



From the Inside Out

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Tina Cole says she was "the worst kind of drug dealer," but after serving her time, she's working to make the path to citizenship easier for those who come after her.

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Photographed by Andrew Spear

Tina Cole's life is a mess.

She's managing a restaurant and moonlighting at a bar. A week ago she became a grandmother. Right now she's running on little sleep, lots of coffee, and a pinch of adrenaline. And it's the middle of a very busy morning rush.

And she's okay with it. She can handle it. She even welcomes it. Sixteen months ago she had just been released from the Ohio Reformatory for Women at Marysville, where she served six years for trafficking in methamphetamines.

When she was released, there were many unknowns. Would she be able to get custody of her children? Would she find a job? Would she find happiness?

Cole is five feet tall with a pageboy haircut, brown eyes, and a vivid smile that belies her current struggles. She leans on the lunch counter of the Sparta Restaurant & Coffee Shop in Newark, Ohio. The Sparta is a spot that has become known among the College's service-learning crowd, as it's part of a larger, Denison-supported effort called Project Main Street, which is working on behalf of the Newark community. The restaurant is a gorgeous turn-of-the-century-style joint with a red pressed-tin ceiling, Gilded Age light fixtures, and dark solid-wood paneled walls. Above the paneling, the room is encircled with paintings by local artist Allen Schwartz '70—muted colors of people moving, chatting, playing music, people living together. The coffee grinder whines and Chuck Berry sings about Johnny being good.

The restaurant is a sanctuary for people like Cole. For more than three years, this nonprofit, just off the square in downtown Newark, has made a point of hiring "returning citizens," or those having served time in prison, as well as others in need of job experience. It's a place full of second chances. Cole got hers when she was hired in March 2015. And now the nonprofit's board has made her the restaurant manager.

Tina Cole's life is a mess. A glorious, busy, awesome mess.

The Worst Kind of Drug Dealer

When she was just 3 years old, Cole's family moved to Newark from her birthplace in eastern Kentucky. She's the oldest of three, and her parents worked long hours, so she was always in charge. "If there was a birthday party I wanted to go to, [my sisters] had to come with me. If I wanted to play sports, they had to sit in the stands while I played. I only saw my parents, my mom and my stepdad, on holidays."

Cole can't remember her mother tucking her in at night, or telling her that she loved her. She can't remember having dinner as a family. "I cooked dinner. Did the laundry. Helped my sisters with their homework. Did my own homework."

She played softball and would have to take her sisters to the games because there was no one else to watch them. Her eyes were on the game but also on her sisters, who sat, patiently or otherwise, up in the bleachers. As a teenager, she wanted more for herself. She dreamed of becoming a lawyer after serving in the U.S. Marines. "I remember being at the Ohio State Fair, and there was a Marines recruiting booth," she says. "After seeing that, I spent the rest of the summer doing pull-ups. I felt I'd impress my family if I went into the Marines."

And then she tore her ACL. "I was playing third base. A girl slid into me. I was in the hospital for a while. The Marines idea was shot. I was 15 years old. Almost 16. Just got my driver's license. And from that point on, it was like, so what am I going to do now? And then I met the man who became my husband. He was five years older."

He was also the man who introduced her to the drug trade. She had wanted attention from someone older than she, and there he was. Eventually he asked her to deliver drugs for him. Her first delivery was to a biker bar—a crack rock worth \$25. She found the buyer. He came out to her car. And that was that. Her life was transformed.

"I was thinking he was doing this because he loves me, he trusts me, this is going to be a great start of our life together. I look back and, no, he was kind of using me. He was abusive. He brought me into the drug world. Once you get in, it's really hard to get out."

Years later, he was arrested, and she took over the business. In all, she sold drugs for 14 years. She sold to all types, she says, neighbors, working class, people you would never suspect. Eventually, she wasn't dealing with the average user; she was dealing with dealers.

"I was the worst kind of drug dealer," she says. "I was a drug dealer who sold drugs for money, not to support a habit." On the day she was busted, Cole had hosted a big cookout at her house. Her sister-in-law was there, nieces, nephews. People were in and out all day long, grilling, eating. They played Rock Band. That night, while she was getting high with some friends, there was a knock on her door. A police officer asked her if she drove a 2007 Chevy TrailBlazer. He told her that some kids had broken its windows. She stepped out of the house to look at her car. Police surrounded her, and threw her against the side of her house.

"I wasn't scared," says Cole. "I took a deep breath. It was like a sigh of relief. You know, it wasn't a hysterical 'Oh, my God! What did I do!' It was relief." She called her mother to come get her two children. For the first time in years, she says, she knew she'd get to sleep a restful sleep. A sleep free of concern that someone was going to rob her in the middle of the night, free of concern about her drug connects.

Cole pled guilty.



Life Inside

Cole thought she knew what prison would be like—her husband had served plenty of time, and she'd logged hours watching prison reality shows. But when she got to Marysville, what she saw and what she ultimately experienced surprised her.

"Don't get me wrong," she says, "there are gangs, there's drugs, there's sex with guards, there's extortion, but only if you put yourself in that situation."

