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JUANITA EDRINGTON-GRANT

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Juanita Edrington-Grant has spent much of her adult life in prison. Juanita's story is truly inspiring and now devotes her life to the organization she has founded named CRAM. You will learn more about CRAM during and at the end of her story.

GFSF: Today, we have the opportunity to speak with Juanita Edrington-Grant from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. How are you, Juanita?

Juanita: I am blessed.

GFSF: That's great to hear. Thank you for taking the time to share your story with Get Free and Stay Free readers. Why don't you take the time to jump into your story?

Juanita: Okay. That could take a while.

GFSF: Sounds good.

Juanita: Well, I was born and raised in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. I'm a product of 11 children, and we grew up very poor. I have like five different fathers in my family, none of which were there in our lives to help my mom raise us. I am 66 years old, and my stepfather has been with my mom for around 54 years now. I've been in and out of prison most of my adult life.

I started going to prison in 1971. I graduated from high school, left home, and began selling drugs, wanting to live a fancy life because of always being poor and wearing hand-me-downs. I got involved with some older people who were selling heroin and cocaine. I was 17 years old and had a scholarship to go to a legal secretary school in Silver Spring, Maryland but chose the street life, and with that, I was sentenced to five years at the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections SCI Muncy.

I spent about 13 months the first time and was released on good behavior to a program for first offenders. After that, I walked off my parole and did very well for a while. Then, I started working at Camp Hill Prison as a secretary for a drug and alcohol program. I met a young man at that job who was a client in the drug and alcohol program.



I ended up establishing an intimate relationship with him. He was from Philadelphia, which led me back into my street life. I had issues with relationships, low self-esteem, and not feeling I was worth too much to anybody for most of my life. I was one of those women who kind of did whatever the man wanted me to do to be in a relationship. I ended up with him and quit my job. I had worked four and a half years at that Pennsylvania Department of Corrections job during that time. It was under a federally funded program. With that relationship, I ended up back in the streets.

After a while, I ended up back at SCI Muncy a second time. I served about two years and then went to a halfway house in Philadelphia. While I was there, I started getting high again and ended back at Muncy for the third time. I served six or seven months of my back time, and then I was paroled back to Philadelphia and right back to street life again. I got myself straightened up a little bit in between that time and came back to Harrisburg but ended up getting back into the fast life once again.

In 1986, I ended up with many charges in several different counties and headed back to Muncy again. This time was for seven years and nine months, with eight and a half years parole to serve. I realized that over 16 years of my life, what they were asking for, and that's when I decided that enough is enough. A few things happened to me for my benefit during those seven years and nine months. First, I went to Penn State, which offered a free college program at Muncy and got my paralegal certification. I was also enrolled in the Associate degree program when paroled to a halfway house.

I was really tired this time. I had tried drug and alcohol programs, and nothing else worked for me. I felt like trying something different in my life, so I gave my life to God in 1993, and honestly, I have not looked back. God has opened many, many doors for me. I can't even begin to explain sometimes where I am in my life and how I even got there. I know that it is extremely hard for ex-offenders. I had opportunities and did not take advantage of them, but then I did take advantage of the last opportunity I had, and this is where I am today. That's basically my background.

GFSF: As for your transformation Juanita, from your old ways of thinking to your new ways of thinking, did that happen gradually, or did you have an Aha! moment?

Juanita: My transformation happened when I was in the county prison, being sentenced to go back to Muncy for the fourth time. I had a spiritual advisor. She was more like a spiritual mother coming into the county prison every week to have Bible study with the women. That's when I had my Aha moment. That was going to be my last trip. I was done. I knew I had to deal with the consequences of my crimes. So, my Aha moment was more of a spiritual basis going down every week to meet with whom I called Mother Right. She would meet with me before the other women would come down for church. I had a special relationship with her, and she stuck by me the whole seven years and nine months I was in prison that time. She stayed in touch with me.

