

# Pardon people, not turkeys — support second chances

BY MIKE DESMOND

Every year it's the same thing: the White House announcing the name of turkeys that will be spared becoming a Thanksgiving meal. It's been this way on and off since Abraham Lincoln gave in to his son Tad's request and made it a pet and not the family dinner. President Kennedy was the first to send a gobbler back to the farm instead of the kitchen. But it was Ronald Reagan who first used the word "pardon" and George H.W. Bush who made it into an annual White House tradition. This year the President pardoned two of them, flown in after being presented on stage at the Minnesota State Fair.

I've been in the hospi-

tality business for decades and owned several restaurants in State College. I love food and I love Thanksgiving. The reason that I don't like presidents "pardoning" turkeys is that they suggest that pardons are for those awaiting execution and the President's last-minute intervention saves them — like they were prisoners on death row. Nothing could be further from the truth.

These days, my passion is helping people who made some bad choices a really long time ago get fresh starts. I've learned that in Pennsylvania, the only way to be forgiven for your crime and have it erased from your record is through a pardon from the Governor. Pardons are

only given to people who have been out of prison for years if not decades, if ever they were in — in other words, to our neighbors. I've listened, I've learned, and they have powerful stories of change and redemption to tell.

They have paid their fines, done their time, and fully "repaid their debt to society." You probably don't know who they are: They act the same as the rest of us, being good neighbors, doing everything to make the best lives they can for themselves, their families and their communities. But they are keeping their heads down because their criminal records are available over the internet in just three clicks, for anyone to find. They live

each day afraid of being identified as a "con" or a "felon" — not applying for things they're qualified for, not coaching their kids' soccer clubs or volunteering for community service, going for a new job or trying to get a loan to start a new business, because they'll have to "check the box" and "out" themselves as having committed a crime.

A huge percentage have drug convictions — many coming from opioid use and addiction to prescribed medication, many coming from wrongheaded decisions when young about how to make some real money. "Drug felons" — no matter how long ago the crime, no matter that no one was hurt, no matter that it was just for

possessing one ounce of marijuana while in college — cannot get jobs in health care, home care, child care, elder care, any job involving "routine interaction" with children including coaching sports clubs after school ... the list goes on.

A ten-year study of the economic impact of pardons in Pennsylvania by the Economy League documented \$16.7 million in additional income was earned by people who had been pardoned. Those millions did not cost taxpayers a penny and flowed to cities and towns all across the state without any government bureaucracy. That's why the Economy League called pardons "no-cost workforce development and community investment policies." That's why the League recommended that more pardons be granted, faster.

Pardons reward accountability and responsibility. They provide hope for individuals and families

who deserve it. We've created a Pardon Project here in Centre County. Here, we are helping our neighbors who have done their level best but just cannot get the opportunities they deserve. Here, our district attorney, our courts, our Bar Association, and our universities are working together in strong support of second chances. Here, we've come together to release potential — which benefits all of us.

That is what pardons really are all about, and we should all be in favor of them, as often as possible, as quickly as possible, for as many as possible — not for just one or two turkeys a year on Thanksgiving.

For more information on the Pardon Project of Centre County, visit [PardonMeCentre.wixsite.com/website](http://PardonMeCentre.wixsite.com/website).

*Mike Desmond is a longtime resident of State College and advocate of the Pardon Project of Centre County.*