

Re-entering Neighbor Mentor Program

Accompaniment, growth, and transformation

BY MELISSA STREIT

Starting in late 2019, The Basilica developed a program to partner neighbors leaving prison with two mentors who accompany them as they re-enter our community. The re-entering neighbors, identified by either the Minnesota or Hennepin County Department of Corrections (DOC), express a desire for a deeper spiritual connection and/or struggle with mental health challenges. Our mentors walk with the participants, help them access resources that decrease their isolation, and assist them as they re-engage and reconnect with the community.

Four participants recalled their experiences with this transformational ministry. Felicia, one of our first re-entering neighbor mentees, was joined by her mentors, Samantha (Sam) Irvin and Patrice Halbach, and her Minnesota Department of Corrections parole officer Chris Poole. Also in attendance were Janet Grove, a retired Basilica staff member who helped launch the program, and Ruth Deckenbach, who was on The Basilica staff and facilitated this conversation. Both Janet and Ruth remain active on the ministry's volunteer leadership team.



Sam Irvin, Felicia, Patrice Halbach, and Chris Poole (left to right) recorded their conversation in The BasiliCAST podcast studio. Listen to all of the BasiliCASTs at mary.org/basilicast.

How did you get involved with the Re-entering Neighbor Mentor Program and what were your first thoughts about the program?

Felicia, returning neighbor: I was released from prison in 2021. I originally went home to East Grand Forks, Minnesota. My life wasn't going to make a healthy future there so I relocated to Minneapolis. At a weekly visit with my parole agent, I asked for resources or programming with spirituality. The following week the [Basilica] program was introduced; I applied and was accepted.

Chris, parole officer: I have been a parole officer since 2016, and our office is open to any kind of community support program related to mentorships, sobriety, support. At our meeting she wanted a bit more community support, her family was not in the area. A couple days later in our unit meeting, people from The Basilica told us about the new mentorship program. Light bulbs went off because this was exactly what she wanted.

Felicia, returning neighbor: When I first met Sam and Patrice I was nervous. But I'm naturally very transparent and outgoing; I felt accepted and welcomed with them.

Sam, mentor: I was also nervous. What if she doesn't like me? Right away you had a big heart and that made it all really easy. And you had goals right away, which was really great to see.

Patrice, mentor: I wondered, will this work and how will I be able to relate to you? The second I met you I knew I could. You had such a willingness, you were determined that you were going to do life better. You had such care and compassion and I was in awe of that. I thought if Felicia can do it, then I am going to walk with you.

Felicia, returning neighbor: Initially I didn't know how it was going to go. But, because of my background, I needed a clean change. Meeting with my mentors gave me something to look forward to. They were definitely available for me. That was the most helpful for me, transitioning into the community, was to have someone available to me.

Chris, parole officer: As a whole, a lot of people on parole don't have family support, don't have positive friend support. A lot of the things that mentorship can help look towards, whether it be a career goal, a sobriety goal, or maybe there's just a lack of knowledge of how to go through something, keeping it all together mentally, this program really helps fill that void. Other people in the community that you can connect with, no judgement, and they can help you towards the goals that you have.

How has your mentor relationship developed and what have you learned in the program?

Felicia, returning neighbor: Building the relationship between my two mentors was amazing. I remember going through life one hour, a day, a week at a time. Because that's what you go through when you're transitioning from an old lifestyle to a new lifestyle. And for me, it was dreams—and it's amazing how many dreams have come true, one after the other! Building a relationship with my two mentors flourished into something natural and helpful.

Being able to call them like, "Ooh my gosh, I don't know what is happening right now!" If that particular thing would have happened for me in my past, I probably would have returned to poor decisions. But since I had someone there for me with positive feedback, it was amazing to be able to feel those things and walk through the world.

Sam, mentor: The program also sets up the mentors for success, with resources and guidance on how to walk with someone when they are going through such a big transition that neither of us have been through.

Chris, parole officer: Sometimes guidance is really all someone needs if they don't have the experience of how to accomplish what they're trying to do. Just that guidance alone can be monumental and helps keep people accountable when they're in a very serious situation like being on parole.

