

## **Richard Miles, founder of Miles of Freedom, a program that helps ex-convicts integrate back in to society, spent 15 years in prison before being exonerated.**

Richard Miles spent 15 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit.

Accused of a 1994 murder and attempted murder, he was 20 years old when he left Dallas to serve a 60-year sentence at the maximum security Coffield Unit in Tennessee Colony.

Outside, all he could see from his window were bars and wires.

But one day, he looked up.

He saw a blue sky, birds and the sun.

"If you can't change your condition, then change your perception," Miles said. "And that changed my whole life. I started looking up."

Miles, now 39, was released from prison in October 2009 with the help of Centurion Ministries, a prison advocacy organization. Three years later, he was exonerated.

"It was hard coming out of prison, recognizing family, recognizing Dallas but not knowing anything," said Miles, who grew up in Oak Cliff.

The state paid him \$1 million in restitution for his time served. He used 15 percent of the funds as seed money to start his South Dallas-based nonprofit, Miles of Freedom.

## **MILES OF FREEDOM**

To learn more about Richard Miles' nonprofit to help ex-offenders find employment, visit [www.milesoffreedom.org/](http://www.milesoffreedom.org/).

It's a vision he formed behind bars with fellow prisoner Aubrey Jones, 63, who was arrested for possession of a controlled substance. After Jones was released on parole in 2012, he joined the nonprofit as its program coordinator.

"Everybody needs help when they're coming out of prison. There wasn't too much assistance," Jones said.

The organization helps former prisoners find employment and housing. Ex-offenders are required to complete a three-month job readiness workshop that includes classes on résumés, interview skills, personal finance and relationships. During the last two weeks, they visit job sites for interviews.

So far, the nonprofit has helped about 65 former prisoners secure jobs at Embassy Suites and the Dallas Convention Center, among others.

In the interim, some ex-offenders join the lawn service crew to earn money while they complete the workshop. The crew tends to about 10 South Dallas commercial and residential properties such as Minyard Food Stores and Park South Family YMCA.

The neighborhood is home for Jones who grew up in a house on Pennsylvania Avenue. Miles' grandmother and parents also once lived in the area.

Jones' childhood home has since been demolished. He said the streets were safer and cleaner when he was a kid. Miles agreed.

“That was one of the biggest things I saw when I got out. ... I’m looking at the neighborhood, and it was like, ‘Ugh,’” Miles said.

In 2013, the nonprofit received a \$5,000 grant from the South Dallas Trust Fund to launch the South Dallas Rebeautification Project. Miles of Freedom bought the lawn equipment and used the grant money to pay the workers. Now, the service is a revenue source for the nonprofit.

Oak Cliff resident Stanley Moore, 44, makes \$9 per hour at the lawn service. It’s the only job he’s been able to land since he was released six months ago from prison. He’s applied at retail stores and fast food chains. They wouldn’t hire him.

“If you shut the door on me, you know what I’m going to do? I’ll knock on another door,” Moore said. “Richard Miles, I knocked on his door. You see what he did? He opened the door.” Moore said his last arrest landed him in prison for a fourth time. Altogether, he’s spent about 20 years behind bars — almost half his life. His rap sheet includes drug possession and theft.

A former gang member, he once sold drugs on the South Dallas streets. It was “quick money,” he said. But at age 23, it sent him to jail. Gang tattoos cover both lower arms, a permanent reminder of his past.

But after his release last September, he didn’t return to South Dallas.

“I didn’t go back to the hood. That’s the hood right across the street. You know what’s over there? Dope, drugs, all kinds of stuff,” he said.

He called his mom in Duncanville. He signed up for Miles’ job readiness workshop. He began training for his barber license at Preparing People Barber Styling College, about two blocks northeast of the nonprofit’s office on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

“When I got out, I changed my environment. I changed my friends. I changed my setting,” Moore said. He sat in a plastic chair outside the nonprofit’s office on a recent Wednesday morning, waiting for the lawn service shuttle van.

“I didn’t want to be that person anymore. I got tired of being that guy.”

That Wednesday morning, he rode the shuttle with three other workers to a vacant lot along Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. A white sign that read “Yard by Miles of Freedom Yard” marked the work zone. An orange, plastic grocery cart stuffed with trash bags and blankets sat against the chain-link fence.

The ground was still soggy from a Monday rainstorm, so they kept the mowers hitched to a trailer in the back. They edged the grass and collected trash such as broken bottles and paper into black bags.

“This is a second chance,” said Moore, bending to collect a piece of paper wedged between the grass blades. “Everybody deserves one. Don’t you think?”

Miles keeps a reminder of his second chance on his cellphone.

It’s a photo of a newborn baby girl — his first child — swaddled in a hospital blanket and still pink from delivery.

Born March 6, she’s named Raelyn Grace.

“She finishes out my life,” he said.