Cole says that when she got there, she was still living with her old mind-set. "At the beginning, I ran what they call a 'prison store,' which was illegal." She got caught and was sent to solitary confinement. She was given a gown, a towel, a washcloth, and an hour each day to shower and leave the cell. At night she slept on a thin mat resting on a metal slab. In solitary, there was little heat. "The windows were frosted over. I put my socks on my arms to stay warm. That was prison to me. Being in solitary, that was my moment." She realized then that she needed to change her course. She says she had "a nice conversation with God."

When she was released from solitary, she started going to church, to support meetings. She joined a reading group, learned to make jewelry from polymer clay, and got connected to a group that provided mentorship to women prior to release. "I decided I was not going to leave prison the same way I came in," says Cole. "And then I moved into honor housing and the dog-training program."

It wasn't the Marines, but there was structure to her life now. She had to be up at 7 a.m., keep her cubby neat, the floor clean, and her bed wrinkle-free. She was working toward something positive, a realization of her best self.

At a class on victim awareness, Cole was able to put words to, and identify, what she wanted to come out of her prison experience. The class was mostly for people responsible for directly harming someone—people convicted of assault, homicide, DUI. She was the only drug dealer in the class, and she was there because she believed that she, too, had directly harmed many people, destroyed many lives.

"We were talking about the ripple effect—like when you throw a rock into a pond and the ripple goes and goes and goes. It doesn't get smaller; the effect of it gets bigger. You can't pull that rock out of the pond, and you can't stop the waves. But what I can do is throw a new rock in."

Cole says her new rock is the knowledge that people don't have to stay in the situations they are in. They don't have to be in abusive marriages or sell drugs for the rest of their lives.

A Continuum of Care

A returning citizen faces serious questions: Do I have anybody to help me? Is my old community a safe place to be? Can I get a job with my record? Will apartment rental agencies screen me out because of my record and my bad credit, and the fact that I have no money to put down? So where will I live? Can I stay sober? Can I get support for my mental health? How can I get to appointments if I don't have a car?

For all these reasons, reentry is especially hard, says Wendy Tarr, an organizer for the Vincentian Ohio Action Network, especially if you don't have a supportive community ready to welcome you back. The stress alone can derail a returning citizen by causing addictions to resurface and exacerbating mental health issues.

Not every returning citizen has the same experiences as Cole, Tarr says. "There's a wide range of reentries—and this starts while people are still in prison. Tina had access to job training and supportive services while she was still inside." But not everyone gets the same services inside or the same support when they leave. "You'll hear stories of people getting put on a Greyhound bus with \$50, still in their uniforms," says Tarr. "This happens especially with jails where there are shorter sentences and few programs."

"It's crucial to have communities that are ready to receive people," Tarr says, "and programs that can address the issues they're facing. If we can do that when people get out so they're not just dropping people off, then there's a continuum of care. This is what made Tina's transition work—she had a caseworker, housing, and a job."

Securing employment is key, and that's not a simple task for returning citizens. The struggle begins as soon as they start filling out employment applications and must check the box stating whether or not they have had a felony conviction. An application with the box checked is often ignored.

In recent years the movement to "ban the box" has urged employers to remove the box, and some have even encouraged legislation addressing the issue. Last year Jeremy Blake '12, a Denison IT technician and member of the City Council of Newark, Ohio, helped write legislation to ban the box on city employment applications. After hearing the stories of returning citizens struggling to find employment and support their families, he knew that banning the box was the right thing to do. "So many people have been touched by the criminal justice system," says Blake. "They have brothers, sisters, cousins, someone they know who has been incarcerated or struggles with mental health or addiction issues."

Blake was encouraged to write the legislation by the Newark Think Tank on Poverty, an organization Wendy Tarr works with. The Think Tank has held forums to educate Licking County government officials and business owners about the issue. State governments also are banning the box on applications for jobs in the public sector. Ohio's ban was signed into law by Governor John Kasich just before Christmas.

On the day the Newark City Council voted on Blake's "ban the box" legislation, Tina Cole was there. When the floor opened for public comments, she spoke in favor of the legislation before the representatives of her community, the same community where she'd sold drugs years before.

"Taking this box off applications isn't just giving us a chance to get jobs," she told the council. "It's showing us that our community is supporting us, that the city is backing us and is opening more doors."

She said that if the legislation passes, returning citizens in Newark will be able to hold their heads high. She said that she worked hard to prepare herself for her return and wants to do good and support her family. She concluded by noting that "The last line in the Pledge of Allegiance says 'with liberty and justice.' We did our justice. We did our crime; we did our time. It says 'for all.' It doesn't say, 'except for convicted felons.'"

The room erupted in applause.

Haven

A month after she was released from prison, Tina Cole went back. This time, though, it was just to teach a jewelry-making class. "I felt guilty for being able to leave. A part of me missed home, a place where I lived my life for six years. I had butterflies all day."

