

Agents of change

Berks Connections/ Pretrial Services helps those coming out of prison to acclimate.

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READING EAGLE: BILL UHRICH

Roberto Olmos Jr. at a home in the 600 block of Tulpehocken Street that he has worked on with Habitat for Humanity.

AFTER SPENDING five and a half years in prison and another six months at the Wernersville Community Corrections Center in South Heidelberg Township, Roberto Olmos Jr. is working full time, saving money in



Olmos works inside the home on Tulpehocken Street.

bank and investment accounts and looking forward to getting a home of his own.

He could not have done all that, he said, without help from staff at Berks Connections/Pretrial Services, a community-based organization that provides services to adult defendants, inmates, returning citizens and their families.

“BCPS should be everywhere,” Olmos said. “They helped me get a job, and taught me how to handle the money I make and even helped me get started with looking for a house.”

Olmos, 44, grew up in New York, raised by his grandmother and other family



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members.

He didn't meet his parents until he was 13 years old.

"Me, I got shipped around," he said. "I moved from family member to family member."

After spending some time in Puerto Rico and in Kansas, he moved to Allentown in 2001.

It was there that Olmos was convicted on a drug charge and sentenced to prison.

While staying at the Community Corrections Center from April to October in 2017, Olmos was referred to BCPS.

A staff member helped him find a job with Millwood Inc., a plant in Lower Macungie Township, Lehigh County, where he repairs pallets.

He's worked there for more than a year, and his boss, Andrew Howell, said Olmos has a strong work ethic and has become something of a role model to other workers.

"What I know about Roberto is that he's a fine worker and a fine person," Howell said. "He's shown that there is true change possible."

Jay Gibson, financial program coordinator at BCPS, has worked with Olmos, helping him to understand how to save money toward a goal.

In just a year he's been able to save a substantial amount of money and establish some credit.

"He's been setting himself up for eventual home ownership," Gibson said.

Owning a home is a dream for Olmos, who currently pays \$200 a month to live at the Hope Rescue Mission in Reading, but one he thought may never be possible.

But, with help from BCPS, who referred him to Habitat for Humanity of Berks County and Neighborhood Housing Services of Greater Berks Inc., Olmos has been able to take classes to learn about home ownership and to work with Habitat toward getting a rehabbed home.

After applying for a Habitat home with help from Penny Hummel, director of family services/volunteer coordinator, Olmos put in the required 300 hours of sweat equity and met the other requirements for home ownership.

His dream now seems to be within reach.

"I would just love if I'd get the house and my younger daughter would move here and live with me," Olmos said. "I missed out on a lot of my daughters' lives, and I want them to know that their father loves them."

Olmos is surprised by the number of people who have gone out of their way to help him.

"So many people have helped me, and they all care about my well-being and want to see me do well," he said.

That support has motivated him to do his best, he said, so as not to disappoint those who have provided assistance.

"It's still a work in progress, but I try to work every day on doing my best in order to thank everyone who's helped me," he said. "I really can't slack off because I would just hate to disappoint my support

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group Nicolle . Schnovel and Peggy Kershner, co-executive directors of BCPS, called Olmos a prime example of a person who took advantage when opportunity was offered to him and has worked hard to change his life.

“Roberto realized that he had support and he was very receptive to that support,” Schnovel said. “He’s an example of the transformation that can occur with our clients.”

Re-entering society after incarceration is not easy, Kershner said, and BCPS works hard to provide assistance to returning citizens and their families.

“We say we’re in the life improvement business, and we’ve worked hard to make that our culture,” Kershner said. “We know that people can come out of prison and become contributing members of society, and it’s our job to help them do that.”

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