

From the inside out - Damien Cobbo's story of training success

At the heart of challenges faced by long-term incarcerated persons on return to the community is an elusive answer to a simple question: "How will I fit in?" A study of Queensland prisoners published by Monash University in 2014 revealed more than half of former inmates find themselves homeless and unemployed six months following their release. A recent study of criminal recidivism in Australia revealed that 45% of people released from prison in 2014-15 were back behind bars less than two years later. Indigenous Australians fare significantly worse against these same measures. The obstacles to societal and economic integration are enormous.

Approaching his 30th birthday, prison life was the only life Damien Cobbo knew as he finally walked free from the four walls that had enclosed him since his teens. His earlier life had been marred by violence, family chaos, drug and alcohol abuse, poverty and transience. Captive to past hurts and a drug-hazed mind, he committed a number of terrible crimes and paid a heavy price.

The odds of finding a life of purpose on the outside were stacked against him.

But only months later, Damien is now a prime candidate for vacancies in the lucrative rail industry after gaining a Certificate II in Rail Infrastructure following a 7-week Townsville-based project delivered by Energy Skills Queensland (ESQ) in partnership with Centre for Excellence in Rail Training with funding from the Queensland Government's Skilling Queenslanders for Work initiative. Damien and others were also supported through a range of contractor inductions with major rail operators Aurizon, ARTC and John Holland and other industry-required certifications to obtain the Rail Industry Worker Card.

It was the timeless kind of time of life on the inside that first got Damien dreaming of a better future. "I think it was just being in prison and seeing what was around me, and the behaviour of others in prison, that got me thinking. Seeing so many Indigenous people in there was upsetting. It was like seeing all my brothers stuck in the darkness, like they couldn't see the light, or anything better," Damien said.

"When I started to think more positively, I really started to believe I could do something with my life. I used the time inside to study, gain an education, learn some new skills and build up my literacy and numeracy. I started to feel like I owe it to myself. I started in there when I was 18, and I knew I wouldn't be out till nearly 30. I started to feel I was wasting my whole life. I'd hurt people in the community. I'd hurt my family. And while I'm stuck in here, they're suffering too. They don't get to see me. I realised I can't get around inflicting pain on everyone. I realised I'm a man now, a young man. If people are going to respect me, I have to change. They're not just going to respect me like that, I have to earn it."

On release, Damien worked with his employment services provider and parole officer to explore opportunities for industry training. ESQ's Townsville Career Start Rail Skills project was open for applications at the time. Damien attended the information session and initial interview screening hosted by Jeff McIlroy, ESQ's Project Coordinator.

With forty aspiring candidates and only 12 places available, the project team had a challenging selection process ahead of them. In addition, Jeff said that a life of violence and incarceration had left visible marks on Damien that he was unable to overlook.

“Damien has been in the lock up for the last ten years. Ten years of his life gone. He’s on probation at the moment, and wearing an ankle bracelet. I noticed his prison tats. I asked him to tell me where he’s at now. He told me his story, and how he was determined to turn his life around. He’d met and fallen in love with a new girl who has two kids. He wants to make it work,” Jeff said.

Jeff said that Damien’s sincerity and openness from their first encounter had left a strong impression, but owing to the nature of his offending and ongoing parole conditions, genuine concerns for the safety for the project team and participants remained.

“We had to jump a lot of hurdles to get him on the course. I’m still talking weekly to his probation officer. I had to send the names and date of births of all other participants to Corrections (as Damien’s parole conditions do not permit him to associate with particular people). I also had to convince the trainer and the RTO that they’d be safe working with him. We agreed that the trainer had the right of veto in the first week of the program if there were any warning signs.”

The trainer now has nothing but great things to say about Damien, according to Jeff.

“Damien has been incredibly reliable. He’s turned up everyday, week in, week out. He’s always been on time, and has applied himself brilliantly. He’s formed strong connections with the other participants, helps them out when he can, and has taken some of the younger ones under his wing and really looked after them.”

Damien and the other participants successfully graduated in late March 2019.

“We’re now all working with Damien and the others to help them find employment,” Jeff said. “It’s been rewarding for all of us working with Damien. When you work with someone to help them change their life in such a big way, that’s a rarity. Until recently, he’d been an inmate his whole life. For him to come out, shed the facade, and work with us and others to start walking a new path, that takes a lot of courage.”



Jeff McIlroy, Damien Cobbo and Probation Officer, Emma Burke, at the Program Graduation