

The Danville Public Library Spreads Literacy, Reading, and Opportunity to Ex-Offenders

by *Otis D. Alexander*

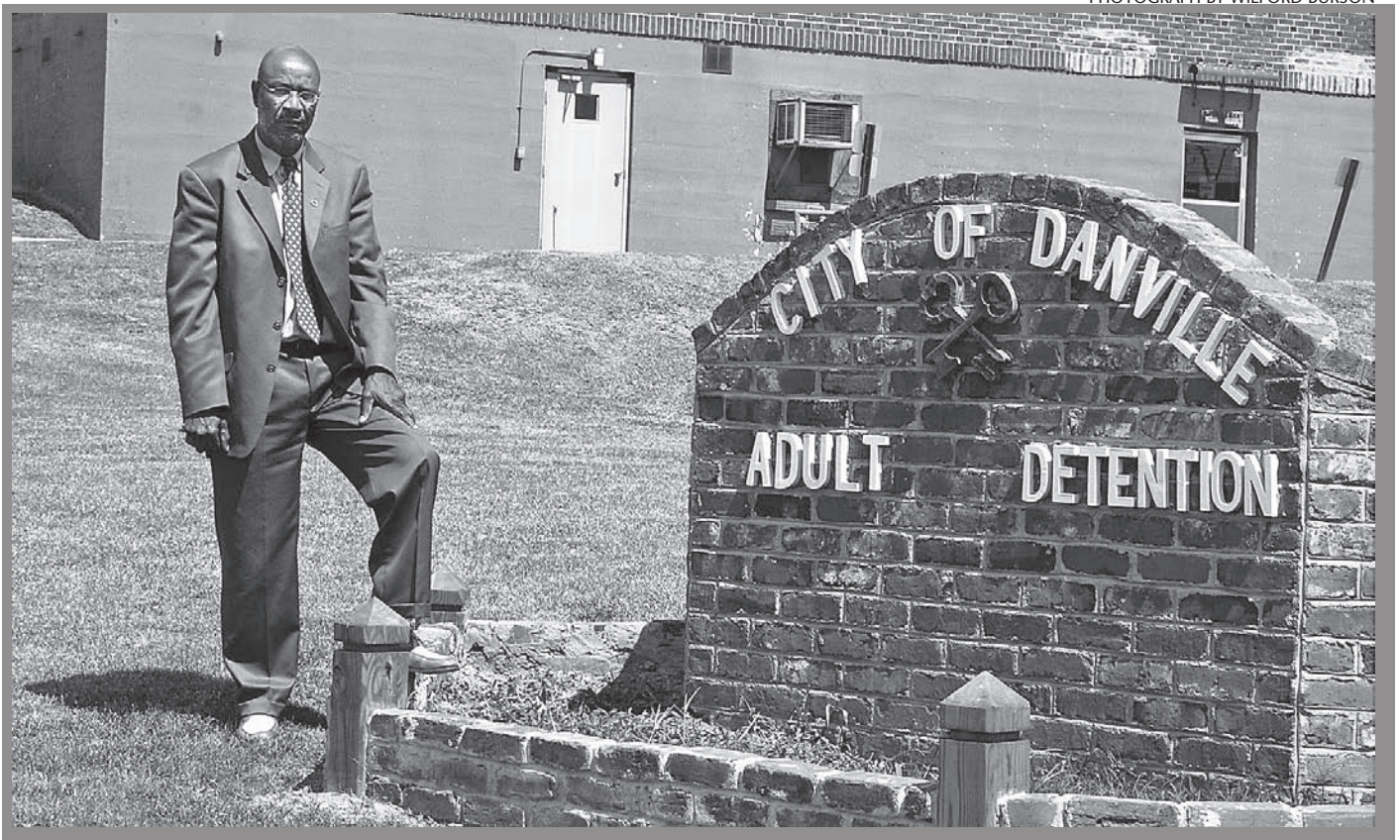
Many ex-offenders feel that “the system” has little to offer them except a strong likelihood that they will return to prison. The high rate of recidivism among former offenders would seem to bear out this fear. However, the Danville Public Library (DPL) is doing all that it can to assist ex-offenders in reconnecting to their

communities by spreading literacy, encouraging reading, and offering referrals to the many services that are available to help them. This is the primary reason that DPL has set up the Institute of Information Literacy: not just to benefit ex-offenders, but also to help the underserved community in general. It is the moral duty of the public library to ensure that all of

its customers are afforded the best and most accurate information for their advancement.

