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Jesse Battle, left, faced two habitual-felon charges, but a judge took a chance on him, and he is now a TROSA director.

TED RICHARDSON, Staff photo by Ted Richardson

Treatment cheaper -- endings happier

BY JOSEPH NEFF, Staff Writer

In 1995, Jesse James Battle sat in jail in Fayetteville facing two habitual-felon indictments. Each could carry eight years in prison. Battle had a string of convictions: cocaine possession, larceny, robbery, breaking and entering, selling marijuana.

"I was really criminal-minded," Battle said recently. "But I knew the penitentiary wasn't my answer."

Battle's criminal career had started early. When he visited a friend to play, he would unlock the bathroom windows so an older brother could later return to rob the house. Battle took his payoff in gum and baseball cards.

He started drinking young, smoked pot in middle school and graduated to cocaine. A shoplifting charge put him in prison for a few months: "It took away my fear of the penitentiary."

Battle started kicking in doors and breaking into people's homes. He was finally arrested on charges of cocaine possession and picked up the habitual-felon indictments.

"I was so tired of the lifestyle. I wanted to be a normal guy who went to work every day," he said in an interview. "But I couldn't figure out what to do. I had a felony record and no job skills."

Battle credits Superior Court Judge Gregory Weeks with prying a plea deal out of the district attorney's office.

"He didn't have to do it. I was a danger to society," Battle said. "I had dropped out of high school. There were all the crimes I got away with, but he saw something."

Weeks sentenced Battle to two years of probation at TROSA, a residential treatment center in Durham. TROSA puts its residents through intensive therapy and employs them in its various businesses: moving, masonry, picture-framing, lawn care, contract labor and Christmas tree sales. By graduation, a resident has a savings account, a donated car, transitional housing and marketable job skills.

It costs about \$27,000 a year to put someone through TROSA, director Kevin McDonald said, about the price of a year in prison. But TROSA is almost completely self-funded: The businesses and donations generate \$26,000, and the other \$1,000 is picked up by fundraising.

The payoff is more than financial: McDonald said only 8 percent of TROSA's graduates are arrested in the first year after release. By comparison, 28 percent of those leaving the North Carolina prison system are rearrested in the first year, and 50 percent in the first three years.

Battle did well. He sobered up, got an associate's degree at Durham Tech and became a certified substance-abuse counselor. He now runs the men's programs at TROSA and is two classes short of a bachelor's degree.

Life is good, Battle said. Instead of just getting out of prison after two habitual-felon sentences, he's a homeowner and taxpayer. A daughter is graduating from N.C. Central University; another daughter is graduating from high school.

"I'm living in the sunshine," he said. "I can't ask for more of it."

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