

Chicago Tribune

Finalist: Nondeadline Writing

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The Beekeepers, Part 1

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The men opened the hive and bees swirled up into the sky like sparks from a fire.

Bees flew through the weedy yard and past the chain-link fence. They flew into the alley, where a woman braced herself against the hood of a police car.

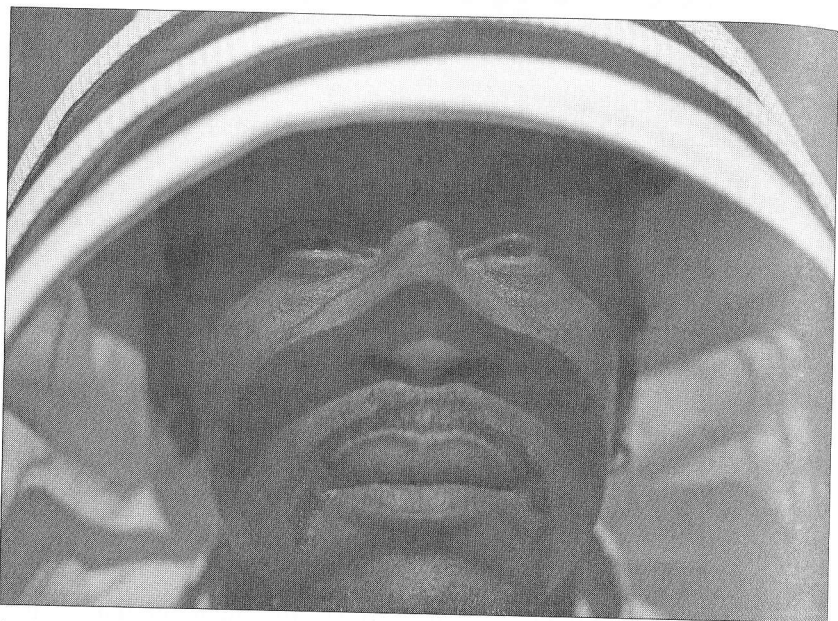
Bees flew toward the gas station, where the calls of hustlers selling drugs sliced the air. And beyond where the men could see them, bees scattered into the vacant lots and backyard gardens, parks and parking lots of Chicago's West Side, searching, as always, for nectar.

This sunny morning in September 2006 was warm, but a bite to the breeze signaled fall. A boy walked by, dressed in a white shirt and navy pants. School had opened today. It was time for a new start, time for what the people who work at the nonprofit agency on this corner in East Garfield Park had decided to call Sweet Beginnings.

The three men standing at the hive were learning how to become beekeepers. None had any experience at this job or, for that matter, much significant work history at all.

Tony Smith, a pug of a man with a broad face, moved with the graceful, contained gestures of someone accustomed to negotiating small spaces. At 30, he had spent half his life in prison.

Hovering uneasily behind him was Shelby Gallion, a 22-year-old former drug dealer. In an oversized T-shirt and jeans that blurred the outlines of his body, his expression unreadable, Shelby looked a little out of focus, as if he might eventually drift out of sight. He lived in a halfway house, still on parole.



At 49, Gerald Whitehead was trying to overcome a lifetime of crime and addiction by learning beekeeping in a program called Sweet Beginnings. (Photograph courtesy of José M. Osorio/*Chicago Tribune*)

Gerald Whitehead, the oldest member of the trio at 49, had been released from jail just a week before, after being cleared of a heroin-possession charge, the most recent stumble in the struggle to turn his life around after decades of violence and addiction. Gerald seemed intimidating, with his heavy-lidded eyes and thrust-out chin, but when he smiled, his face cracked open wide and bright.

The three men and 17 hives in this yard were the makings of a small experiment, an attempt to address one of the most stubborn and destructive problems in Chicago and other cities around the country: what to do with the hundreds of thousands of people released each year from prison.

