



www.PardonsNow.org

Pardon Me: The First Ninety Days of the Impact Campaign

The way he tells the story, *Pardon Me* began in failure. On parole for the accidental shooting of a man during a bar fight when he was 22, having served twelve years in prison, Shuja Moore had tried his best to become the man he knew he was. But everything was ending in a No. “No” to this job and that and that. “No” to driving an Uber, “No” to renting on AirBnB. “No” to credit cards and dating websites. He wasn’t the worst thing he had ever done in his life - he knew that - but he couldn’t get the chance to prove it.

One day alone in his apartment, leafing through his papers, he found [“Con from a Con?”](#) It was the July 9, 2014, column in the Philadelphia *Daily News* that was about him. The columnist was writing about a letter of apology he had written to the parents of the man he had accidentally shot and killed – heartfelt, explaining how what brought him to the bar that night had betrayed his own family’s trust, vowing to honor the memory of their son by committing himself to do his best for his community for the rest of his life. He would later say that the columnist had done her best to write a fair story, questioning whether his apology was real or just a play to win parole, but she had totally missed the real story. He realized then and there that “his people” – people who had made bad choices but had then worked hard and changed – could not rely on outsiders to tell their stories. They had to tell their stories themselves.



Shuja started writing and calling videographers, asking if they would help him tell stories about the transformation of people who had spent time behind bars. “I have nothing to offer you – no credentials, no pay,” he’d say. “But I need someone to believe in me and break the stereotypes that are killing communities like mine.” Unbelievably, two said they’d help: Sean Grasso, a freelance documentary and commercial cinematographer who seeks the ability to learn from, and be inspired by, the people he films; and Hunter Bartlett, an editor and cinematographer who looks for projects that serve a larger purpose. “*I Am Not A Savage*” was the first of what was to become an ongoing [webseries called *Walkies*](#).

As fate would have it, this was the same time that [Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity \(PLSE\)](#) was starting to use video to support its efforts to reform the pardon process in Pennsylvania, to make it a real opportunity for its low-income clients to expunge their past crimes so they could have the second chance they deserved. PLSE had created an advisory group of people with lived experience in the criminal justice system, [the Pardon Project Steering Committee \(PPSC\)](#), and Shuja accepted the invitation to be a member. It took no time for the PPSC to decide to allocate \$2500 from a grant it had received from the Phoebe Fund of Bread & Roses to support a film Shuja wanted to make about pardons, and PLSE agreed to double-match it. Then came contributions from Kimberly and Tobey Oxholm, a letter of support from WHYY’s president Bill Marrazzo, and a grant from the Independence Foundation. With that, *Pardon Me* came to life.

September 13, 2023

By the summer of 2023, Shuja had been awarded a Mike Lee Fellowship at PLSE and been honored as a “Remodeled Citizen” by the Mayor’s Office of Black Male Engagement. He had landed two great jobs, first as a Reentry Specialist for JEVS and then with The Enterprise Center as its 52nd Street Corridor Manager. He had received contributions for his film from the Bobby Bonds Memorial Foundation and the Patricia Kind Family Foundation. He had also been appointed to the Board of Directors of the ACLU of Pennsylvania, and it was the ACLU that decided to host a fundraiser for him and his new documentary. They would handle all the details and publicity; he just had to show up and talk about his life and his film.

This wouldn’t be the first time the film had been seen by members of the public. That was [a screening in April](#) that was co-hosted by Berks Connections/Pretrial Services (now, Connections Work) and the Reading Area Community College. But that was a “rough cut” and this was the final. It imposed a real deadline on the production team. Editing right up to the very last day, they met it.



The World Café Live in Philadelphia was the perfect venue in so many ways. The room was packed by people who cared about the issues – racial and social justice, second chances and hope – and about him



personally: his parents and brother were there, as were many from the West Philadelphia neighborhood where his family has lived for four generations. So too was the Judge who had sentenced him to prison (pictured at right) and the *Daily News* columnist who had doubted his sincerity while he was incarcerated. So too were many members of the PPSC, two of whose stories were being told in the film (who participated in



a panel discussion afterwards with two leading ACLU attorneys, pictured at left), and many of those who had invested in him and his vision for the film. It was an unqualified success, beyond any of his dreams.