Patrice, mentor: The other value is having a mentor pair, a partnership. Sam came with some wonderful resources that I didn't have. And maybe I came with more lived experiences and another way of saying things. There were times that I said, "Okay, let's first begin by breathing and counting, and now let's look at it. What's the worst that could happen?"

Felicia, returning neighbor: Knowing there are real, genuine, caring people available to me—they're here, not leaving, they're listening, and asking what I need—how much better could that get? I honestly don't know where my life would be if I hadn't been in this program, because it wasn't easy transitioning, especially coming to Minneapolis. I'm from the fields!

The whole program is my family. If you have given me that, you can give it to other people, and that is amazing. Imagine how many people can prosper and make their lives go in a path that they want to go.

Continued

“What am I going to do? Where do we go from here?”

— Felicia, returning neighbor

Patrice, mentor: I taught about Sister Helen Prejean, she’s referred to as the death penalty nun. Her quote is that we should never be judged by the worst thing we’ve ever done. You have served your time for what you have done and that’s a non-issue. When you’ve talked about times in prison that you weren’t on board and I thought, “I have never known that person.” I’ve been really honored to see this side of you. You truly have worked so, so hard, and that makes me want to work even harder to try to step next to you and be with you.

Felicia, returning neighbor: I’ve called you freaking out. “What am I going to do? Where do we go from here?” I think those are never really my fears, because I’m pretty strong. But just even having that little lapse of thought process of what am I going to do with the worries? Being able to revert back to my spirituality, because that’s what I want. That’s the reason I wanted to come into this program as well, to have my relationship with God become stronger. With you ladies it was never pressed but it was always helpful to have conversations and keep our thoughts positive.

You are able to reel me back in, and now I’m able to do that myself more, but do you remember when I couldn’t? I think that was such good growth, to be able to see that within myself is a huge thing. Now when I do speak with you ladies, you remind me, “Look at what you’ve done, how far you’ve come, don’t be too hard on yourself.” I feel like people that come from a past like me, that’s so easy to do.

Patrice, mentor: Felicia has taught me to do more pausing and listening to that inner voice and to ask God to be with me. I want to be very sensitive, aware, and conscious of this relationship, and to honor how sacred it is. But most importantly to let you know how much I do care about you, hold you in prayer, and just want absolutely the very best for you.

Sam, mentor: As a mentor I’ve gained a view of really fighting against my own prejudice and biases. You do not fit the mold of what we see in society as a prisoner. It’s been helpful for me to look at you and think, “I can do all the things I put my mind to, because you’ve done it.” You’ve done it with a family and with all the things going on. That is very inspiring to me.

What has been the most meaningful part of the program and how has it changed your perspective?

Chris, parole officer: It’s really rewarding in my line of work to see someone who has come to terms with some of the things in your past, decisions that you wanted to move on from, for the betterment of yourself, your family, your kids. And then to see you make decisions afterwards, too, that help you get a career set up, help you get a more stable environment for your family and living situation.

Patrice, mentor: One time we talked, before you got your son back, and he was living

up north. You had been outside and saw the morning sun dancing and sparkling. So you called your son, who was at the bus stop, and he talked about the sun sparkling and dancing, and you said, “That’s God.” And I said, “Absolutely, that’s God.”

When you were telling Sam and me your first goal was to get him back, I couldn’t even fathom how that would happen. Sam knew that it could happen, or at least she presented that. In my unknowing, I thought, “If Sam says yes, it’s going to happen. It’s got to happen. Because they both witnessed the sun sparkling and dancing at the same time.” And I thought, God is there. God is good.

Felicia, returning neighbor: One of the most rewarding things I do remember specifically was having my Zoom meeting with court when I got custody back of my son, and it so happened to be my sentencing judge who granted me custody back. So when the proceeding was finished, he just told me, like, “It’s awesome to see you back in my courtroom, but on a different, good note.” I felt so good when that accomplishment and dream had come true, and then being able to let you ladies know about it, and him coming home to live again. Those are thanks to God’s divine acts, that’s what I believe they are, for sure! ✚

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