

## This Organic Food Company Doesn't Discriminate Against Ex-Offenders

by Olivia Anderson

Mike Miles hadn't had a stable job in years. He bounced around from temp agency to temp agency, never sure when his last day would be. Sometimes, he lost a position with less than a day's notice. This wasn't due to a poor work ethic—from arriving early to staying late, Miles says he did everything he could to build a good rapport with employers around Lancaster, Pennsylvania. But because Miles had a criminal record, he was always cut loose when it came time to let staff go.

"It was like walking on eggshells. You just never knew when you'd be gone," he recounted.

He says it's the best job he's ever had.

After his release from prison in 2007, Miles struggled to find stability—both mentally and financially. During this time he lived in his mother's house, and she helped him raise his daughter. When his mom passed away two years later, Miles says he became more determined than ever to create a healthy environment for his family.

"I'm all she has, and she's all I have," he said. "I had to build a whole new relationship with my daughter, while building a whole new life for myself."

It wasn't until October 2015, nearly a decade after he got out of prison, that a cousin told Miles about Lancaster Food Company, a local business that hires people who have difficulty finding jobs. This includes people with language barriers and disabilities—but the company focuses on hiring formerly incarcerated people.

Hoping this would clear up what felt like a thick cloud of uncertainty over his future, Miles submitted an application. He got an interview. And, soon after that, he began a new job, encompassing everything from food production to maintenance, not to mention a livable wage of \$15 an hour. He says it's the best job he's ever had.

Miles' scenario is rare in Lancaster, where the poverty rate holds steady at 30 percent—about double the national average. This figure riled Charlie Crystle, Lancaster's co-founder and CEO. Crystle was raised in Lancaster but left in 1986 to pursue a college degree and, later, a career in technology. He co-founded four tech companies, one of which sold for millions of dollars back in 2000.

Crystle is skeptical that many of Lancaster's low-income residents can get started the way he did. "The big push is about technology, but it ignores a whole swath of the population that will never go that route," he said.

He believes that food production is a key way to "meet people where they are," referring

to former offenders who may lack a high school or college degree. Lancaster produces products like bread and maple syrup, all of it USDA certified organic.

And Crystle wants it to grow. “The intention was never to start a mom-and-pop bake shop; it was to create a sizeable company where hopefully we can hire a couple hundred people,” he said.

The company is rapidly expanding, moving from a 1,000-square-foot space to one eight times larger by the end of this year. But, at just 16 full-time employees, including administration and owners, it doesn’t put a dent in the city’s poverty rate.

Crystle says he wants to inspire other companies and entrepreneurs to rethink their current practices and ignite conversations around minimum wage and employment opportunities for everyone, including ex-offenders.

Dan Jurman, who chairs the city’s Commission to Combat Poverty, believes Crystle’s business is a great way to make this happen. “None of us can tackle these issues alone,” he said.

Against the grain

According to the National Institute of Justice, having a criminal record cuts a job applicant’s chance of getting called back nearly in half.

Often, employers have an aversion to hiring people with criminal backgrounds, said Steven Raphael, an economist and professor of public policy at the University of California, Berkeley. He points to the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality, which asked employers whether they’d hire prospective employees who had a criminal background. More than 60 percent responded with “probably not” or “definitely not.”

Raphael’s research also suggests that even if certain companies don’t incorporate formal criminal history searches as a part of screening—and more than 80 percent of U.S. employers do—they rely on informal signals of criminality. Gaps in employment records, for instance, may preclude someone from getting a job.

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Obstacles like this make it considerably more difficult for ex-offenders to transition back into life outside of prison. Raphael thinks part of the answer is more companies like Lancaster Food Company. “This is an important part of reentry—we want people to lead healthy, productive lives,” he said. “Most of the men and women coming out of prison are people of prime working age, and they need work just like everybody else.”

Polly Lauer, the firm’s chief operating officer, agrees. Pennsylvania allows hiring managers to ask about prior convictions, and for many workplaces, they’re an obstacle. “But I tend to look for those (resumes), as opposed to putting them in the wastebasket,” she says.

There are exceptions to that rule. Lauer refrains from employing two types of offenders—people convicted of pedophilia and rape—in order to protect the safety of employees (many of them female).

Everything else, including murder, Lauer feels can be reformed by the time someone

comes back to work. She conducts extensive, probing interviews that run as long as two hours.

That approach is informed by Lauer's background—she has a degree in psychology and has worked for organizations serving people with mental illness and histories of substance abuse. She says Lancaster Food Company is the culmination of her entire career.

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Beyond providing employment and livable wages, the company also helps employees navigate the many challenges of reentry. Because many employees have a limited support network as well as personal obstacles, Lancaster tries to connect them to resources that go beyond simply providing them with a job. This means anything from helping them find housing and health benefits to changing their schedules so they can make court dates.

It also means a modest paycheck for Lauer and Crystle. Lauer took a pay cut in order to work at Lancaster, but says it's a decision she doesn't regret.

"If you look at our bottom line compared to a company that's paying their employees half what we are and paying themselves a lot more than we're paying ourselves, it looks very different," Lauer said. "And that's a choice."

Not one employee has quit. According to Mike Miles, having a steady job has given him new courage.

As of last month, he is freshly engaged, the father of a 19-year-old daughter studying nursing, and in the market for a house.

"It don't have to be a big house," Miles said. "I just want to be stable."