The Impact Campaign

The purpose for the movie was never simply to give Shuja Moore a first notch on his documentarian's belt: it is to change how society wrongly stereotypes and dismisses people like him and to give hope that a final release from the criminal justice system is actually possible for them, not just for the rich, white and connected. That meant the film had to be shown lots of times in lots of places to lots of different kinds of audiences. Shuja had left a salary behind when he committed himself to his film. He did not have the connections he needed to get his film seen. And he was running out of funds, the most significant of which had come from the Independent Public Media Foundation and the Independence Foundation.

That he could go on was due to the timely arrival of Bonnie Benjamin-Phariss, a documentary “impact strategist” – a term Shuja had never heard before. Among any number of awards and credentials, she had led the documentary division of Vulcan Productions, “the independent media company founded by Microsoft co-founder Paul G. Allen, noted for telling powerful stories and campaigns to help audiences understand the world around them, respond to challenges and bring about lasting change.” With her guidance, insights and contributions, Shu was able to map out [a 15-month “Impact Campaign”](#).



It included five very specific deliverables that were developed with the Pardon Project Steering Committee. By the end of 2024, the goals would be to double the number of pardon applications received by the Board of Pardons, double the number of counties having Pardon Projects, train 1000

new Pardon Coaches, cut in half the time it took for pardons to get to a hearing (from 4 to 2 years), and achieve 3 very specific changes in the law. Obviously, these were not things he could do alone.

Since 2018, PLSE had been focused on reforming the pardon system in Pennsylvania and by the fall



of 2023, it had achieved most of its goals. Among many successes, it had given birth to ["Pardon Projects" in a dozen counties](#) – groups of civic leaders, volunteers and people with criminal records who are committed to helping people in their own communities apply for pardons. Volunteers trained in how the pardon process works and how to help applicants are called "Pardon Coaches"; organizations that are willing to be information centers in their communities are called "Pardon Hubs." And it was to that network that Shuja turned. He asked

them to sponsor screenings during October, which the American Bar Association had named "Pro Bono Month" to inspire more volunteering by attorneys. (Pictured left: screening hosted by Pardon Project of York County with (among others) York County Economic Alliance President and CEO Kevin Schreiber, District Attorney David Sunday, former Board of Pardons Secretary Brandon Flood, and the Pardon Project's driving force, Bar Association Executive Director Victoria Connor)



What followed was a 2000-mile, 8-week pardons road trip, made possible thanks in very large part to a \$25,000 grant from The Andrea W. and Kenneth C. Frazier Family Foundation, a second grant from the Independence Foundation, the generosity of Glenn Barnes and Ruth Shaber, and PPSC leader Paula Budnick (herself a pardon recipient) who joined the team as his chief administrative

assistant. To everyone, the screening schedule was "aggressive". To filmmakers young in the craft, what Shuja accomplished was "unbelievable". By the end of November, 1300 people in 13 counties



across Pennsylvania – from Philadelphia to Erie, from Washington to Lackawanna - had seen the film (right, top: Mayor Jaime Kinder introducing the screening at the public library in Meadville, Crawford County) and listened to a panel of experts afterwards discuss the harms caused by criminal records and the benefits of pardons to society at large (left, top: the panel at Wilkes University in Luzerne County; left,



bottom: the panelists at State College in Centre County, including [from right] WRSC radio host and discussion moderator, Tor Michaels; State College Borough Councilman and Pardon Project leader Gopal Balachandran; and Assistant District Attorney Sean McGraw). It ended with a screening and the creation of a "Pardon Hub" at Eddie's House (at right, bottom), a non-profit social services organization in North Philadelphia, where pardon services will continue to be offered to the community – a model any community non-profit can use:



