



Pathway to Freedom, Inc.

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More Than a Meal: A Night of Restoration

By Scott McLean, Founder/CEO

This past holiday season, I sent out a newsletter asking for your support for our Pathway to Freedom Christmas Banquet. Today, I want to share the experience of one of our volunteers, Jerry “Jake” Neel, who traveled from Fort Smith, Arkansas to serve and show his support. His story is a powerful reminder that what each and every one of our supporters and volunteers are doing is making a real difference. Your generosity is changing lives. Jerry says:

I want to take a few minutes to share something God allowed me to experience this Christmas season. Yesterday, I had the privilege of attending a Christmas dinner in Wrightsville, Arkansas. From the moment we arrived, I knew this wasn’t going to be just another meal.



Jerry serving at PTF Family Christmas Banquet

We were searched at the gates, left our phones in the car, and carried only our IDs. That alone made me slow down and become more present. We arrived early, but there was already a long line. Our leader waved us forward and brought us to the front. It humbled me. I thought, Lord, I’ll go where You send me. Once inside, we were immediately put to work serving drinks. Being older, I quickly realized bending down for ice wasn’t going to work for long, so we adapted. We brought the ice up to table level and worked together. And standing there serving, it hit me—that’s the body of Christ. We serve one another and make room for each other’s limitations.

Since not everyone had arrived yet, I walked around greeting people. Folks may not know my name, but they recognized me. In that moment, I wasn’t a visitor—I was family. I noticed some people had empty seats beside them, while others sat close together. They told me, “That’s my wife,” or “That’s my son,” or “That’s my mom.” Then more people came in—and that’s when it hit me. This wasn’t just a Christmas dinner. This was a reunion. A meal became a doorway for connection and healing.

Families were being reunited. Friends who had prayed and walked through hard seasons together were finally meeting each other’s loved ones face to face. And church... that is Christmas. Because Christmas is about Emmanuel—God with us. It’s about restoration. Reconciliation. Being brought back together. The Bible says, “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people dwell together in unity.” I didn’t just read that Scripture—I watched it happen.

It reminded me that some of the greatest gifts God gives aren’t found under a tree. They’re found around a table—in restored relationships and the joy of belonging. This Christmas, I’m grateful for what God is doing in His people: bringing families together, restoring hearts, and reminding us we are never alone.

What I witnessed that night was more than an event — it was a living picture of what God is doing through Pathway to Freedom. Lives are being restored, families are being rebuilt, and hope is being renewed one story at a time. It was a reminder that this work reaches far beyond a single evening and into the hearts of many. I am grateful to be part of something that reflects God’s love so clearly.

As I looked around the room, I saw people who had once been strangers now sitting side by side as family. I saw stories that had been broken beginning to find healing and purpose again. It was a reminder that God is still in the business of restoring what was lost. And it showed me that what happens through Pathway to Freedom reaches far beyond one night and into generations.

The Missing Link: Restored and Rebuilt

By Allan Lankford, PTF Graduate

It all started when I was 11 years old. My dad lost his job at FedEx and later took a trucking job that kept him away for weeks at a time. When he was home, we did what he wanted, and over time I heard more criticism than encouragement.

I didn't feel accepted at home, so I looked for it in the streets. My dad wasn't a bad man—he was doing what he thought was best. But I was just a kid who wanted to feel seen. By 16, I was drinking and using drugs. By 19, I was committing burglaries. In 2010, I was sentenced to 10 years in prison. I served five.

When I was released in 2016, I rebuilt my life, got a job and bought a truck. But I hadn't dealt with my deeper issues. I became involved with a woman, and we both fell deeper into addiction. Meth took control of my life. In 2020, I became homeless and hit rock bottom. I committed several crimes and was arrested again. Back in jail, I lost everything, my freedom, my relationships, my pride. That's when I truly surrendered my life to God. An inmate gave me the address to Pathway to Freedom, and I wrote a letter. A year passed with no response. In frustration, I cried out to God.

The very next day, I was told to pack up. I thought I was going somewhere else—but instead, God sent me to Pathway to Freedom. When I arrived, I was surprised. Daily worship. A welcoming group of men. A structured program. It wasn't what I expected—but it was exactly what I needed. For the first time, I had mentors who challenged me and loved me biblically. I learned to confront my thinking, my anger, and my wounds. I began to see my identity through God's eyes.

After graduating the 18-month pre-release program, I stayed to give back, helping other men walk their journeys. I later paroled to Safe Harbor, where I now work as a driver, helping men get to work and appointments. Pathway to Freedom gave me what I needed—but it only worked because I chose to allow it.

That's the missing link. It's always a choice. I graduated from the post-release phase of Pathway to Freedom on October 11, 2025. I still face challenges, but I'm on the right path—because of God, my mentors, and Pathway to Freedom. I'm finally discovering who I am in Christ and learning to walk in the purpose I was created for.

Today, I'm learning how to live with structure, accountability, and faith as the foundation of my life. I no longer measure myself by my past, but by who God is shaping me to become. My story is still being written, but now it is being written with hope. I am learning what it means to live with purpose instead of running from pain. Each day is another opportunity to walk forward instead of looking back. What God has started in me, I am committed to finishing with Him. My life now belongs to His purpose, not my past.



Allan's New Chapter



Group 49 with counselor Jon Justice, celebrates pre-release phase completion



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