he still must face the stereotypes and attitudes of potential employers in the 'real' world," said Whittler-Price, who has a caseload of 75 clients. Approximately five are ex-offenders.

Because of the challenges that they face securing a job, many ex-offenders return to their old friends and their old habits; so they go back to prison very quickly.

In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that nationally approximately 650,000 ex-prisoners are released each year; nearly two thirds of them are back behind bars within three years of their release.

Whittler-Price explains that employers often have legitimate reasons for denying employment to a former inmate: They have limited education and cognitive skills, limited work experience, and are often substance abusers or have other physical or mental health issues.

"In Arron Barker's situation, he wasn't a substance abuser, but he had never held a full-time job," she says, identifying an employment obstacle common to ex-of-

fenders. "But I knew I could help him. More importantly, he was determined to change."

Whittler-Price worked with Barker in her office for nearly two weeks helping him prepare his resume, complete online job applications, and contact hiring managers with openings in his field. She also worked with him on developing his interviewing skills and helped him select a business suit for his interviews.

Approximately three weeks after being released from prison and with help from the Minneapolis Urban League, Barker landed a job doing commercial framing for a construction firm. "It's been a blessing," said Barker. "Now I'm living the life I should have been living all along."

Whittler-Price believes that Barker's search for employment was short because the Minneapolis Urban

League has developed a strong collaboration over the years with a number of Twin Cities businesses and governmental agencies. They support the Urban League's mission and work with the Urban League staff to actively seek qualified candidates and develop employment opportunities to help advance underserved individuals and communities and people of color.

Today, Arron Barker has a new position as a heavy-service technician with Bauer Built. He lives happily with his wife and daughters in Brooklyn Center, and he is planning to attend Minneapolis Community and Technical College this fall to continue his education.

The Minneapolis Urban League and other branches in cities across the country offer a wide range of programs and services that can help seniors, teens and adults find and secure employment.

Liberians angle to remain in U.S.

Special to Sentinel-Voice

A deportation deadline is fast approaching for some 3,600 Liberians who found sanctuary in the U.S. from a deadly civil war at home. The Liberians have been living in the U.S. with temporary protected status (TPS), first granted in 1991 with the outbreak of rampant fighting. But with war over and a new government working to rebuild, the U.S. says those on TPS must return home by Oct. 1.

But the West African nation is not ready, say government officials, pointing to an unemployment rate of 85 percent and insufficient basic necessities.

"We don't have the housing for them," said Charles Minor, Liberia's ambassador to the U.S. "There have been years of destruction of our schools. Teachers have left the country. So we have a very serious problem."

An in a recent development, flash floods cut off running water to a quarter million people in the capital, Monrovia, this week, displacing hundreds of people and destroying or severely damaging homes.

In her personal appeal to Pres. George Bush, President Ellen Sirleaf urged a lifting of the Oct. 1 deadline. "Continuing to provide residency... will allow (Liberians in the U.S.) to continue to contribute not only to American society, but also to Liberian reconstruction," the President wrote.

Your Horoscope Says... Sept. 6-12

ARIES

Energy in the mornings will be more productive than the energy you feel in the afternoons. Work hard early each day, then take the afternoons off to play. Better yet, get your honey to join you in playing hooky from work!

Soul Affirmation: I give thanks for the chance to give.

Lucky Numbers: 31, 42, 52

TAURUS

Finding a way to do it better than others is not going to be hard this week. Share your wisdom with other seekers. All who receive your word will benefit this week. Happiness rules! Don't waste a moment of this perfect week on any negative thoughts.

Soul Affirmation: I create a positive world for myself by thinking positive.

Lucky Numbers: 11, 13, 18

GEMINI

Strong vibrations bring a series of dramatic interactions with others this week. Practice your charm. Let it come from the heart, and let your energy carry you upwards to your best, highest self. Keep emotions calm.

Soul Affirmation: In the storms of the week I find comfort inside myself.

Lucky Numbers: 25, 28, 30

CANCER

People often forget about the roaming side to your personality. This week is a week when you'll love thinking about "far away places with strange sounding names," as the song says. What you do about your urges is yet another matter. Home calls too. What a week!

Soul Affirmation: I smile as I think about far away places.

Lucky Numbers: 42, 47, 49

LEO

Move slowly concerning relationships this week. People are a little edgy and they don't know exactly where you are coming from. Make full explanations. Don't assume that they know what's on your mind. Most of all, stay positive no matter what.

Soul Affirmation: Clinging to the old will inhibit my growth this week.

Lucky Numbers: 6, 8, 20

VIRGO

Exercise will work off some of your excess energy this week. Take a walk and remember that your world is made up of many beautiful parts. The part you are focusing on so intently this week is not your entire world. Proceed accordingly!

Soul Affirmation: I celebrate with those around me.

Lucky Numbers: 13, 29, 34

LIBRA

This week is a good week to dump any extra baggage that has been pulling you down. You have too much potential, so don't throw away or waste your time on issues that will amount to nothing. Stay focused on your goals. Meet and spend time with people who will be able to help you reach them.

Soul Affirmation: The word is in me. I bring it forth.

Lucky Numbers: 7, 29, 44

SCORPIO

This is a good week for exercising that clever mind of yours. Luck will be with you in all endeavors you start. Luck is with you always because positive outlook attracts positive vibrations.

Soul Affirmation: I enjoy looking at the road of life sweeping just in front of me.

Lucky Numbers: 30, 41, 54

SAGITTARIUS

Your careless ways with money are

going to be apparent this week. Financial mistakes you've made in the past will be especially painful. Don't conceal the pain from yourself. It is a warning that you should take steps to prevent future financial crisis.

Soul Affirmation: I let my friendships guide my way.

Lucky Numbers: 5, 22, 35

CAPRICORN

Take advantage of the great weather and spend time outdoors enjoying and relaxing with Mother Nature. Learn a new sport, and spend time with family and friends. Don't take travel matters into your own hands. Seek a professional who will be able to plan a wonderful vacation for you without breaking your bank. Cook up some goodies for your loved ones.

Soul Affirmation: I change who I am by changing where I am going.

Lucky Numbers: 3, 20, 23

AQUARIUS

Everything seems to be moving along in a very pleasant way this week. Friends are helpful, family is supportive, even the sun seems to be shining just for you! Enjoy this harmony and count your blessings. Finish a task at work.

Soul Affirmation: The slowness of my week gives me time to refresh my energy.

Lucky Numbers: 12, 26, 36

PISCES

The bond that you established with your spiritual side works well in your relationship with a special person. Speak of the reality of the intangible qualities of life. Your lover will understand. Keep attention on the financial matters you've been dealing with.

Soul Affirmation: I obey the rules this week and avoid hassles.

Lucky Numbers: 3, 8, 24