Date	City/County	Primary Hosts
9/19	Phila	ACLU
9/28	Phila	Independence Public Media Foundation
9/29	Williamsport/Lycoming	Yokefellowship
10/2	Malvern/Delaware	Bobby Bonds Memorial Foundation
10/3	Wilkes-Barre/Luzerne	Wilkes University and Luzerne Co Law & Library Assn
10/4	York	York County Bar Assn & DA of York Co
10/10	Scranton/Lackawanna	Greater Scranton Chamber of Commerce
10/11	State College/Centre	Penn State Law School
10/16	Somerset	Tableland Services Inc., Summit Legal Aid, and Somerset County Bar Assn
10/17	Washington	Washington & Jefferson University, Wash. Co. Bar Assn, Summit Legal Aid, and the Rotary Club
10/23	Erie	Gannon University and the Erie Co Bar Assn
10/25	Meadville/Crawford	Crawford Clean Slate and the City of Meadville
10/26	Pittsburgh/Allegheny	University of Pittsburgh Law School
11/2	Phila	Behavioral Health Training & Education Network, and City of Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and disAbility Services
11/3	Stroudsburg/Monroe	Monroe County Bar Association
11/8	Wilkes-Barre/Luzerne	Marywood University
11/9	Phila	St. Joseph's University
11/15	Phila	US Veterans Administration
11/16	Phila	American Society of Criminology - Annual Conference
11/28	Phila	LaSalle University
11/28	Phila	Eddie's House

The reviews everywhere, without exception, were uniformly glowing. After each, a cinematographer recorded comments ([example here](#); more at the end of this report) from those who were willing to step up to the mic on their way out of the venue.

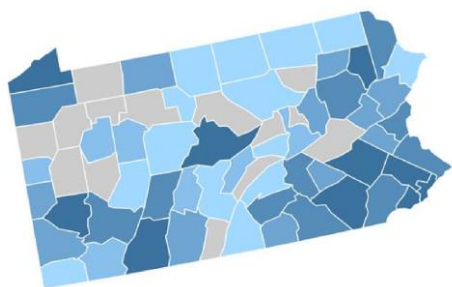
Results to Date

Again, the goal was never just to have people see and applaud the film, then go home. Conversations have begun on a major issue that, until now, has been invisible, and most of the benefits of “opening the eyes” of civic leaders will take time to realize. But as PLSE puts it, “Social Justice Requires Social Action” and the film offers [a large list of how everyone can help](#).

Here's how we've done so far towards reaching the five specific goals of the Impact Campaign:

Specific Goals	Results (through December 31, 2023)
15 new Pardon Projects	New projects on the rise in Crawford, Cumberland, Huntington and Adams Counties Newly energized Pardon Projects in Erie, Lackawanna, and Somerset Expansion of the Berks County Pardon Project to Kutztown
	New Pardon Hub in North Philadelphia (Eddie's House)
	New clinical program in Pardons being discussed at Pitt Law

1,000 new Pardon Coaches trained	46, with trainings scheduled on January 10 (Lancaster County), February 15 (Cumberland County, with Board of Pardons Secretary Shelley Watson) and March (Monroe County)
5 key changes in the law	The automatic expungement of pardoned crimes was signed into law on December 13 and will go into effect in 180 days (June 11)
Double the number of pardon applications submitted (from 1,940 in 2022)	Too soon to tell. But the number of pardon applications received by the Board of Pardons in 2023 was 2,173 – the most in PA history with almost 500 applications submitted during the last three weeks of December alone
Halve the 4-year timeline to a pardon	965 people from 53 counties signed a letter to the Governor urging him to sign pardons more quickly (see map below) – but Governor Shapiro still took until December 22 to sign 128 pardons that had been recommended to him on June 16 by the PA Board of Pardons (BOP) and 58 more it had unanimously recommended to him on October 12; and he’s refused to “tie himself down” to an “arbitrary” procedure to make final decisions within 60 days of the BOP’s endorsement, despite their having come to him after the Board’s 3-year process, public hearing and recommendation



Launched on September 11 by the Pardon Project Steering Committee and highlighted at several screenings of the film *Pardon Me*, the letter-writing campaign called on Governor Shapiro not only to sign the 222 pardons then on his desk, but to establish a standard operating procedure that would ensure future pardons got to him within sixty days of being recommended by the Board of Pardons. The campaign received support in 53 of Pennsylvania’s 67 counties.