Before she went inside she sat in her car and cried. She's not sure why she was crying. Maybe it was because she was remembering the trauma of being in prison. Maybe it was for the people she knew who were still inside.

Or maybe they were tears of joy and recognition that she would never be a prisoner again.

The morning rush is over at the Sparta, and Cole's daughter comes into the restaurant with her baby girl. Haven, she's called—a safe place, a shelter, a port of call, a refuge.

Cole picks up the baby and keeps talking.

"When I was in prison, I was so lonely. I was surrounded by 3,000 people, but I was alone. After 16 months outside prison, I feel like I've found my place. My day-to-day life is so good." She divorced her husband and now has custody of her children. "The other day my son said, 'Mom, do you know how much you've done in the past year? Most people wouldn't have done all that.' In not so many words, he was saying he was proud of me."

But the highlight of Cole's year is asleep in her arms. "I wasn't happy about becoming a grandma," says Cole, who is only 38, "but I wouldn't trade it. I wouldn't."

It helps to have the support of a community, to have a business to run, to have a granddaughter to help raise. She's not stressed. "Look, I can handle a restaurant—I have plenty of business experience," she says, laughing.

Even in this small town, there's so much life in front of her. "The thing about a small town is when you get caught, it can go one of two ways—people can know who you are and throw the book at you, or people can know who you are and give you a second chance."



Prison Stories

In February, Piper Kerman, author of the best-selling prison memoir *Orange Is the New Black*, spent the day at Denison. Kerman spoke to classes, visited the Sparta for lunch with Tina Cole, and gave a lecture to a packed Swasey Chapel. Kerman talked about her time in prison, the need to rethink sentencing, and how to better prepare incarcerated people for reentry, an issue that is close to her heart.

Kerman currently is teaching nonfiction writing classes at Marion Correctional Institution and the Ohio Reformatory for Women at Marysville—the same place where Tina Cole served her six years. She co-teaches those classes with Christopher Greathouse '11.

Greathouse says he never imagined he would be working in a prison. “When I was in the first grade my teacher told my parents something like, ‘He’s either going to do really great things or end up in prison.’ My mom likes to say that I combined the two.”

The experience has been eye-opening. Before working with Kerman, he says, prison was almost a mythological place for him, removed from his life. “It’s kind of sad that that’s the state of affairs—that my eyes had to be opened to the realities of prison.”

Greathouse says that the writers at Marysville and Marion are ambitious and talented; they want to learn; they want to develop their craft. “Some know they’re pretty good writers, but they still come in and work hard—an essay a week. I don’t even write that much. And some of these guys have read so many books in solitary confinement, more books than I have, for sure.”

But, he says, he has a different knowledge that he can share. “I think that my intuition about writing has largely been informed by my experiences reading and writing, especially by people who taught me to treat writing as a process,” says Greathouse. “What I really admire about those teachers, like Ann Townsend ’85, my senior thesis advisor, was going through this tedious, gripping process of revising, revising, revising. This is what I try to instill in the writers I’m working with: that the stories that make up your life, the stories you’re writing, are stories that you’re constantly revising.”

In some ways, Greathouse says, he’s doing that in his own life as well. “I want to involve myself more in human rights issues related to prisons. Now that I know people in prison, I can’t just forget about them. I can’t go on in the same way with the life that I was living before.”

Banning the Box

Newark City Council member and Denison IT technician Jeremy Blake ’12 was determined to help ban the box on the city of Newark employment application that asked job candidates if they had been convicted of a felony. A checked box was almost always a guarantee that the application would never make it out of the slush pile—which made it difficult for returning citizens to find work after serving their sentences.

Last March, the Newark Think Tank on Poverty hosted a forum at Denison about employment barriers faced by convicted felons or returning citizens. They invited state Representative Scott Ryan, as well as human resources directors from Denison, Licking Memorial Hospital, and many other local agencies and employers. Blake asked Newark’s director of law, Doug Sassen, to join him.

“He’s been in office for more than 16 years, and his opinion carries a lot of weight. At first he was hesitant and was like, ‘Okay, I’ll go to this thing because Jeremy asked me to,’” says Blake. “But then after hearing the stories of returning citizens, he also realized that this was an issue. He went back to his office and did some research and became an ally of the effort.”

They drafted legislation, and Blake worked behind the scenes to dispel fears about the legislation’s reach. The bill would affect only city employment and not private employment, but his hope was that if city government took the step, others would follow. Banning the box, he explained, doesn’t mean that an employer cannot run a background check; it simply means that potential candidates can get their foot in the door. That’s often the hardest step.

When the bill finally reached the council floor last July, the vote to adopt it was unanimous. And now the state of Ohio, as well as Denison, has banned the box.

Blake says that the movement to ban the box in Newark sparked conversations about other barriers facing returning citizens, such as access to mental health and addiction services. “We want to have restorative justice, to rehabilitate, to get people into relationships that are positive, not negative,” says Blake. “And we have to get to the place where law enforcement knows the neighborhoods better and can, rather than send people to jail, send them to get help. We’re coming to a place where we really need to begin looking at some people as patients and not as criminals.”

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