Over the last three decades, harsher penalties for drug crimes and stricter sentencing laws have helped fuel explosive growth in the nation's prison population and, inevitably, in the number of inmates returning to society. In Chicago alone, roughly 20,000 ex-offenders come home each year.

Most end up in neighborhoods like this one, where unemployment is high, opportunity scant and the temptation of drugs and crime rarely more than a corner away. They don't stay long. More than half the state's prisoners find themselves back behind bars within three years of their release.

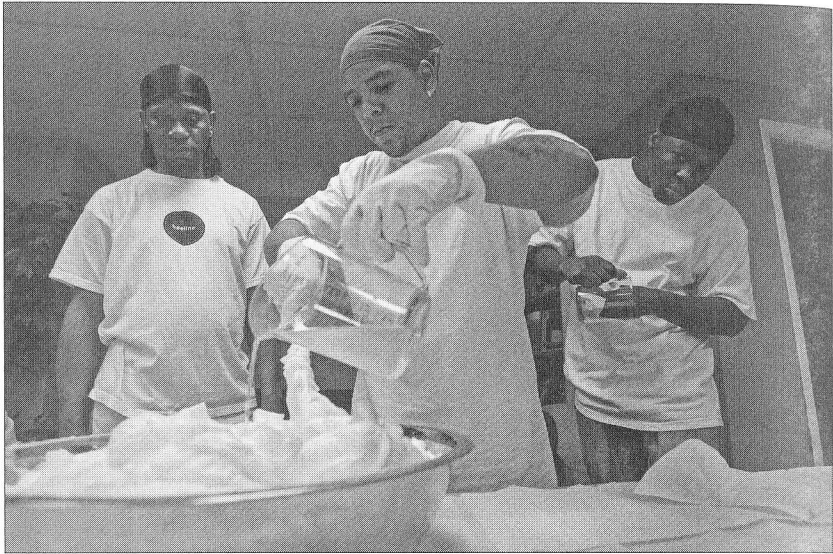


The Sweet Beginnings program kept its beehives behind the North Lawndale Employment Network's offices on Chicago's West Side, within sight of the Eisenhower Expressway and in the heart of a neighborhood struggling against poverty, unemployment and crime. The hives were an opportunity for the agency not just to help people find jobs, but to create them. (Photograph courtesy of José M. Osorio/*Chicago Tribune*)

Finding work can reduce someone's chances of returning to prison. Although getting a job with a criminal record is difficult, checking the conviction box on an application poses only one hurdle. Many former inmates face other problems, from poor education and little understanding of workplace rules to drug addiction or a lack of stable housing. And behaviors that help people thrive on the job—teamwork, communication—are often the opposite of those that ensure survival in prison.

For five years, the North Lawndale Employment Network, or NLEN, had helped ex-offenders find employment. With Sweet Beginnings, the agency decided to create its own jobs, in its own neighborhood, where people could learn how to work and build an employment history before they moved on. The idea attracted the attention of major philanthropies and companies, among them the MacArthur Foundation, Boeing Co. and Ben & Jerry's, each of which donated expertise or money to the effort.

Now, what may have once seemed like little more than a quirky venture—using former prisoners to produce honey in the ghetto—stood on the verge of transforming itself into a high-profile business.



Tony Smith (center) adds a honey mixture to a body cream base as he and his co-workers, Gerald Whitehead (left) and Shelby Gallion, learn how to make body-care products for the Sweet Beginnings business. The decision to make honey-based products such as lotion and lip balm was based on the desire to increase profits and create more job opportunities. (Photograph courtesy of José M. Osorio/*Chicago Tribune*)

Whether it would succeed depended in part upon the three men in the yard. The men measured success in starker terms. Failing, they feared, meant going back to the streets, going back to prison or getting killed.

During the coming year, through the bees' final foraging in fall, the threat of winter, promise of spring and richness of summer, the men and the enterprise of Sweet Beginnings would attempt nothing less than their own reinvention.