Meanwhile, on October 18, the Community Action Association of Pennsylvania awarded its first-ever “Dependable Difference Award” to Megan Foy, one of the leaders of the Pardon Project of Somerset County; and on November 16, after giving the keynote address to the American Society of Criminology’s Division on People of Color and Crime, Shuja received its [Community Service Award](#) “in recognition of his outstanding contributions to improve the quality of life for underserved populations and communities affected by crime.”

Looking Ahead

As impressive as the progress made toward the specific objectives are the developments that are occurring around the state as this report is being written:

County	Results
Philadelphia	In February, civic leaders in West Philadelphia are coming together in February to create the first “Neighborhood Pardon Network” with multiple, connected Pardon Hubs. AFLCIO District Council 33 will become the first union in the state (and maybe the country) to start offering record-clearing services to its members
Centre	The megachurch in the county is considering adopting pardons as one of its callings. A second screening of the film is being scheduled at the Capitol Theatre and only those with criminal records and their families will be invited to attend

Erie	Gannon University will offer funded “Community Justice Fellowships” for students to work in its new Pardon Project. To date, three \$1000 Fellowships have been funded.
Lackawanna	After attending the screening, Paige Cognito, the Mayor of Scranton, pledged to include some funding for pardons in the City’s 2024 budget. Lackawanna Pro Bono has licensed the film, to make it a permanent part of its pro bono program for attorneys.
Crawford	Mayor Jaime Kinder attended the screening and pledged to support the Pardon Project. Inspired by the film, new volunteer coaches have been trained. Women’s Services, Inc., is appointing a Pardon Fellow and will serve as the county’s Pardon Hub.
York	\$9,000 was raised to support the Impact Campaign thanks to the tireless work of Victoria Connor, the Bar Association’s executive director. The Association licensed the film so it can continue to recruit volunteers for the Pardon Project.
Washington	The Rotary Club is considering adopting Pardons as a service program – and it would be the first Rotary in the state – in the <i>country</i> - to do so.
Lancaster	Zion Community Services and the Lancaster County Reentry Coalition have taken the lead in reenergizing the Pardon Project there, partnering with State Representative Ismail Smith-Wade-El to map out a year-long campaign of record clearing events.
Allegheny	Practice Professor Chalon Young is working to create a Pardon Hub at Pitt Law.
Monroe	Following the screening at its Bench-Bar conference, the Bar Association is leading the development of a Pardon Project with a Steering Committee that is chaired by Past President Hillary Madden and includes Judge Jonathan Mark, the Public Defender, the First Deputy DA, and Clerk of Court George Warden.
Lebanon	Barbara Smith, the County’s Clerk of Courts and the president of the statewide PA Assn of the Prothonotaries and Clerks of Court, is working to start a Pardon Project there.
Somerset	The Bar Association has identified this as a project for its Young Lawyers. A Pardon Fellow has been appointed by Tabletop Community Action and is active with the Pardon Project Steering Committee.
Bedford	ADA Megan Will, one of the founders of the Somerset Pardon Project, is working with Clerk of Courts on starting o in this county.
Berks	Kutztown University – geographically remote from Reading, which is where the Pardon Project is centered – is planning to incorporate <i>Pardon Me</i> into its 2024 Transformative Justice summer courses as well as create a Pardon Hub there.
Dauphin	A Pardon Fellow is being appointed, and civic leaders will be meeting in February to discuss forming a Pardon Project.
Statewide	In April 2024, the film will be shown at the annual conference of the Criminal Justice Advisory Boards meeting in Centre County. The Pennsylvania Association of Goodwills is working to include pardon-related services as part of its recently-received \$13 million dollar grant for re-entry services.
National	<i>Pardon Me</i> has been nominated for the 2024 ABA Silver Gavel Award.
International	Faculty members of the American Society of Criminologists will be showing the film and asking Shuja to zoom with their classes.

