

# Unlocking Potential

There is some amazing work being done to give ex-offenders the help they need to integrate back into society, as Olivia Greenway discovers.

**V**ERY few of us will have any personal experience of prison life, even through our extended network of family, colleagues and neighbours.

So perhaps it's not surprising that we may have a stereotypical view of what offenders may be like.

Television often depicts them as self-assured career criminals who habitually reoffend.

But in reality there are many who are determined to make something of their lives back outside, for both themselves and their families.

But it's hard to get work if you have a prison record,

despite best intentions, and nearly 75% of ex-offenders remain unemployed a year after their release.

Like all of us, what they need most is hope, and there are a number of organisations offering a lifeline to those who have strayed from the path.

When Tanjit Dosanjh, as a young man, first visited his father in prison in 2003, he noticed there were very few vocational opportunities for those incarcerated – not encouraging if you had a long sentence to serve, as his dad did.

Tanjit graduated in optometry in 2008 and, inspired by stories of



Trustee James Burton training a group of volunteers in Lesvos refugee camp.

training programmes in Californian prisons, he first approached the UK prison service in 2010 with an idea.



The Prison Opticians Trust.

In the lab.

Although the prison service did show interest in the idea of training offenders in optical services, the existing optical contracts still had some years to run.

Undeterred, Tanjit self-funded a pilot project in Stanford Hill Prison and worked there for two days a week, training offenders.

In 2014, he knew the scheme worked and had the confidence to bid for proper funding.

By 2015 he had grants from three charities and set up a trust, eventually to be known as the Prison Opticians Trust.

The organisation is now the largest provider of optometry services to prisons in England and Wales.

More than 40 prisoners have now been trained, and 50,000 pairs of glasses made.

Their latest development is the newly launched Just Specs, where customers can buy prescription

glasses online, made by the ex-offenders.

One person who has been helped by this is Tamara, who was convicted of fraud in 2015 and given a 15-month sentence. It was her first offence.

"I was terrified in prison," Tamara admits. "I was living in an environment you cannot begin to imagine."

Fortunately, after a month, she was transferred to an open prison.

She knew she could never return to a role where she would be trusted with money, so she had to think of something else.

At her open prison they ran job fairs, and it was at one of those that she met Tanjit.

She trained with the Prison Opticians Trust on day release, passed her exams and, upon her permanent release, she managed to secure employment.

"Without the Prisons Opticians Trust, I don't know what my life would be like now," Tamara says. ■



The Duchess of Cornwall at the Clink restaurant, HMP Brixton.

The Clink.

## The Clink

Alberto Crisci is the mastermind behind the Clink charity.

"Almost all offenders are good people. Many of us need to change our perception and see them as individuals."

Alberto, a trained chef, set up a wine bar in Croydon, south London. The business failed and he was declared bankrupt, so he needed to get paid work quickly. Seeing a job advertised for a chef at HMP High Down, he applied and secured the position.

Once there, he was surprised how much he enjoyed working with prisoners. He was also disappointed that there was no catering training for them and was determined to put that right.

After a lot of hard work and effort over several years, not only do they now train chefs (since 2009), but they also serve customers in five prison restaurants which are open to the public.

Alberto has also set up an outside catering arm of the charity and kitchen gardens.



The finishing touches to food preparation.

The Clink.

## A Helping Hand

There is also a chance to volunteer with organisations that work with prisoners and their families:

### New Bridge

Befrienders write to prisoners and after six months may visit them. A commitment of three years is required. [newbridgefoundation.org.uk](http://newbridgefoundation.org.uk)

### Families Outside

Families Outside is the only national charity in Scotland that works solely on behalf of families affected by imprisonment. No volunteering is with prisoners. They are piloting volunteering opportunities across Scotland. All vacancies are advertised on Volunteer Scotland. [www.familiesoutside.org.uk](http://www.familiesoutside.org.uk)

### Prison Fellowship

A faith-based charity that works on the basis that "No-one is beyond hope". [prisonfellowship.org.uk](http://prisonfellowship.org.uk)

### Forward

A charity working to break the cycle of offending or addiction: "A belief in change, for anyone, no matter what their past". A variety of roles are available from mentoring to admin. [www.forwardtrust.org.uk/about-us](http://www.forwardtrust.org.uk/about-us)

## Timpson Foundation

Darren Burns is National Recruitment Ambassador for the Timpson Foundation, which works to help marginalised people get work.

"We believe people deserve a second chance," Darren explains. "Integrating foundation colleagues back into the workforce is of benefit not just to that individual, but to society as a whole."

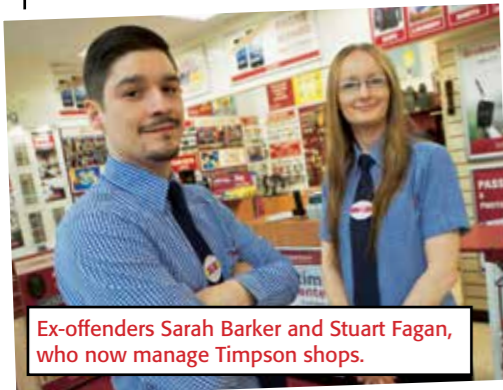
Known originally for its shoe-repair service, Timpson now covers dry-cleaning, key cutting, engraving, photo processing and more. It has more than

2,000 outlets throughout the UK.

James Timpson, Chief Executive since 2002, pioneered the recruitment of ex-offenders following a chance visit to a prison, and the company now calculates that more than 10% of its workforce are ex-offenders.

Many ex-offenders come to Timpson via the Release on Temporary Licence scheme, and Timpson also has seven training units within prisons, where training is carried out on-site.

"I don't see prisoners, I see people," Darren says.



Ex-offenders Sarah Barker and Stuart Fagan, who now manage Timpson shops.



Timpson.