This morning's lesson was about survival. John Hansen, the beekeeper training the workers, showed them how to tilt the hives to get a sense of how much honey they contained. A heavy hive meant the bees had stored enough to make it through the winter. A lighter hive would need help.

The hives, with their unevenly stacked wooden boxes, called supers, looked like tipsy filing cabinets scattered among the clumps of goldenrod, Queen Anne's lace and clover.

The men moved among them, gently leaning each hive back and opening the lid to peer inside.

An elderly woman stopped at the fence. "What y'all got in there? Bees?" she asked.

"Yep," John answered, still bent over a hive.

“Oh, Lord, think I better get back.”

After a minute or two, Shelby disappeared inside the building. John continued to make his way around the yard, Gerald and Tony in tow.

“Look at that,” John cried out at Hive No. 2, lifting a frame thick with honey, each cell a stud of gold. At Hive No. 6, bees crowded the entrance, but the supers felt suspiciously light.

When they finished, John delivered his verdict.

“I think,” he said, “we can bring them through the winter.”

Second Chances

“To make a prairie it takes a clover and one
bee,—
One clover, and a bee,
And revery.”

Emily Dickinson

In this pocket of the West Side, the past may fade or burn or erode almost to dust, but it persists. It holds on.

Like the Star of David that adorns the front of the Independence Boulevard Seventh Day Adventist Church, a remnant from the time when Chicago’s Jews lived and worshiped in the neighborhood. Or the cracked patches of concrete in the overgrown lot at 1550 S. Hamlin Ave., where Martin Luther King Jr. lived for a short time in a rundown apartment to protest the way Chicago’s blacks were housed.

Or, in the conference room at the North Lawndale Employment Network, the blotch of greenish ink on Tony Smith’s right forearm, visible as he took notes in a narrow, slanting script. It had been a tattoo of a cobra until he removed what he could with lemon juice and a sewing needle.

The cobra is a symbol of the Mickey Cobras street gang, as is the “MC” inked on Tony’s left shoulder. Police records say Tony belonged to this gang. He won’t say much about that or anything else in his past.

What he will say is this: “I was a naive, snotty-nosed street kid who didn’t care about himself or other people.”

His first arrest came at age 9, for disorderly conduct. By the time he turned 13, he had been convicted in an attempted murder and was, according to a police officer who knew him, one of the most violent and feared gang members in the Cabrini-Green public housing complex. He marked his 16th birthday awaiting trial for beating three men with a gun and torturing two of them with a heated ice-chopper. That crime earned Tony a 30-year prison sentence.

He emerged almost 15 years later, having never used a cell phone or filled out a job application. When he talked about what he wanted to see for the first time with his own eyes, he named—after Navy Pier and Millennium Park—a Jet Ski.

Across the conference table, Shelby idly twirled one of the braids near his ear. Shelby's past was his shoes. The butterscotch Timberland boots imprinted with tiny hexagons or the candy-bright Bathing Ape sneakers. New shoes, like his new watch and new cell phone, the leather "Scarface" cell phone case—all accessories of the lifestyle he said he wanted to leave behind.

He began selling drugs about the time he started high school, and by his senior year, the money and all it bought had easily trumped education. Then came two stints in prison and, during the second one, nights spent lying on his cot, wondering what would become of his two young daughters.

That was why he had come to Sweet Beginnings. But he still thought about the old life. It took him a week at the agency to earn what he could have made in a matter of hours on the street.

And Gerald, standing at the kitchen window, staring out at the hives?

Gerald's past was the hovel of a building across the alley, where he had snorted \$10 bags of heroin. And his grandmother's house three blocks away, where he had stayed as a child and sexually assaulted a young woman as an adult. The bar around the corner where he once got shot on his birthday. His past was the man crossing the street he knew from Narcotics Anonymous and the cap-shadowed teenager who walked in the door of the North Lawndale Employment Network and addressed him as "Brother Bone."