To date, we've also begun to license the film to ensure that it will continue to be screened and keep the conversations going. The licensees span a wide range and include, for example, the York County Bar Association (which was the first), the Public Defender of Philadelphia, Lackawanna Pro Bono, Temple University, PA State Representative Isiah Smith-Wade-El, the Promise, and the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey.

As we head into 2024, we are already looking at some very exciting events:

- January 10 – community leaders are gathering in Carlisle to plan the launch of the Pardon Project of Cumberland County, and in Lancaster, community leaders and attorneys are coming together for a Pardon Coach training that will begin with *Pardon Me*
- January 17 – the launch of a year-long series of record-clearing event (10 already scheduled) sponsored by State Representative Ismail Smith-Wade-El, held in his District, hosted by the Zion Community Services Inc., and supported by the Reentry Coalition and the Bar Association – a public-private partnership that we hope will spread via other State Reps
- January 23 – a pardon program hosted in West Philadelphia by the Greater Philadelphia Leadership Exchange, a program for business leaders connected through The Economy League
- February 12 – after holding a very successful screening in November, LaSalle University leaders will be meeting to discuss starting a Pardon Hub there
- February 15 – a 2-hour “summit”/CLE on pardons in Carlisle, sponsored by Dickinson School of Law, the Cumberland Bar Association, and CareerLinks, and including the participation of the Secretary of the PA Board of Pardons
- February 27 – Temple University is holding a “Second Chances” event including a screening of *Pardon Me* followed by a panel of experts.
- March - The Pennsylvania Reentry Council's Employment Committee will be hosting a special meeting highlighting *Pardon Me* and will be using the film to continue educating the public on the need for pardon and probation reform, and the impact pardons can have on those touched by the criminal justice system
- April 9 – presentation at the annual meeting of the statewide Criminal Justice Advisory Boards, hosted by the PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency and the County Commissioners Association of PA, in State College, Centre County









The point is to put a spotlight on the discrimination and get people talking about what it's doing to hurt us all – connecting those without any appreciation of the issue with those who suffer silently from it – building bridges between people – neighbors – whose paths most likely would otherwise never cross.

We cannot thank enough those who, like Sean Grasso and Hunter Barrett, saw something special in Shuja and this project and decided they would help. We gratefully acknowledge their contributions on the final page of this report. The unknown is whether we can raise the funding we now need to keep Shuja on the road and the Impact Campaign going strong. Otherwise, his budding career as a successful filmmaker is calling....

Tax-deductible contributions to keep the Impact Campaign going can be made to Do Moore Good, EIN 56-2572253, 4642 Sansom St, Suite 2, Philadelphia, PA 19139, or <https://donorbox.org/pardonme>

Additional Materials generated (so far!) during the Impact Campaign

Testimonials (selected)

 Tom_1.mp4	 Nicole.mp4	 Catherine_1.mp4
 Berks.mp4	 Allegheny.mp4	 Jessica Bird.mp4
 Courtney & Brooklyn.mp4		 Aaron Mallory.mp4

Press (selected) (reproduced next pages), followed at end by **Donors**)

“Too Many Pardons? No – way too few.” Commentary, Aaron Moore, *The Trib Live* (Westmoreland County), November 13, 2023

“Pardon Project of York County event focuses on 2nd chances for those with criminal records.” Lena Tzivekis, *York Daily Record*, October 11, 2023

“Filmmaker holds screening of ‘Pardon Me’ documentary at Meadville Public Library, showcasing state’s pardon process.” Rebecca Hazen *Meadville Tribune*, October 27, 2023

“Pardon people, not turkeys – support second chances.” Op Ed, Mike Desmond, *Centre Daily Times*, November 22, 2023

For More Information: connect@domooregood.org

Aaron Moore: Too many pardons? No — way too few.

