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TCC instructor is a felon who turned his life around

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Armando Villarreal III was anxious as he jumped into his shabby gray pickup and headed toward Tarrant County College South Campus in Fort Worth.

He was hoping to catch David Clinkscale -- a former mentor -- in his office. He was hoping Clinkscale could help him find a job in teaching. Branching out into an academic career at age 37 was daunting enough, but Villarreal had a concern beyond his age. Villarreal, a convicted felon, knew second chances don't come easy.

An average of 750,000 inmates in the United States are paroled each year, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. Most struggle to find work upon their release because many companies have strict policies against hiring people with criminal histories.

When employers don't give ex-inmates the chance to get back on their feet, their likelihood of returning to prison increases, said Marc Levin, director of the nonprofit Center for Effective Justice in Austin. This doesn't mean that all ex-convicts should get jobs, he said. Employers should evaluate applicants case by case, he said.

"Jobs keep them busy and help them earn a living, so they're not prone to commit another crime," Levin said.

An opportunity

That afternoon in January 2003, Villarreal burst into Clinkscale's office and announced that he had just completed his master's dissertation at the University of Texas at Arlington. Clinkscale, chairman of the social sciences department for TCC South Campus, offered him a teaching position.

"Armando has absolutely proven positive that people can redeem themselves through hard work, dedication and honesty," Clinkscale said. "Much of TCC is about providing those kinds of opportunities to people who have made mistakes but have demonstrated true change."

Villarreal began working part-time at TCC as a history instructor. He noted his conviction on his application, but the matter wasn't fully investigated until last year when he applied for a full-time position at TCC's South Campus.

Clinkscale said Villarreal's background helps him relate to his pupils.

"He's traveled down the same road as many of our students. For that reason, he can offer them sage advice," he said.

A transformation

Villarreal, who was born and raised in Laredo, had been a prosperous gunsmith and firearms dealer. Judges and magistrates were among his clientele. He learned his craft from his father, who ran a prominent gun store in Laredo. "This was bona fide," Villarreal said. "This wasn't Joe's quack shack selling guns out of his garage. It was a family business."

But on Nov. 3, 1994, he was arrested for knowingly manufacturing a machine gun for a Laredo police officer without filing the required paperwork. At age 29, he pleaded guilty and served about a year at a federal prison camp in La Tuna, near El Paso.

Afterward, he stayed a month at a halfway house in Fort Worth, followed by three years of supervised release.

Villarreal worked at grocery stores and mowed lawns. But for him, this was not enough.

"I had to leave some sense of legacy for my children to follow," said Villarreal, who is married and raising six children ages 3 to 17 at his Fort Worth home.

Villarreal enrolled at TCC, taking out loans and working odd jobs to pay his tuition. At first, he thought about studying medicine or law. But a course in Texas history inspired him to teach.

"I haven't looked back since," he said.

Villarreal earned bachelor's and master's degrees in U.S. history from UTA in 2001 and 2003 respectively.

A valuable lesson

TCC began conducting background checks on full-time faculty members in November 2003, several months after Villarreal was hired. So he didn't face any initial scrutiny.

This changed when he applied for a full-time position.

The human resources department asked him to write essays about his offense. Officials requested letters of recommendation. And they talked to his probation officer. After a three-week investigation, TCC administrators said they made a "conscious decision" to hire Villarreal.

"If there's ever a person who deserves a second chance, Mr. Villarreal is that person," said Erma Johnson-Hadley, TCC's vice chancellor of human resources.

Johnson-Hadley was moved by Villarreal's "remarkable" will to turn his life around. She was touched by his letters of recommendation. She was impressed by his first four years of teaching.

"We don't regret the decision to hire him. I stand by it," Johnson-Hadley said. "And now, Mr. Villarreal has the same protections as all of our employees."

Ayla Harrison, one of Villarreal's former students, said she doesn't mind learning from professors like Villarreal who have shed their criminal past.

"I think what happened in your past should stay in your past. I mean, nobody's perfect," said Harrison, 18, of Burleson.

Villarreal admits he broke the law and recognizes he may never escape his criminal history.

"They scrutinized me pretty good. They put me through the grinder," Villarreal said. "After I got the call telling me I was hired, I cried -- maybe for 10 or 15 minutes. I felt like I was on Mount Everest."

Reintegration

Marc Levin, who supports work-release programs, encourages employers to help reintegrate ex-convicts into society. To ensure that they don't regret their hire, Levin suggests employers do the following:

Interview the ex-offenders to get a sense of whether they've changed.

Determine how long it's been since their conviction. Research shows that if convictions are seven years old or more, they are less likely to be repeated, Levin said.

Find out whether they met all the terms of their probation.

Distinguish between violent crimes and less serious crimes.

Look at character references.

STATE LAW

Section 51.215 of the Texas Education Code requires all institutions of higher education to conduct background checks on employees who hold "security-sensitive positions." This includes employees who have access to a computer terminal or have access to a master key. The law, enacted in 1983, leaves it up to the college or university to identify who falls under this category.

Before its current policy took effect in November 2003, Tarrant County College conducted background checks only on employees who came in contact with children and those who held what TCC considered to be security-sensitive positions.

Adjunct professors -- part-time employees who are hired on an as-needed basis -- and full-time professors hired before November 2003 have not yet gone through background checks. The exception occurs when they apply for a promotion or a different position, said Erma Johnson-Hadley, TCC's vice chancellor of human resources.

The TCC human resources department is discussing whether all faculty members hired before November 2003 should undergo background checks.

BACKGROUND CHECKS

University of Texas at Arlington

History:

UTA has conducted background checks for staff members at least since the early 1990s. Checks began in 2007 for full-time professors and fall 2008 for adjunct professors.

Retroactive checks?

No. UTA does not plan on conducting background checks for their full-time professors hired before 2007. The university does, however, plan on conducting background checks on their adjunct professors hired before fall 2008.

Hire ex-convicts? Yes, on a case-by-case basis, UTA officials said.

University of North Texas

History:

UNT began background checks for staff members in the mid-1980s. The university expects to conduct them during fall 2008 for new adjunct and full-time professors.

Retroactive checks?

No. Faculty members hired before fall 2008 will not undergo background checks unless they seek tenure or apply for different positions, UNT officials said.

Hire ex-convicts? Yes, on a case-by-case basis, UNT officials said.

Texas Woman's University

History:

TWU began background checks for staff members in 1992. Checks began in 2006 for full-time professors and in 2007 for adjunct professors.

Retroactive checks?

Yes, all professors hired before 2006 will undergo background checks within the next couple of years, TWU officials said.

Hire ex-convicts?

Yes, as long as they completed their sentence more than two years ago, their position does not relate to their conviction and they've demonstrated real change, TWU officials said.

Texas Christian University and **Texas Wesleyan University**, both private institutions in Fort Worth, declined to comment about their hiring procedures.

Sources: UTA, UNT and TWU