Gerald's past was everywhere.

His earliest memory was of being bitten by a dog. He bit the dog back.

Gerald wasn't sure whether he remembered this incident because it happened or remembered it because he was told it happened. It didn't matter. He became that story: the boy who would bite back.

He grew up with two older brothers and 10 younger sisters, a mother who worked as a live-in nurse and a father who was, as he put it, "kind of missing in action."

Gerald struggled in school. He never learned how to read or write well. The other children made fun of him. By 6th grade, he had basically stopped going.

"I started out making a career," he said. "Whatever I could steal to make a hustle."

At the same time, he joined the Unknown Vice Lords. In the gang, he could force respect from all the people who had once belittled him. He moved up to become an "elite," a top-ranking gang member and close associate of onetime Vice Lords kingpin Willie Lloyd.

From the age of 20, Gerald bounced in and out of prison, spending more time inside than out: armed robbery, home invasion, criminal sexual assault, burglary, aggravated battery, drug possession.

He was 43 before he decided he couldn't do the time anymore. He has his conversion story. One night in prison, he broke down. Was this all his life would ever be? Had God put him here for nothing more? He wanted to die.

Then, in his cell, he sensed the spirit of his late grandmother, who always gave him a meal when he was hungry and a bed when he was homeless, and he felt at peace.

He could try to change.

It proved difficult. He lost a job working in maintenance at a nursing home after a background check revealed his criminal record, he said. There was an arrest for domestic battery. He was using drugs too, crack and then heroin. He became a dope fiend, a hype.

That went on for years, until his mother persuaded him to check into a residential drug treatment program, where he stayed for five months. Not long after he got out, in the spring of 2006, he stopped by the fence at NLEN on his way to sell loose cigarettes at the gas station nearby. He knew the agency; the month before, he had gone through its four-week job-training program for ex-offenders.

A couple of men were setting up hives. Gerald asked if he could watch. Then he asked if he could help. He stepped into the yard and began handling the hives, as though, one of the men observed, he had been beekeeping all his life.

At first, Gerald worked for free. He did whatever needed to be done: fixing the lawn mower, pulling weeds, picking up the trash that blew in from the alley. It was somewhere to go every day. Soon, the agency began to pay him, \$7.25 an hour.

Every day was a fight. Stay straight, go to work. Failing would be as easy as stumbling off the curb into the street.

"It's a wrasse trying to do good," Gerald said one afternoon. "You always got evil whispering in your ear."

He felt comfortable around the bees. He liked them. If you didn't know bees, he thought, they might scare you. But once you knew them, you came to respect them.

Gerald understood bees.

Finding Sweetness

The building that housed the North Lawndale Employment Network, near the corner of West Flournoy Street and South Independence Boulevard, had once been a duplex and still felt like someone's home.

Walk in and you might find a worker bouncing a toddler on her knee while she interviewed the child's mother or an old woman grumbling about delays on the Pulaski bus.

Most days, the center hummed with people who came for one of the agency's job-training programs, a computer class or to get help writing a résumé. Amid the bustle, the Sweet Beginnings employees set up bee-keeping class at whatever table happened to be free and began to learn about bees.

They learned there are three types of honeybees: the worker bee, which is female; the drone, which is male; and the queen bee, which mates with the drones and lays the colony's eggs.

They learned that a worker bee lives for about six weeks. They learned that it takes the nectar from 5 million flowers to make 1 pint of honey. They learned that pollen mixed with nectar is called bee bread.

During these lessons, Tony took notes on a yellow legal pad. Gerald tilted his chair back or leaned forward, head propped on his arms, always restless. Shelby occasionally cleaned his nails with a public transit card.