GFSF: There's been no looking back since?

Juanita: No looking back. I have only gone forward. I've looked back mentally, spiritually, and emotionally, but I have not gone back.

GFSF: Look back for all the right reasons?

Juanita: Yes.



GFSF: Many men and women can relate to your situation regarding the struggles of drugs and incarceration. Before we go into a conversation about what you can share with those who are currently incarcerated, let's talk about what you are doing nowadays. I've been reading about you. With your work, you're doing some pretty amazing things in the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania area.

Juanita: After my last incarceration, I immediately started doing prison ministry. I think prison ministry is important. I am not a religious fanatic. I live my life daily like any other human being. I am very stern in what I do, and I believe in spiritual awakenings. I believe that prison ministry is important to the prison system. I think it's important for the individual to practice faith however they see fit. However, you have to believe there is a reason why God continued to let us exist after we went through what we went through.

Beginning in 1993, I spent about 13 months in a halfway house. While there in a state Community Corrections Center, I started working for the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry. I knew this was a divine intervention to get a state government job under these circumstances. I went from a Clerk Typist II to a Clerk Typist III, a Clerical Supervisor, an Administrative Assistant, and a Paralegal. I worked there until I retired in 2013.

GFSF: You were hired as a state employee while in a state correctional community center?

Juanita: Yes. I started working for the state Department of Labor and Industry in November of 1992 and was released from the halfway house in April of 1993. I put my best foot forward once I got the job with the state. I knew how crucial that was for me being an ex-offender. It wasn't always easy because people would talk about me being an ex-offender, but I didn't care. I'm like, 'I've got my foot in the door now.' I tried to show them the value of hiring an ex-offender. I wanted to be an example of what can result from hiring an ex-offender because I already had it within me. I was already going to the prisons every week with a prison reentry group, and I just really wanted to show what an ex-offender could do.

GFSF: Show not only for yourself but also for other men and women after you.

Juanita: That's right. Because my thing is when you have a ministry mind, it's always about other people. I knew the position I was in was only through the grace of God. I knew I didn't have to worry about doors closing in my face because I just believed serving God would get me what I needed. Not so much what I wanted, because I wanted to be an attorney but knew I couldn't because of my criminal record. I always thought I was a good paralegal, so I didn't need to be an attorney. When I received my paralegal certification from Penn State University, I was considered the jailhouse lawyer in SCI Muncy. I helped a lot of people.

I was writing commutation applications for lifers. I'm still in touch with some lifers that I served time with. In fact, I just wrote a letter to the Board of Pardons for two lifers, and I heard that one got a public hearing, so I'm grateful for that. I've been back to Muncy on several occasions when we were doing pre-release groups. I went into the men's prison on several occasions, but I know that it takes more than just prison ministry to help people when they come out of jail. Because even though we go in and teach people about God, what do we offer them when they come home? That's what I felt God wanted me to do, so my ministry is the street.

Some people in the church feel like I do not spend enough time in the church. I'm an ordained, licensed missionary under the National Church of God in Christ. What I tell them is "show me in the Bible where Jesus spent all his time in the church. He was in the street. He healed people in the street or at their house



when He healed them. He taught and fed people in the streets. I tell them I feel like I'm doing more as Jesus did than the average pastor by spending less time in church and more on the streets.

GFSF: That is very real and practical.

Juanita: Yes, not everybody can be behind the pulpit. I believe my work is in the community, and I have adjusted my life for that purpose. I got married when I came home. It was a bad move. I knew it, and it was with a drug-addicted person, but you make those terrible decisions sometimes. I divorced after six years, and I've chosen not to marry or be in a relationship since that time. I have been raising my niece's two kids for the past five years because she has MS. They're five and seven. I'm raising them to help give them a decent life.

GFSF: So, you are keeping yourself quite busy serving God and people at the same time.