TRIB LIVE AARON MOORE | Monday, November 13, 2023 7:00 p.m.



BRIAN C. RITTMAYER | TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Aaron Moore, left, and Arnold Councilman Phil McKinley await primary election results May 16 at McKinley's P&M Pizza.

You may have seen the news last January that outgoing Gov. Tom Wolf had granted 2,540 pardons over his two terms. They were recommended by the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons, which you've probably never heard of. This past week, that board recommended 114 more people for pardons, bringing their total to just under 400 this year alone. And there's another 250 or so on their way in January.

What's going on? That's way too many, right?

No.

I have a criminal record. You might know that, because my opponents in the race for Arnold City Council tried to make a lot out of the fact that I have a record, and you shouldn't be voting for people with criminal convictions.

I was arrested in October 1991 in a sting called Operation Trigger Lock. On the advice of my court-appointed attorney, I pled guilty to the misdemeanor of "intentional possession of a controlled substance by a person not registered" and was sentenced to probation and payment of restitution and costs of over \$1,000. That was 32 years ago. I had just turned 20. I completed my sentence. But because my record is public, it can still be used against me.

A little history about me. I grew up in public housing, in a single-rent home, where the role models of success were limited. Like most of the young kids I grew up with, I found comfort in hanging in the streets. We were overlooked or stigmatized not only for living in public housing but also for living "below the tracks."

Today, I'm 52. Over the past 32 years, I have had to "check the box" in too many applications to count outing myself as having a criminal record.

I'm lucky that the conviction that is on my record didn't stop me from getting certain jobs, but it did prevent me from getting jobs that would have allowed me to comfortably take care of my family. A drug conviction is an almost automatic "no" for jobs, training, schools, financial aid, loans, housing — heck, under public housing rules today, I would have been evicted from my home. My family, too.

Now, with the pardon, I don't have to check the box any more. When I got it in the mail, you cannot imagine the load I felt coming off my shoulders. To be honest, I didn't realize I was carrying it — but I know it now. For the first time, ever, no one can use my record to knock me down anymore. I learned to keep pressing forward, to be intentional and to never give up. I succeeded by keeping my head up, my eyes open and most importantly never losing hope.

Now, with the pardon, I can be an example to others like me who messed up once, twice, even three times and have been doing their very best ever since, but always running into walls. Like them — like most of us — I'm not rich, connected or privileged. But I did get a pardon. Now I am proof that there can be a second chance for just about anyone who turns their life around. I will be hope to those who feel hopeless. I'm excited now to think about what could be next for me.

And isn't that really what all of us want? Making sure people who've committed crimes fully "repay their debt to society" for sure, and finish the sentence the judge put on them; but after that, getting back to work, making the best they can of their abilities and their potential, contributing their best for themselves, their families, and our community. Right?

There are thousands — yes, thousands — of "criminals" just like me right here in Westmoreland County. Isn't it time to let us get back up and into the game?

Aaron Moore was elected to Arnold City Council on Nov. 7 and will take his seat in January. He and others will be starting a Pardon Project in Westmoreland County, joining a network of similar community efforts around the state. For more information about pardons and how to apply, visit PardonMePA.org.

LOCAL

Pardon Project of York County event focuses on 2nd chances for those with criminal records



Lena Tzivekis

York Daily Record

Published 4:05 a.m. ET Oct. 11, 2023 | Updated 4:05 a.m. ET Oct. 11, 2023

Last week, the Pardon Project of York County and its community partners presented a screening of the documentary "Pardon Me," followed by a panel discussion.

Over 200 were at the Capitol Theatre in downtown York on Oct. 4, where "Pardon Me" director and producer Shuja Moore, a pardon recipient himself, shined a spotlight on the transformative potential of pardons.