Their teacher, John Hansen, was 76 and white and jangled the change in his pocket. He had begun keeping bees 31 years before, after he saw a sign someone had posted on a bulletin board at the suburban publishing company where he worked, offering to sell two hives. He went on to become president of the Illinois State Beekeepers Association, and in his retirement, he still kept bees, sold honey and ran a small business managing hives and removing bees from people's homes.

Of everything John taught the men about bees, they found nothing as interesting or amusing as what they learned about drones.

When drones hatch, the worker bees help them out of their brood cells while the worker bees must emerge on their own. Drones that mate with the queen on what is euphemistically called the "nuptial flight" die because the act rips their sexual organs from their bodies. When winter approaches, worker bees drive the drones from the hive, to certain death.

One morning, Tony walked in with his heavily underlined copy of *Beekeeping in the Midwest*, the book they were assigned to read.

"It said male drones are like human males," Tony told John. "They don't do no work. I kid you not, that's what they said." The book doesn't compare men and bees; that was Tony's analysis.

In the beginning, the men's hands-on instruction mostly involved learning how to care for the hives and prepare them for winter. While they worked, they used a smoker, a metal can with attached bellows, to blow smoke into the hives to distract the bees. The smoke causes the bees to act as though their hive is on fire, and they eat honey to fortify themselves to flee, ignoring intruders.

Honey bees usually sting only if they feel threatened. Tony had never been stung, so John plucked a bee from a hive and stung him with it to make sure he wasn't allergic to the venom. Gerald hardly seemed to notice stings or care beyond issuing the occasional epithet. Shelby seemed the most leery, often hanging back while the others worked. But when Tony asked if the bees scared him, Shelby denied it.

In the early fall, the men learned how to extract honey, to harvest it from the frames where bees build the combs.

Because the Sweet Beginnings hives didn't contain enough honey to spare, John brought in eight frames from his own apiary. The frames, stacked in the kitchen of the resource center, looked a little like wood-frame screens, except that, instead of wire grids, the panels held hundreds of hexagons filled with honey.

As the men crowded around a large metal tank, a lone bee banged against the kitchen window.

"Do we have to actually do it?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, you guys are going to do it," John replied.

To extract honey, a beekeeper uses a knife to cut open the wax caps that seal the individual cells of honey in the frame. Then, the frames are placed in an extractor, which spins them to release the honey. The honey drips down the walls of the extractor and exits through a tap.

Slowly and delicately, Shelby slid the knife against the frame. Wax curled off in strips. A slight scent, sweet and floral, filled the kitchen.

"Just swipe it," Tony advised.

"Let it ride even and flat," Gerald said.

"You're doing fine," John said. "Just watch your fingers."

Tony and Gerald each took a turn. The knife, as it drew across the wax, made the thick, wet smack of a cartoon kiss. Sunlight warmed the honey in the frames to the color of amber, glowing against the black shadow of the blade.

"That honey look good, don't it?" Tony asked.

As the extractor spun, the air began to smell sweeter and sweeter. Thin streams ran down the inside of the tank. Minutes passed. A nickel-sized dollop of honey pooled on the filter atop the white bucket under the tap.

"There's the first drop," John said.

While the extractor whirred, the men went outside to check on the bees. Brenda Palms Barber, the exuberant black woman who served as the North Lawndale Employment Network's chief executive officer, joined them.

"I want to see how the babies are doing," she called out, standing at the hives, perfectly at ease in her gray suit while the others wore jackets with netted hoods.

More than two years before, Brenda had come up with the idea for Sweet Beginnings when she decided that the employment network needed to do more than help people find jobs; it needed to create them.

She considered a landscaping business or delivery service but worried that customers might be reluctant to allow ex-offenders in their homes. A friend suggested a honey co-op.

Brenda knew nothing about honey, but the idea intrigued her. She liked it even better when she learned that some people consider urban honey more flavorful than its rural counterpart because the bees can gather nectar from more varied flowers within a shorter distance. Imagine creating sweetness out of the asphalt and hardship of the West Side.