Juanita: Yes. When I started CRAM, I was heavy into prison ministry. I was going into six or seven different prisons. I knew my calling was to be more than just a prison ministry because I couldn't sleep at night a lot of times. So, I bought a Dictaphone, and when I would wake up in the middle of the night, I would record everything that was on my mind. After about a year, I started typing out what I had recorded and typed out the acronym CRAM which stands for Christian Recovery Aftercare Ministry. I came up with that, and I believe God gave it to me because of the Christian person I am. Aftercare is needed to provide to people coming out of prison or out of drug treatment centers. Recovery is what we all need to do. You need a recovery process, whether drugs and alcohol, bad relationships, or bad decisions. Ministry is what I've always wanted to be at heart. I always wanted to minister because ministering to somebody is being kind to them, helping them, and seeing him through the ordeals or issues in life. So that's how I came up with CRAM, that's the 501(c)(3) nonprofit that I have incorporated and have had since 2002.

GFSF: CRAM is your main project right now, and you have been doing that ever since then?

Juanita: Yes, CRAM is my life. It is what I've been doing since 2002 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania since I stopped doing prison ministry and started doing CRAM, which is more of an outreach. When I started CRAM, I met people every Saturday to talk to them. I would feed them a meal, and my church would let me use their facilities. We had a house that we used. I would meet them there each week, bringing their kids. I would have someone watch the kids, and we would just talk and have rap sessions. My bishop over 90 churches asked me to help do some outreach. I told him, you do not have to pay me, but I need somewhere to set up my program. He gave me a two-story, three-bedroom, seven-room house. It was in an area of town that I loved because I was born and raised in uptown Harrisburg. He gave me that house in kind. I still use that house to this day as a food bank. Last year, I moved out of there when I got my new property, a 16,000 square foot building, and five vacant lots. I have so much property that God blessed me with for \$250,000.

GFSF: This is all going towards the work that you have begun.

Juanita: Yes. My nephew and I, an ex-offender, have a construction company, and we built a veteran house on the parking lot. It houses 20 veterans, and there are 20 apartments over there. Next door to the veteran housing is our CRAM Human and Social Services building. Never in a million years did I dream that I would be somewhere like this today because, you know, society often dictates that ex-offenders are not supposed to go but so far.



But, listen, I don't believe, and this is the truth, I don't believe I am any better than any other ex-offender. I believe I was an ex-offender who got tired of the street life and who got tired of going back and forth to jail. I simply made up my mind that something had to give and decided to do something different and more positive, and these are the results over time.

GFSF: Especially when you are faithful to God in the process.

Juanita: That is right because if I cannot give my glory and praise to him, I do not want to be bothered. When people ask me to speak, but we do not want you to talk about God, I tell them you do not want me to speak then.

GFSF: The work you are doing is eternal and lives forever. That is great stuff!

Juanita: It is not about me. Do you know I get hundreds of thousands of dollars? I've gotten \$100,000 a year from a local funder for the last three years because they know what I do.

GFSF: They believe in you, your work, your mission, and your results

Juanita: That is right. I retired with 25 years from the state and my medical benefits, so my nonprofit does not have to care for me. I have my own benefits, and the only way I get paid is if I have to write it in a grant. So I had a pot of money for five years. Let me tell you how blessed this is. A former governor of Pennsylvania, Governor George M Leader, took an interest in CRAM. He died in 2013. That man, unbeknownst to me, left me a trust fund with \$510,000.00.

GFSF: He also was the founder of Leader Nursing Homes.

Juanita: That's exactly right. I worked with him about once a month, right before he died. He asked me to do some pre-release work for him. To give him credit for using his money, I created the Leader Project. I took his name Leader and made the acronym Leading Ex-offenders and Developing Improvement Readiness because that's what he had me do with his money. I was to send ex-offenders to get their forklift certification or go somewhere and get a real estate license, something that cost around a thousand dollars. I know that was a blessing from God. When he died, his family called me down to their office and told me that they had this money for me, and I was like, 'well, why would he leave me money?' I was thinking maybe \$20,000.00 or \$30,000.00, but that man left more than half a million dollars in a trust fund.