The 30-minute film focuses on individuals who got a fresh start via the pardon process.

The panel discussion that followed the screening, moderated by York County District Attorney David Sunday, highlighted the stories of panelists Shuja Moore, Judge William R. Carpenter from the Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas, pardon recipients C. Reginald "Reggie" Johnson Esq. and David Bryant, and pardon fellows DaShawn Harrison and Laurie Besden.

Filmmaker Shuja Moore spoke about his arrest at the age of 22 after he was convicted of an accidental homicide following a scuffle over the possession of a firearm.

After serving 12 years in prison, he was released and built a career working for nonprofits in the Philadelphia area. Through filmmaking and his nonprofit organization Do Moore Good, he said he is aiming to promote the narrative of justice in the media.

York County native David Bryant spoke about his struggles with substance use, which began in his late teens after his mother committed suicide. He has been in recovery for 22 years after battling alcohol and prescription drug addiction and received a pardon from Gov. Tom Wolf in April 2022.

Laurie Besden spoke about her experience with substance use. She was arrested five times, caused 29 car accidents and was sentenced to prison three separate times. Besden was sent to rehabilitation and was sentenced to the "option of a new life" by Carpenter.

The attorney turned her life around and received her full pardon by Gov. Tom Wolf in August 2020.

"I wasn't seeking a pardon to erase my history," Besden said, adding that she wanted to use her life experience to pay it forward and help others. "I am now the best version of myself," she said.

York native Dashawn Harrison served nine and a half years in state prison.

Since his release, he has been a youth mentor, volunteering in local organizations, including the YMCA, Pa Lady Rens, 717 Hoop Dreams and more. He spoke about his newfound purpose of serving the community, and is a pardon fellow, aiming to help pardon recipients tell their stories.

Mission: change lives

C. Reginald Johnson spoke about his arrest and conviction for armed robbery and kidnapping and was originally sentenced to 10-year concurrent sentences for each offense. His sentence was completed in 1976. Since then, Johnson has become a trial attorney focusing on areas such as criminal defense and personal injury.

In 1983, Johnson received a pardon from the governor of Massachusetts.

"My mission in life is to try and change people's lives, and my clients' lives, through counseling them and giving them a second chance at life," he said.

The documentary also featured compelling narratives of two people navigating the challenging pardon process in Pennsylvania, illustrating the profound impact it can have on their lives.

Following the panel discussion, several members of the audience who were actually interested in obtaining pardons asked the panelists about the steps they had taken to obtain one.

Viewers also commented on how much they appreciated the movie and how it affected them. Some were moved to tears.

Victoria Connor, CEO of the York County Bar Association/York County Bar Foundation, emphasized that this issue is a community problem, affecting housing, voting rights and employment opportunities.

A pardon in Pennsylvania is the only way to erase felony and misdemeanor convictions from a criminal record.

Learn more and watch the panel discussion

For more information on pardons, visit the York County Pardon Project website.

The York Daily Record live streamed the panel discussion on its Facebook page and the video can be viewed there.

https://www.meadvilletribune.com/news/filmmaker-holds-screening-of-pardon-me-documentary-at-meadville-public-library-showcasing-state-s-pardon/article_31c14496-742d-11ee-a62e-8713dc678dd3.html

Filmmaker holds screening of 'Pardon Me' documentary at Meadville Public Library, showcasing state's pardon process

By Rebecca Hazen Special to the Tribune
Oct 27, 2023



Philadelphia filmmaker Shuja Moore hosted a screening of his documentary, "Pardon Me," which showcases the pardon process in Pennsylvania.

REBECCA HAZEN/Special to the Tribune

A special screening of the short documentary, “Pardon Me,” was held at the Meadville Public Library on Wednesday, part of a broader campaign to inform people about the pardon process in Pennsylvania.

