

# The New York Times

THE NEEDIEST CASES

## Out of Prison, and Suited Up for a Future

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Katie Orlinsky for The New York Times

Trumont Williams, a former gang member who served more than 16 years in prison, coaches a basketball team of juvenile offenders as part of the Fortune Society's mentorship program.



*Every year since 1911, New York Times Neediest Cases Fund has provided direct assistance to children, families and the elderly in New York. Articles will appear daily through Jan. 30, illustrating the difference that even a modest amount of money can make in easing the struggles of the poor.*

*Last year, 10,428 donors contributed \$6,280,242, which was distributed to those in need through seven New York charities.*

By the time Trumont Williams was 12, he was pocketing \$30 to \$50 a day as a lookout for crack dealers. This was in the late 1980s, when the drug was ravaging the South Bronx.

He recalled, "You didn't see the effect of crack until the summer, when the clothes came off," and emaciated limbs were on display. Dealers with the **CC gang**, the dominant crew of the era, did not discriminate, selling to children and to pregnant women. Mr. Williams, now 39, joined the gang in his teenage years.

"The level of respect one had for themselves, with crack, it went away," he said of the addicts the drug created. The trade also ushered in a crescendo of violence. "For two or three dollars," he said, "someone will kill you or take your head off."

Mr. Williams should know. In 1991, when he was 20, he and another man robbed the house of a couple suspected of dealing drugs out of their home. After they took cash and jewelry, he said, his partner decided

“we can’t leave them alive.” Mr. Williams said he shot the man several times, while his partner shot the woman.

“At the time I felt bad, but I felt worse as the years went on,” Mr. Williams said. “You’ll never forget that, no matter how old you become. You can hit somebody today and apologize tomorrow, but when you do something like that, you can’t return from it.”

He added, “The only thing I feel good about is that I am not back in that life.”

Mr. Williams pleaded guilty to manslaughter and weapons possession and served 16 years 9 months in Otisville Correctional Facility in Orange County. His mother did not know her son was a criminal until the day he was arrested, and she took it hard.

While he was in prison, the Internet and cellphones seized the globe. Mr. Williams said that after his release, when his brother opened a laptop and logged on to his e-mail, “I was stuck in the kitchen, just looking at it; I was so happy, like a little kid.” His nieces and nephews have since taught him how to send text messages.

“It’s overwhelming,” he said. “Data comes in and out so fast.”

Mr. Williams earned his high school equivalency diploma at Otisville and took certificate programs in “anything they had available,” he said.

After his release, on the advice of his brother, he stopped by [the Fortune Society](#), which works to assimilate former convicts into society. He sought a job, further education, housing: the tenets of an ordinary life. He said he found that everything he needed was there, including peers. “Seventy-five percent of people there were incarcerated,” he said. “I could relate to them.”

In the program’s wood-shop class, Mr. Williams met John Dawson, an ex-convict who became his mentor.

“Trumont was eager, ambitious,” said Mr. Dawson, who taught the class. “He came dressed up and he didn’t have much. He pulled it together.”

Mr. Williams said Mr. Dawson taught him how to trust and respect his peers, and, most important, to get rid of the chip on his shoulder. When the time came to hold his first legitimate job — cold-calling companies and imploring them to hire the formerly incarcerated — it was Mr. Dawson’s words he heard in his head, soothing his jitters: “Don’t panic now.”

In his work, Mr. Williams serves as a living example of what he sells, and he has to look the part. “Suited and booted, that’s what they say,” he said. But he lacked the money for a new wardrobe. So Mr. Dawson contacted the [Community Service Society](#), a partner agency of the Fortune Society and one of the seven beneficiaries of The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, and requested \$500 for suits and ties from Burlington Coat Factory.

Once suited and booted, Mr. Williams began his uphill battle against recidivism. He moved in with his fiancée in Jamaica, Queens.

He also coaches basketball with Mr. Dawson. Mr. Williams believes that if he had stayed in school, his life would have been different.

“Working people have no reason to be in the street,” he said. “Working saved me.”