



Photo by Lebanon Tourist & Convention Commission

Aaron Dorris checks the water quality at the plant. Dorris went through a program while serving time in the Marion County Detention Center to help him turn his life around.

Dorris rebuilds life with job in Lebanon

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This is a success story.

It could be a story about the Marion County Detention Center, one of the few of its kind in Kentucky that provides aftercare treatment to state inmates fighting substance abuse.

Or it could be a story about the Lebanon Water Works, one of the local entities to bring those inmates on site to work.

Instead, yes, this is a success story, but it is one about Aaron Dorris, a Bowling Green native who went through that treatment program and worked at the water treatment plant.

But, more importantly, it is his success story and how he had the intestinal fortitude to pull himself away from his checkered past and become so valuable to the Lebanon Water Work Company that they offered him full-time employment, even after he had finished his sentence at the local jail and moved back to Bowling Green.

Dorris had no idea where Lebanon was when he was sentenced to seven years at the detention



Photo by Lebanon Tourist & Convention Commission

Aaron Dorris goes over some paperwork for his job with Lebanon Water Works.

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DORRIS

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center after being convicted of his fourth DUI offense. His only knowledge was one you might expect. Norris knew there were lots of distilleries in the area.

He did know that he wanted to take advantage of every opportunity available to reduce his sentence. That is why he worked in a GED tutoring program and why he worked in the kitchen at the jail. And when possible, because of his seniority and his good behavior, he also signed up to work in the community.

“Aaron was a Class D low custody inmate which is level one or two,” said Barry Brady, the Marion County jailer. “He was housed in the low custody part of the jail. These are the guys you see around in khaki uniforms doing work at the park or on the garbage truck.”

Dorris wanted more than just an opportunity to be outside. He wanted to learn a trade, and when another inmate talked about working at the water treatment plant, he jumped at the chance when someone was needed there.

“When I was in Bowling Green, I was working at a place that grades the land in new neighborhoods,” he said. “They didn’t do anything with the water itself. They made sure the water drained like it was supposed to and I thought that was interesting.”

He didn’t just mow grass and run errands on site when he got to the treatment plant. Dorris gathered water samples that needed to be tested. He also watched the testing process and kept asking questions and wanted to know more about it.

“Every time that I would go out there, I could tell he knew exactly what to do and you could tell that he liked doing the work,” said Daren Thompson, the operations and management supervisor at the water company. “He wanted to know what those numbers meant. ‘He wasn’t a licensed operator, but you could ask him questions and he could answer them because he listened and he was a quick study.’”

That was a big jump for a man who was kicked out of his high school for skipping 60 days of classes in the first half of one school year.

“I had to go to an alternative school,” Dorris said. “I was trying to get out of school as fast as I could.”

FINDING HIS WAY

At the detention center, he took a different approach, taking so many classes that his seven-year sentence was reduced by more than half. One was the Sacramento Water Treatment Operator #1 class offered by California State University.

That put him on the road to becoming a licensed operator.

“The class was worth six months of experience toward his Class 1 certification,” said Mandy Spalding, plant operator at the water plant. “He was able to get that through the REACH (Re-Entering American Communities with Hope) program at the jail, and then two more by working for us.”

With no jobs available at the water plant, Dorris went back to Bowling Green in October of 2019, finding work driving a forklift and later working at a Toyota dealership.

Spalding wrote letters to several utility companies in Bowling Green, but to no avail.

“I knew with my background that not many places would hire me,” Dorris said. “I had pretty much burned every bridge that I’d ever gotten from somebody helping me to get a job by sticking their neck out.”

He still had that nagging desire to work for a water company and paid \$250 of

his own money to take a test that would improve his status as an operator.

“I almost passed it, missing it by a few points,” he said.

He stayed in touch with his friends in Lebanon as they served as a reminder of the trip that he had taken to rebuild his life but wondered if he was relegated to temporary jobs for the rest of his life.

“I thought I was kind of stuck to temporary agencies because that’s really the only way you can get your foot in the door anymore,” Dorris said.

When a job opened up at the treatment plant in 2020, it didn’t take long for Spalding to make a call to Bowling Green.

“I hadn’t been working here very long when he went back to Bowling Green,” she said. “I was impressed in that time how he went above and beyond what he had to do. He got along so well with everyone out here. When the job came open, every single one of the operators were like, ‘You need to call Aaron.’ We knew we wanted to hire him.”

LEAVING HOME TO COME HOME

Dorris was living in Bowling Green with his wife and daughter and with extended family nearby. He had to decide if he wanted to pack up his bags and leave the only community he had lived in.

It wasn’t just the opportunity to work at the water plant that helped him make the decision.

“When I was in the detention center, and I was coming out to work, they didn’t treat me like an inmate,” he said.

“They just treated me normally like I’d never been in trouble before. They didn’t pass judgment on me.”

He knew the job offered him a chance to rebuild his life away from some of the temptations of his past. Not only that, “this was a good job,” he said.

His wife thought it was a good time to leave Bowling Green, but even then, there were obstacles to overcome. With no driver’s license because of his previous arrests, the family had to find a place to live close enough to the plant so that he could walk to work. He is living near the store in Calvary, only a few minutes away. His wife found a job at TG, and life is good for the Dorris family.

Aaron is working toward his Class 3 certification, a process that has been slowed down because of COVID.

“He’s pretty much capable of running the plant by himself,” Thompson said. “We just have to have someone within 30 minutes of the plant right now.”

SEVERAL SUCCESS STORIES

This has been a success story.

It’s the success story of programs for inmates, and it makes Barry Brady realize what makes his job worthwhile.

“What Aaron has done is wonderful,” he said. “The most rewarding part of my career is focused on recovery and treatment for individuals that are broken or trapped in addiction.”

It’s the success story of entities who will realize that people can change and make a difference.

“Over time you can really see what somebody’s character was like,” Thompson said. “Everybody makes mistakes. Some mistakes are bigger than others. But Aaron understood that, and he wanted to make a change in his life. And he did. We’re glad he came back.”

But in the end, it is a success story about Aaron Dorris and those who will walk in his shoes.

“I think it’s important to encourage them (inmates) and let them know that you can still get a good job out here,” he said. “Often times, they lose their confidence in there. I’m beginning to see the longer I’m staying out of trouble, the more doors open and the more opportunities there are for you.”