The agency launched Sweet Beginnings in the spring of 2004 with a grant from the Illinois Department of Corrections. Two years later, after parting ways with the original group of beekeepers working with the agency, the program started over with fresh bees and a new idea.

The bees came from Wisconsin, picked up and delivered by NLEN's chief operating officer, who had to roll down the windows of his Jeep Cherokee on the way back because the 30,000 bees generated so much heat and noise.

The new idea came from a business plan created by volunteers at Boeing, the chairwoman of the board of Ben & Jerry's and others. It called for Sweet Beginnings to shift its focus from selling honey to selling honey-based products such as lotion and lip balm. They hoped the move would increase profits and, with the expansion into manufacturing, packaging and marketing, the job prospects of its workers.

When Brenda and the beekeepers returned to the kitchen, about 4 inches of honey stood in the 5-gallon bucket.

She passed out plastic spoons and everyone dipped in to taste.

"Yum," she said. "It's really, really good."

She continued to talk, in a stream of words as smooth and unbroken as the honey pouring into the bucket. She talked about biscuits and business competition and hosting a honey cook-off and social purpose and making lip balm.

When she was almost done, she said, “That’s some of the stuff we’re thinking.” Then she paused and said something else, slowly, as if the idea had just struck her.

“Our demographic,” she said, “is the opposite of the people working on it.”

Under Suspicion

“There is a Thief Amongst Us!” the signs announced.

“IS IT YOU!”

One sign was posted above the sink in the kitchen of the resource center. Another was taped to the bathroom door. More hung on the walls next to inspirational quotes from Eleanor Roosevelt and Gail Sheehy.

The signs went up in late September, after someone stole the agency’s digital camera from a cabinet in the downstairs conference room. It was only the second theft in the two years since NLEN had moved into the building, and it hurt.

The agency prided itself on being the kind of place where visitors wandered back to the kitchen to help themselves to coffee and bought candy for school fundraisers by dropping a dollar on a desktop.

No doors barred the offices; no cameras peered down from the ceilings. The clients who came here already felt as though the world treated them like criminals; the people who helped them didn’t want to do the same.

That trust disappeared with the discovery of a dented cabinet door.

Brenda felt betrayed. She didn’t like thieves. She could find a job for a murderer before she could find one for a thief. Stealing was a crime of opportunity, and every time a thief saw something to steal, he had to decide not to steal it.

If the signs shouted the crime, other conversations in the building occurred in whispers.

Who would know the camera was kept in the basement conference room, in the cabinet with the VCR? The beekeepers, who watched videos for their classes. And Gerald? Well, he had been an addict, and everyone knows that hypes steal.

This was the first of a four-part series that followed three ex-felons through a workplace training program in Chicago. To read the rest of the series, go to www.poynter.org/bnw2009/resources.

BEHIND the STORY

Ethical Reporting

By Louise Kiernan



Gerald Whitehead and I sat on a stoop as the afternoon unfolded. We talked as kids drifted by on their way home from school and we talked as the people who worked at the building behind us let themselves out the chain-link gate and went home.

In the year I followed Gerald and two other men through a workplace training program that teaches ex-felons how to care for bees and make products from honey, we had many conversations, hard and easy. But I think most often about this discussion because it captured an essential dilemma in writing about ordinary people: the exhilaration that comes with unearthing a chunk of the truth, at getting closer to the heart of their story, and at the same time, the painful awareness of what telling that truth might mean for them.

I had learned that Gerald had been in jail on drug charges one day when he called in sick to work. I already suspected that despite his repeated denials, Gerald, a long-time addict, was still using.

We talked for more than two hours that day. At first Gerald denied using drugs, but I kept asking. Eventually, he confessed that he had been snorting heroin on and off for months. He understood I would include that information in my story, but when I told him I'd have to bring it up in my close-out interview with the head of the agency, he asked me for a favor: He wanted to tell her first. I agreed.

