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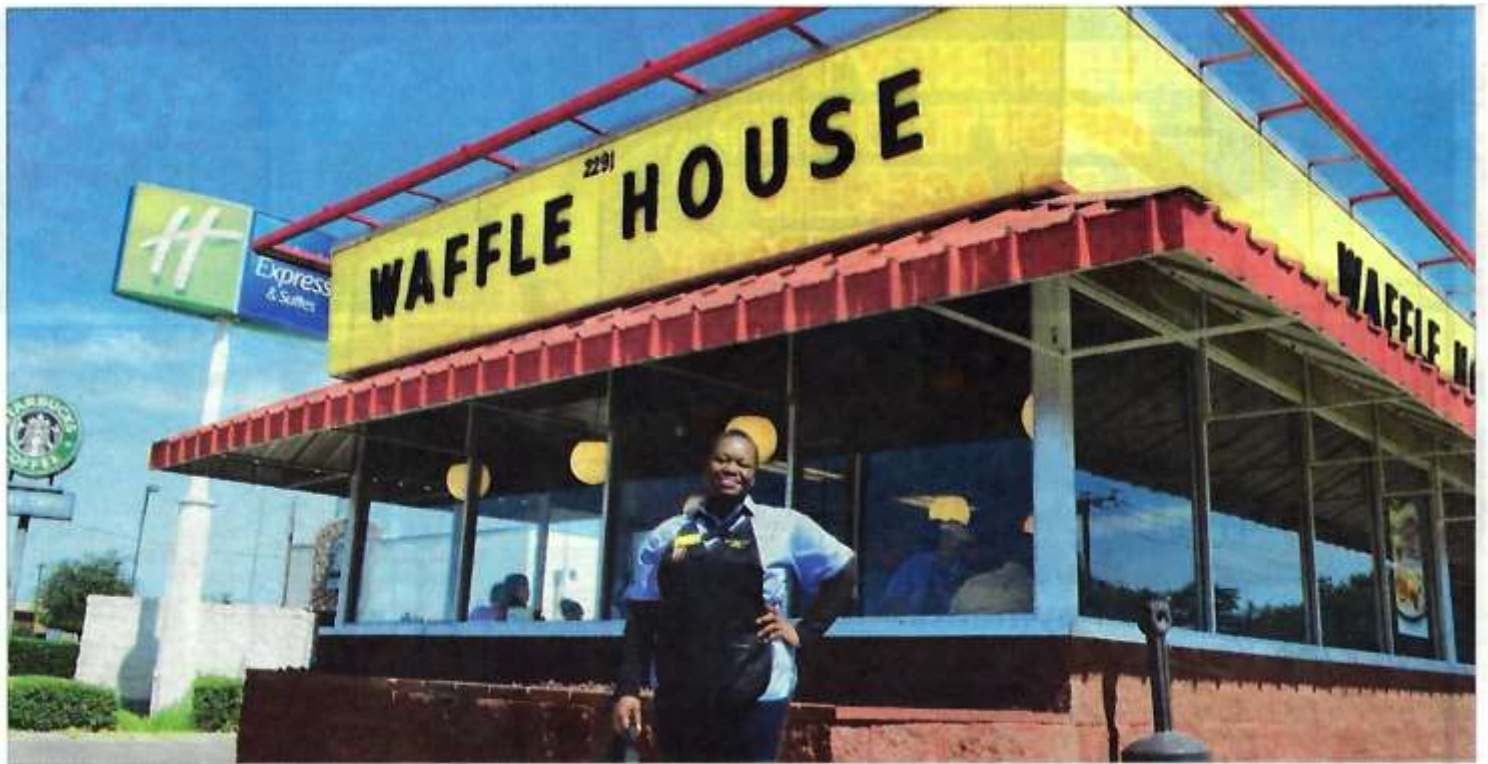
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Getting a new start

Former prison official works with ex-inmates

On the Cover



Staff photo by NANETTE LIGHT/neighborsgo

In May, DOORS helped to connect Deanna Hall with a waitress job at a Waffle House on West Northwest Highway, where she's known as "Queen" by the employees.

Opening 'DOORS'

Christina Melton Crain of Preston Hollow starts nonprofit to reduce recidivism

By NANETTE LIGHT
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Christina Melton Crain is a voice for the underdog.

For 18 years, she built a law practice representing abused and neglected children.

Now, she's a megaphone for formerly incarcerated men and women, as well as their families.

Crain was the first woman appointed to head the Texas Board of Criminal Justice in 2003, and she founded the Dallas-based nonprofit DOORS in 2010 to combat recidivism and help former prisoners to reintegrate into society. It's an issue she witnessed firsthand during her five-year term as leader of the state's prison system.

The daughter of a former Dallas County treasurer, Crain said she was raised to be a public servant. Her husband, Nate Crain, is also former chairman of the Dallas County Republican Party. The couple lives in Preston Hollow.

"When I got off the board [in 2008], I decided I had such a passion for all this that it was time for me to do something with this, not just my law practice," said Crain, 48, who graduated from Kimball High School in Oak Cliff.



Photo submitted by CHRISTINA MELTON CRAIN

The Christina Melton Crain Unit, formerly in the Gatesville Unit, was named after Crain when she retired as the first chairwoman of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice in 2008.

