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2nd Opportunity – helping Inmates Finding the Right Path



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Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: Mr. Ghilarducci, what is the concept behind 2nd Opp Media Group?

Mr. Ghilarducci: We provide the 2nd Opportunity Program, an employment readiness, life skills, financial literacy, and reentry program for underserved populations. Primarily we work with the currently and formerly incarcerated populations and substance abuse treatment centers.

CEOCFO: Is there a particular geographic region or age of your students?

Mr. Ghilarducci: Geographically we started in Chicago and worked in parts of Illinois. We have expanded to a second location in Atlanta, Georgia. We are now in ten or eleven different states and growing rapidly. The population that we serve is anybody that the jail, prison, or recovery center staff wants to attend our program. We do not ask about backgrounds, we do not require a particular length of sentence remaining, and we do not have any other qualifications except that they are interested in preparing to reenter society.

CEOCFO: About how long before they are released, might they be in the program?

Mr. Ghilarducci: Generally, the shortest would be about six months but we have people that attend the program that still have years remaining, but they are interested in starting to prepare for release. We welcome them just as much as those that would be released in the next few months.

CEOFCO: *Do you have a sense of who is really interested when they register for the program?*

Mr. Ghilarducci: I think we do have a sense of that, and we come to conclusions quickly because of the way we present the material. It requires the completion of our workbooks. If after the first class they do not want to be engaged, then there is no reason for them to continue to participate. The facilities do a good job of making the expectations clear.

We have the opportunity to walk through the facilities before the program starts to meet with the men and women. We tell them what the 2nd Opportunity program is, what it does, and what the expectations are. Those that sign up understand what they are getting into as far as having to commit their own time and effort to do the work. I think people that end up in our groups are motivated to participate.

CEOFCO: *What are you teaching and how are you interacting with people in your program? What might have changed in your approach over time?*

Mr. Ghilarducci: We have five courses that we offer in both English and Spanish. The first course is known as A Path Forward which is an employment readiness program for those that have been out of the workforce. The second is A Path to Financial Freedom which is a financial literacy program. So many people I have encountered in the incarcerated population have very little experience with the everyday financial system. Many have never had a bank account or do not understand what credit is and how it works. The third course is called Values-Aligned Goal Setting, which helps people put together a plan, which is a plan for their return to society and all that involves. We help them to have tools to understand how to set goals with specific activities to pursue those goals.

The fourth course is called A Path to Advanced Skills which emphasizes the importance of improving one's skill set to find a career, something other than an entry-level minimum wage job, for the long term. It may involve taking apprenticeship programs that are available inside prisons or getting involved in apprenticeship programs on the outside through the U.S. Department of Labor. The last one is called a Path to Higher Education. The Vera Institute of Justice did a report noting there are about 600,000 incarcerated individuals right now that are eligible for Pell Grants to take college classes. We show them the path to enroll and take college classes while they are incarcerated. We talk to them about the certificate programs so that they can come out of prison with a certificate issued by a college or university for a specific skill. For example, they get a certificate in logistics and supply chain and they can use that to get a job in that field anywhere in the country.

These courses were developed based on lived experience, research, and the feedback we have gotten from the participants. We modify and enhance based upon opportunities that emerge. An example was in December of 2020 when an education reform package was passed giving Pell Grants back to the incarcerated population. In response, we create A Path to Higher Education because we knew there were going to be a lot of questions from individuals that are incarcerated but interested in

getting some college classes. We also work with schools that want to be involved with the populations we serve.

CEOFCO: *What has changed with COVID; is it easier to get jobs today?*

Mr. Ghilarducci: It is easier today. I tell our participants that if they are ready, willing, and able to work, we will help them get a job because the demand for jobs is so great right now in many different industries. Manufacturing, for example, hospitality is another example. Some of the companies that in the past had stringent policies prohibiting the hiring of anybody that had a conviction have discontinued these policies. They have come to see they can find quality employees that may have a background but are anxious to get back to work and show up every day and do what is asked of them. I routinely speak with employers about their labor needs and find them receptive once they understand the opportunity to engage our population. I think COVID has opened some doors that before the pandemic, probably were not available.

CEOFCO: *How does your program differ from some of the other programs available?*

Mr. Ghilarducci: We are authentic and comprehensive. I started to develop these programs while I was incarcerated. I was in federal prison for thirteen years. I saw men leave and come back because they just could not get back on their feet; the primary struggles were finding employment, substance abuse treatment, and stable housing. It was obvious to me that they did not understand how to take those first steps and did not have a plan specific to their situation.

I think the reason we connect so well with the populations is that we relate to and understand them. They know right away all our presenters have lived the experience of being incarcerated, and we understand what they are going through. We understand what the fears, challenges and barriers are so we can relate to their anxieties. Most importantly, we bring hope that we can emerge from these situations and get on with our lives.

Our programs are available through tablets that are inside the jails or prisons, through our website, or on DVDs which we accompany with workshops. We can answer questions and share information, stories, and advice that really seems to resonate with the population.

CEOFCO: *How do you reach-out to various institutions for them to sponsor your program?*

Mr. Ghilarducci: We attend Sheriff's and Jail Associations Conferences, both national and in individual states. When we start to work in a particular county jail, the Sheriff or jail administrator will refer us to other jails where they have a relationship. We also work with probation departments, prosecutors, and judges to provide ample access to what we offer in a coordinated way. A lot of the growth that we are starting to feel now is coming from referrals. In addition, I have had opportunities to speak to groups of decision-makers about the work 2nd Opp does.

CEOFCO: *Would you tell us about the people that are leading the classes; what do you look for in your presenters?*

Mr. Ghilarducci: The first thing is that they have to take responsibility for their crime. We do not want somebody to stand in front of the room blaming the government for the reason they went to prison, that is a deal breaker. They have to stand in the front of the room and say they made some mistakes in their life that led to their incarceration. They also need to be able to command a room and present our material. Our program provides the participants an opportunity to engage and ask questions. The person leading the workshop must make certain that no one is excluded, that people are not talking over each other, and that people are allowed to share their opinions.

Most importantly, we look for individuals that are serious about wanting to help others. This is a way that they can reach back to the people that are going through what they went through. It is a way to say this is what I learned, this is what I experienced, and these are some of the challenges I had to confront and how they can use the 2nd Opportunity program to organize their thoughts and prepare for the next steps. As with all businesses finding the right people can be challenging, I am constantly looking for additional presenters.

CEO CFO: *What is next for 2nd Opp?*

Mr. Ghilarducci: I think the next thing we will be doing very quickly is a podcast, working title "Friends of 2nd Opp." It will be broadcast on the inside through tablets which I believe will be very popular because of the guests we will present. This will include formerly incarcerated who will inspire based on their stories, employers open to hiring people with backgrounds, colleges and universities who want to talk about how they can help an individual get an education, and companies that want to offer their products and services to a population that has a great many needs when they return to society.

From a business perspective, there are presently 2.2 million incarcerated individuals of which about 600,000 return to society every year. This is a large consumer segment with identifiable needs. We want to use this podcast to link the right organizations to bring information, products, and services to a large population. The potential list of guests is very long and will focus on those that want to be involved in bringing solutions. They will be recognized as "Friends of 2nd Opp." We will also offer the podcast through traditional podcast channels so families on the outside can be listening to the same thing as loved ones on the inside.

I am excited about what this podcast will bring because it will provide a venue to allow those on the outside to speak to those who are incarcerated, offering solutions to fundamental needs. We will launch the podcast this fall. I believe it will be very well received on the inside and I think it will help us reach the next level. Any of your readers interested in appearing should reach out.