GFSF: What an incredible and inspiring story, and yet you are so humbled by it all. Your story tells of a woman who spent much of her life in prison and yet rebounded to not only find a fulfilling life after prison but help many others to find a better life as well. Tell us more about your newest location and work at CRAM.

Juanita: I have a brother in the Pennsylvania state prison doing 25 to 50 years. He was caught up in three-strike law. He's been in jail for 19 years now. I have kept in touch with him the whole time, and he was recently transferred closer to me to SCI Camp Hill. My brother was a talented construction person, and his son (my nephew) took after his father. My nephew already had a construction company when he went to prison for five years for drugs.



He has a college background, and when he went to prison, he knew he was not coming back. A couple of years after his release, he visited me and said he wanted to work with me. I told him I did not work with family members because there could be problems. However, I knew that he had a sound mind and said, okay, I will take a chance. He needed my administrative skills to help him develop a community development plan. So we went to an investment company and told them our idea to build housing for veterans and hard-to-place individuals. They liked our idea and invested the whole amount of the \$4 million project.

GFSF: Someone should write a book about you!

Juanita: I am thinking about asking my brother to write one about me. He wrote a book since he was in prison. The property used to be a medical center, and we converted it into a human and social services hub. My nephew, who has the construction company and is an ex-offender, also employs about 20 ex-offenders and pays them \$44.00 per hour. So I share this with those in prison to be inspired and know that they can do better.

GFSF: A businessman in Allentown, Pennsylvania, shared that he has about 40 men working for his company and pays them well. He said he purposefully looks for returning citizens because he has had much success with them because they have a lot more to offer, many times, than the non-incarcerated population. As we move forward, do you have any thoughts on the system and society related to the formerly incarcerated?

Juanita: I would like to encourage those in prisons that whatever city or state you are going back to, there are most likely programs to help with your transition. I know many in society think 'not in my backyard when it comes to ex-offenders; however, just about everyone has a relative or knows of incarcerated people. Many of them need help when they get back to their neighborhoods, including sex offenders. I know that is a terrible crime, but they require specialized support. If the system will put people back out into the community, then the system needs to help the community receive these people and not make waves for them. I think the community corrections centers are a great idea. I think they do a good service for people for like 30, 60, or 90 days to try to get themselves together before they hit the street directly. However, it takes us, the nonprofits, to help people. It is hard because money is not easy to get for ex-offenders. I do not believe in second chances. I believe you deserve as many chances as you need. After all, if I had only gotten a second chance, I would not be here today because I had to get four chances before I stopped.

GFSF: Thank you for taking the time to share your incredible story of hope and transformation, Juanita.

Juanita: Thank you. If anyone is being released to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, please visit our website and fill out an intake form to see if we can help you get back on your feet.

About CRAM

CRAM began its first program service in 2002 (Mentoring and Substance Abuse Support) upon its initial recognition as a 501(c)3 faith-based human and social service agency. CRAM expanded and grew its program services over time.

CRAM began with the vision to offer services for ex-offenders. We are blessed to have impacted so many lives through the following services we offer:

- LEADER Project
- Reentry Mobile Laptop Services
- Employment Assistance Project

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- Project MENTOR.
- Pre-GED Services
- Computer Literacy Class
- Financial Literacy Class
- Housing Financial Assistance
- Family Reunification Project
- Distribution (donation) Center
- Ex-offender Workforce Development
- Community Service Project

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We are evolving and building strategic partnerships. Our most recent accomplishment is the development of the one-stop service center dedicated to meeting the needs of ex-offender and their families, veterans, and other underserved populations in the capital region. The HUB Campus (The Harrisburg Uptown Building) represents this new vision.