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Library Director Otis D. Alexander

On August 11, 2008, as director of the Danville Public Library and creator of the library's Institute of Information Literacy program, I was invited by Offender Transition Coordinator Charles B. Crumpler to speak at the Danville Adult Detention Center (City Farm). The fourteen inmates I addressed will be reentering the community within the next few months. After a warm welcome by the inmates, I shared information about the various services the public libraries have to offer throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. Many of these services are geared to the underserved, and a few are actually designed for the ex-offender.

In the commonwealth, a growing number of men and women with arrest and conviction records are reentering the employment market. To be sure, there are more than ten thousand who are released here annually. Some have been incarcerated in Virginia, while others relocate from other state institutions. These ex-offenders face numerous barriers in their search for jobs as well as other bias factors that impede their efforts to reenter the community. If they can gain employment, many of these ex-offenders will stay free from crime and not become recidivism statistics. To assist in solving some of these problems, my talk emphasized the information that one can obtain from reading, along with other related services provided by a public library.

Having previously compiled *Getting It Together/Reentry for Virginia Employment: How to Get What You Want by Using the Public Library*, I discussed this guide in detail with the inmates, describing the guide's origins and how it seeks to both smooth their transition as they reenter communities in Virginia and steer them positively so that

they will be successful and not continue to make similar choices to the ones they made prior to incarceration. I discussed decision-making, and how the decisions people make can lead them to poverty or plenty. I then asked them not to become victims of destiny, and to break the high recidivism rate that threatens the community.

Getting It Together is divided into three major sections. However, the meat of the publication is "Reentry and Virginia Employment." This section provides guidance on obtaining vital documents like

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birth certificates; food stamps; Social Security cards; identification from the Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles; Armed Forces/Military Personnel Records; high school, university, or GED transcripts or diplomas; and professional licenses. The section also provides help in creating a résumé or curriculum vitae, along with an abundance of information concerning health and wellness, free clinics and beaches in Virginia, transitional housing, cheap transportation, free legal aid in Virginia, and faith and philosophy. The appendices are very functional, as all of the resources can be found in the Danville Public Library as well as every library in the commonwealth.

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I made it clear that no one was promising anything, I did highlight good interview techniques, encouraging my listeners to make sure that they are truthful, positive, and brief. Sure, they made mistakes. However, it's important to let the employer or interviewer know how they will improve themselves. Falsification of an employment application is grounds for dismissal. A conviction does not automatically disqualify an applicant from employment.

This was my second visit to speak at the Danville Adult Detention Center. Because of these engagements and the need to assist ex-offenders in a community where the economy is not the best, I created a daylong workshop, *Transition & Resources for the Underserved: Ex-Offenders*, that will be held on September 22 to address some of these problems, from employment to recidivism. Speakers and programs will include the mayor of Danville, an Episcopal priest, the director of Adult and Continuing Education, staff from the Center for Volunteerism, the Basic Computer Application program at the Institute of Information Literacy (DPL), and librarians.

It sometimes appears to be difficult for our society to admit that it does not want to deal with ex-offenders. Also, it is hard for former inmates to gain decent employment, as many of the employers do not offer them a second chance. Ex-offenders lose the fundamental right to vote, and few are ever welcomed into our neighborhoods. While the public library is not an employment agency, it is committed to making sure that all community members have equal and professional resources available in a variety of media formats. ■