Philadelphia filmmaker Shuja Moore, producer and director of the documentary, was present at the screening, to share his story and to answer questions. The event was sponsored by The Pardon Project of Crawford County and Crawford Clean Slate, Crawford County Bar Association, Center for Family Services, Crawford County Drug & Alcohol Executive Commission, Allegheny College Bonner Program, Women’s Services, Meadville Neighborhood Center and Not One More.

“Pardon Me” features the stories of people with a criminal record who have applied for a pardon, as well as interviews with people knowledgeable and involved in the pardon process.

“Because of their criminal record, they are not able to climb up the ladders of success in society,” Moore said. “One in three Americans have a criminal record. People are scared to be forthcoming about it because they would be judged by that experience.”

Moore himself was formerly incarcerated, having been convicted for third degree murder and sentenced to 12 to 24 years in prison when he was 22 years old. He served 12 years and was released in 2016.

“It’s been seven years since I’ve been out. I’m still on sentence though. Anybody can apply for a pardon, but I would not be the most suitable candidate. Most suitable candidates are fully done,” Moore explained.

Moore noted that because he did not have a lot of career choices, he decided to take ownership of his story, which lead him to filmmaking.

“This story has to be told by somebody who has lived it. Providing an opportunity for people to feel seen and heard has been magical,” Moore said. “The film makes the case that, once you have a record, you essentially have a life sentence no matter what the crime was. You could be discriminated against employment, housing, social situations”

Moore has also produced a web series called “Walkies,” 15-minute webisodes that showcase the transformation of the formerly incarcerated.

In addition, Moore was named the Mike Lee Fellow at Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity. He was recognized as a “Remodeled Citizen,” by the Mayor’s Office of Black Male Engagement. He is also a community contributor for WHYY, Inc., the Philadelphia-based affiliate of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).

According to Moore, he believes that a pardon is an underutilized tool, and a low-cost investment.

“We want people making good money so that they can raise families, give back to their communities, and support the local economy,” Moore said.

Don Goldstein, with The Pardon Project of Crawford County and Crawford Clean Slate, helped to bring and organize the screening of “Pardon Me” to Meadville.

“We do have a fledgling Pardon Project of Crawford County, inspired and supported by a statewide network. We are putting out the word as best we can to folks who are in a situation like what [Moore] describes, to talk to us and explore that avenue of a pardon. The film tour, having Shuja here, as well as the statewide director of Pardon Project, Tobey Oxholm, is a great resource for us, as well as inspiration,” Goldstein said.

After the screening, there was a question-and-answer session with a panel of guests, which included Moore, John Force, pardon applicant and licensed professional counselor; Lisa Pepicelli Youngs, Crawford Clean Slate; Arnold Johnson, Crawford Clean

Slate; Mindy Davis, Southwest Region Parole Manager, Dept. of Corrections – reentry division; and Tobey Oxholm, Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity – PA Pardon Project.

During the panel, Oxholm noted that, while the pardon process is lengthy, with applicants often not receiving a pardon for three to four years, it is easy to get the process started. The process used to be harder, with a lengthy application, but it has since been simplified. The applicants need to receive two out of five votes from the state Board of Pardons in order to be given a hearing.

“The best news is that, out of the people who got the two votes, 82 percent of them ended up with a pardon. The odds are darn good. That is what this project is all about,” Oxholm said.

The film is currently on a statewide Pardons for the People Tour, which has visited multiple cities in Pennsylvania. Moore hopes to hold more screenings in the future, including repeat viewings, if possible. To host a screening, visit pardonsnow.org/screenings.

“I think the biggest joy from all of this is meeting people in all the areas of Pennsylvania who are social justice advocates in their area, doing great work,” Moore said.

• **More information:** Visit pardonsnow.org., crawfordcleanslate@gmail.com, and pardonmepa.org.

Opinion

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-

tal 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.

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

Nothing. Without You

We wish to thank those who – like cinematographers Sean Grasso and Hunter Barrett – were willing to open their imaginations to this project and their ears to our requests for support. Your contributions and your faith in Shuja Moore, who otherwise would have been forever regarded as a murderer, has made all this possible.

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