I'm used to writing about people who don't have experience with reporters. Those are the people who interest me. Over the years, I have worked hard to treat them with honesty, sensitivity and respect, and to make sure they understand what they're getting into when they agree to be written about. But this project proved challenging in ways I didn't expect.

The story began simply enough. When I proposed to the North Lawndale Employment Network's chief executive officer, Brenda Palms Barber, that I follow three trainees through the Sweet Beginnings pro-

gram, she immediately signed on. "The good, the bad and the ugly," she told me more than once, and she kept her word.

Two of the three trainees, Tony Smith and Shelby Gallion, made it clear that they would cooperate with the photographer and me only while they were at work. Fortunately, Gerald, the most reflective and charismatic of the three men, soon emerged as our main character and he didn't mind where we followed him.

Sweet Beginnings had received some news coverage and would continue to attract attention while I worked on my story, but those articles were very different from what I wanted to do. Typically, a reporter would come out for a few hours, interview the men, spend some time in the apiary and write a quick feature. I realized the men were used to interviews; they weren't used to reporting.

I explained that I would check out what they told me, talk to their friends and family and read through their court records. What concerned them most was what I would learn—and write—about their criminal backgrounds. I gave them the simplest and best reason I could: We had to know where they had been to understand how far they had come.

I also told them that anytime I was with them, I was reporting my story and recording what they said and did. But if they wanted to go off the record, they only had to ask. That happened just once, when one of the men wanted to complain about the day's work.

Throughout the reporting, I kept my notebook and tape recorder visible so everyone was aware of what I was doing. I trusted that over time they would become comfortable enough with me that it wouldn't matter. Sooner or later, people can't help being themselves.

In fact, the biggest ethical struggle week in and week out was making sure everyone did remember I was there as a reporter, not a friend. Brenda wanted my opinion on the scents for the products. Gerald asked me for money. Many times I had to explain that I couldn't do anything that might affect the course of the story or make me part of it, no matter how trivial that action might seem. Sometimes, that meant fighting my impulses to intervene or comment upon what was happening around me.

Other issues surfaced as well. The men didn't always tell me the truth. Gerald neglected to mention his sexual assault conviction. Tony told me he didn't have any children, but he has a teenage daughter. In both instances, I had to talk with them about what I had learned and how I was going to handle it in the story.

When the series was almost ready to run, I met separately and privately with Tony and Gerald to run through my final questions and go over

exactly, point by point, what the articles would say. I didn't want them to be surprised by anything that would appear in print. By that time, Shelby had been fired and dropped out of touch with the agency and me. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't track him down.

The day after the series started, I met Gerald at his new job to find out what he thought about the stories. He flashed that grin of his. "It's cool," he told me.

I wish this essay could conclude with that moment, but the complicated realities of stories like this one don't always allow for happy endings.

The next time I saw Gerald, a few weeks later, I gave him some extra copies of the stories. He talked proudly about the attention they had brought him. But his tentative grip on success was already slipping. He had gotten into trouble on the job. A month or so later, he accused the agency and his employer of abandoning him. They said they were doing what they could to help him but were hampered by his self-destructive behavior.

I wrote a follow-up story examining Gerald's claims and what had happened to him and the two other men, who recently had been arrested together on drug possession charges. Tony ultimately managed to get back his job at the agency. But Gerald was angry and out of work. He stopped returning my calls. I don't know what he's doing now or how he feels about the stories that once made him grin with pride, but I know I treated him fairly and honestly.

The last time we talked, he told me, "I'm just trying to do what I got to do to survive."

I hope he will.

Before becoming a senior editor at the Chicago Tribune, Louise Kiernan worked for the paper's projects team. She wrote the lead article in a series that won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for explanatory journalism and was a Pulitzer finalist in the same category that year for an individual project. She has worked at small papers in Oklahoma, Texas and Tennessee.