DOORS isn't another re-entry program, Crain said. There are already many of those throughout the state. Instead, the nonprofit connects these organizations and their services — housing, employment, transportation, health care and substance-abuse treatment — for former offenders.

"Before us, [offenders] would come out of prison. They would be given \$100 and a ticket to go back to



Staff photo by NANETTE LIGHT/neighborsgo

Deanna Hall (right) reads off orders handed from waitress Rena Taylor (center) to manager Tracy Douglas. DOORS helped to connect Hall to a job in May at Waffle House on West Northwest Highway. An Illinois native, Hall was released from a Georgia prison on probation in March 2013, when she moved to Dallas to live with her father. She served four years of a 15-year sentence on an aggravated assault charge.

wherever they came from, and then they're on their own," Crain said.

Since its inception, the nonprofit has provided services to about 2,500 former prisoners. Crain knows of only one who's re-offended.

According to a 2013 state recidivism rate report by the Legislative Budget Board, the number of individuals re-incarcerated within three years of their release is declining slightly. The report states the number to re-enter prisons dropped almost 5 percent from 2005 to 2009 and the percent returning to state jails declined nearly 2 percent. The number of re-arrests from 2004 to 2008 remained mostly stable, according to the report.

The time frame includes most of Crain's reign over the criminal justice system. Her legacy includes ongoing initiatives such as the Amachi Program under the Big Brothers Big Sisters umbrella to mentor children with incarcerated parents. Another is a partnership with Rockwall-based nonprofit Patriot PAWS for women inmates at Gatesville's Christina Melton Crain Unit — named in her honor after she retired from the justice board — to train service dogs for handicapped veterans.

"We're not going to help everybody, but if we can help a percentage to bring the recidivism rate down, then I think we've done a great job of using our tax dollars more wisely," said Crain, a former president of the Dallas Bar Association.

Many prisoners write handwritten letters to Crain before their release lobbying for help from DOORS. The nonprofit has received almost 3,000 letters since it began.

On a recent Monday afternoon, a stack of envelopes sat piled on a table in her office. Crain reads every letter, and a DOORS employee in Austin writes each inmate back.

After their release, each is assigned a case manager, who issues a series of assessments and writes a targeted plan to tackle ex-offenders' most pressing needs.

Crain said former offenders are the organization's best referral system.

Deanna Hall, 32, of North Dallas heard about the program online from a fellow ex-offender, who suggested the organization could help her find a job.

An Illinois native, Hall was released from a Georgia prison on probation in March 2013. She served four years of a 15-year sentence on an aggravated assault charge. She shot her stepfather in Georgia in 2008 over a disagreement in dividing the assets of her mom, who died of cancer earlier that year, she said.

She moved to Dallas last year to live with her dad in his



Photo submitted by CHRISTINA MELTON CRAIN

Women inmates at the Christina Melton Crain Unit cheer after a performance by The Catdaddies, a rock garage band in which Crain is a vocalist.

apartment.

When the judge handed down her sentence, Hall said she thought life was over. She left behind a 2-year-old son when she was arrested.

"For me, going to prison was like the end of the world, but it's not. Once those doors close, when you're in jail, you have to think that this will be over soon," Hall said.

After her release, she enrolled in online courses to study business at University of Phoenix. After she graduates, she hopes to open a small business. Her son, now 8, lives with his father in Illinois.

With a felony on her record, Hall went without a steady job for more than a year after her release. In May, DOORS helped to connect her in less than a week to a waitress job at a Waffle House on West Northwest Highway, where she's known as "Queen" by coworkers.

The income will help her to pay a fine of more than \$700 she's accrued over the last year for not having a job — a requirement of her probation.

"Those doors will reopen," Hall said. "You're going to have to go back into the workforce. You're going to have to go back into life. You're going to have to live."

Now, plans are underway to extend DOORS' reach in Dallas County.

Crain met July 7 with Dallas City Council member Rick Callahan to organize an effort to make DOORS the official umbrella organization for all ex-offender rehabilitation services in Dallas County, not just the nonprofit's approximate 40 partners.

Callahan, who represents Pleasant Grove and South-east Dallas, said recidivism is an issue he's wanted to tackle since elected in June 2013.

"I've been involved with this for a long time. I realized we couldn't help my area in terms of poverty and crime unless we got a grip on this," Callahan said.

Crain aims to expand DOORS' model statewide in the next five to 10 years.

In 2013, the nonprofit received a \$1.2 million, two-year grant from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to establish the state's first pre-release entry network at six prison facilities in Gatesville and Marlin for women inmates prior to their release to Dallas County.

The program was expanded in July to include women coming to Tarrant County.

The organization is working to renew the grant and hopes to spread to Huntsville next year.

"We're filling up beds in prisons ... and that's just ridiculous," Crain said. "Prisons are there for a reason. Prisons are for people who can't live with you and [me]."

Neighborsgo reporter Nanette Light can be reached at 214-977-8039.

MORE INFO

What: DOORS, a Dallas-based nonprofit that works to combat recidivism and help connect former incarcerated people to service providers

Offices: Administration, 17101 N. Preston Road, Suite 260, in Dallas; Operations, Bill J. Priest Institute for Economic Development, 1402 Corinth St., Suite 235, in Dallas

Eligibility: Anyone 18 years or older who has been or is incarcerated, or has been on any form of correctional supervision

Website: dallasdoors.org

Phone: 214-296-9258