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Offering Hope: Endel Williams' continued success mirrors that of Racine Vocational Ministry

By Lee B. Roberts

As Endel Williams has moved up the career ladder, he has not only increased his salary and improved his benefits; he's cut his commute time down from several hours to 45 minutes.

These days, the Racine resident is working as a lab technician at Payne and Dolan in Waukesha, where he analyzes pavement material and is learning new skills every day. It is a job he loves, both for the challenges it provides and the people he works with.

Eight months ago, we told you the story of Williams commuting to Iowa in order to work as a carpenter's apprentice on a construction crew. It wasn't an easy situation, with the travel involved, but Williams was grateful for the opportunity because it wasn't long before that he was serving time in an Oklahoma penitentiary for drug-related offenses, with little hope for employment on the outside.

Meeting Williams on the street today, you might never guess that this now-successful, driven man was a habitual offender for much of his youth, having made his "living" dealing drugs and dodging gunfire and the police.

Yet, the streets may very well be where you'll still find Williams today, although in a different capacity.

In the last few years, Williams, with the help of Racine Vocational Ministry, Inc., has not only worked his way up from a felony record to a good-paying job with benefits at one of Wisconsin's top companies, but is giving back to the community through his work with the city's Gang Diversion program. Working with Maurice Horton, Williams spends time out on the streets talking to at-risk youth facing the same temptations he did years ago, offering them hope for a better life. He has also recently started working with offenders at the Racine County Jail in the same capacity.

For his work, both on and off the job, Williams was recently given the Leap of Faith Award by Racine Vocational Ministry at the organization's annual recognition event.

"Endel has not only landed a good job, he has made a life for himself," RVM Executive Director James Schatzman told the audience.

Williams, in turn, expressed his thanks to Racine Vocational Ministry, the Workforce Development Center and all of the businesses that gave him opportunities to prove himself since his release from prison. While it has been a couple years since he worked there, Williams still goes back and visits his first employers, Allwright Moving, to show his gratitude for the support they gave him.

While Williams' story is certainly impressive, it is not RVM's only success story. Since the organization was founded in 2002, it has not only helped many people find jobs, but has taught them the skills necessary to be successful in their work. Such successes fit well with the organization's goals of empowering individuals to

live out their calling through fulfilled participation in all areas of life, including work.

Last year, RVM put 175 people to work (a significant increase from their first year's 95) and this year that number has already reached 149, with a quarter of their fiscal year remaining.

"This has been a record year of growth and success for our participants," Schatzman told those gathered at the Nov. 17 awards ceremony. "And some of them have done so against tremendous odds."

Still, there is plenty of work to be done, Schatzman said. While the organization is very grateful for all of the support that the companies they are working with have given them and their clients, RVM needs more employers who are willing to take a chance on an employee with a less-than-stellar background.

"We need 20 or 30 solid corporations who know who we are and what we do," he said.

RVM hopes to move in that direction by recruiting ten new companies in the coming year. Other program goals for 2006 include: * Raising \$15,000 in corporate sponsorships for job training.

* Raising \$50,000 for a second year for the Community Re-Entry Program.

* Adding a full-time office assistant.

* Increasing individual giving to \$7,500.

Williams, too, has plans for his continued successes on and off the job. Working at Payne and Dolan, he is able to take care of his

children and mother and is looking at the possibility of buying a house. And much of his success, he says, is because of the support of the many positive-thinking people around him and his growing faith in God.

Another thing Williams says has been a big help in keeping him on track has been his time in the boxing ring. In an effort to keep himself off the streets, Williams put his fighting skills to work with the Racine Boxing Club soon after his release from prison. Through the club he successfully competed in the Golden Gloves competition and those experiences have taught him the value of discipline and patience, he said.

Such experiences are the kinds of things Williams says he hopes to encourage other youth to get involved in. His mission of helping those at-risk to avoid the dangerous lifestyle he lived for many years is something Williams is very dedicated to.

For all his accomplishments, against such odds, some people refer to Williams as a hero. Yet, because he is a humble sort, such accolades make him uncomfortable.

"It's not that I don't like it when people call me a hero, but I kind of struggle with that, because there is still a lot going on out in the streets," he said. "If we can get that to come to a halt, then I'll feel like a hero."