

He Served More Than 21 Years In Prison, Now He Helps DC's Incarcerated and Youth Population Find Hope

By Myahna Alston



Bryant Woodland with the Second Look Project team of attorneys. (Photograph courtesy of the [Second Look Project Instagram page](#)).

After spending over two decades in prison and finding hope through D.C.'s Incarceration Reduction Amendment (IRAA), Bryant Woodland has transformed his life into a beacon of support for the incarcerated population and youth in Washington, D.C.

IRAA allows individuals incarcerated in DC to ask for a reduced sentence or early release if they were under the age of 18 when the crime they were convicted of took place, and as long as they have served at least 15 years of their sentence.

Released in 2021, Woodland now serves as a re-entry coordinator, advocating for the rights of formerly incarcerated individuals and guiding them through the challenging process of reintegrating into society.

Mr. Woodland who frequently revisits his hometown community, the LeDetroit Park area near Howard University in hopes of bringing a positive outlook for the youth who envision life as he once did.

At the ripe age of 20, Woodland went to prison for being an accomplice in a deadly robbery attempt, at the time, his son was six-months old.

“That's the first thing I processed and I got the papers and the 35 years to life and I was 20 turning 21, but I got that thinking– that's all the way to 2035,” he said.

Woodland was arrested in 2001 near Howard’s campus, in front of the dormitory formerly known as Lucy Diggs Slowe Hall.

Banned from the Howard University Hospital campus, and its surrounding areas, by the age of 11, Woodland was later barred from Georgetown University’s campus for being disorderly.

Growing up, he remembers being largely surrounded by criminal activity, and having endured several traumatic experiences before being sentenced to serve time in federal prison.

“I have weathered the storm, and both of my parents were gone by the time that I was 18. My mother was in an accident when I was ten, we were waiting for her to come home from the store, and after that she was in a coma from then until I was maybe 22. I got a call from my family, I think New Year's morning she passed,” Woodland said.

At the age of 17, during Howard’s Homecoming, Woodland found out his cousin was murdered. Months later, Woodland was notified that his father passed away later.

Woodland is not the only one, who was left to become a product of his environment at a young age. According to a report done by D.C. Voices on juvenile justice rates in the District of Columbia, an average of 52 arrests are made per 1,000 children in the district, who are between the ages of 10 and 17.



Bryant Woodland's Office at Second Look Project. (MyAhna Alston/101 Magazine).

“They always want to say, you need to look at the nature of the crime, and I always tell attorneys when they look at me, that's the one thing that never changes every day in this whole thing, the person can change.

“You know, people can grow. But if that is the case, you know, that never changes the feelings for these families, the victim and the one convicted,” Woodland said.

During the time he was incarcerated, Woodland was transferred to male-only federal prisons, Lewisburg in Pennsylvania - notorious for high-profile inmates like John Gotti and Whitey Bulger.

“There would be days where maybe like 80% of the prison is on lockdown because it's this small special management unit where they send all of the 6-foot-6 inch, gang-banging, like the worst of the worst,” Woodland said.

Throughout his 20 plus years serving in prison, Woodland held numerous jobs in the safety division, he learned to dismantle and rebuild handheld portable fire extinguishers, recycle, and became certified in various trades, including pest management and handling hazardous waste. Woodland received his GED while in prison at 31 years old. After hearing about the IRRA legislation from one of his good friends, Roy Middleton, Woodland knew he had a real shot at a second chance.

“Well, we're in prison. We have so many emotions and appeals and it's like, is it tangible? Like, you know, will it do anything? “People are being told they're going home in a box like you're going home in a box. This is what your paperwork says,” Bryant explained.

“But then, like I said, once I really caught on and got to researching, I was in another place.”



Bryant Woodland pictured with Maggie Birkel (Photograph courtesy of The SLP Instagram page).

Birkel and Woodland met Maggie Birkel, his attorney at the time and deputy director of Second Look Project in April 2021.

Birkel and Bryant would email daily during the end of his sentence. Occasionally, she would interview him and his family about his life before his arrest and during his incarceration.

“We had been waiting so long and everything came down, I believe April the 27th, the law passed out of Congress. The next day I got a call from Maggie, and was like, this is exciting,” said Woodland.

The day following Birkel’s phone call – was Bryant’s birthday –April 29th. After numerous emails, phone calls, interviews, and court dates, and 21 years, Woodland came home in December 2021. He was imprisoned at FCI Cumberland on the day when he was released.

“I mean his nickname is ‘Love’, and it’s just the perfect encapsulation of who he is. The reason why his case was so straightforward is he is just this incredibly peaceful and friendly person, and we didn’t have to use any expert. His record is just like incredibly strong. So we worked up the case and filed the motion and got the hearing all very quickly” said Birkel.

“He’s very much the glue of his family because his grandmother, who helped raise him is still alive and that’s who he came home to initially. I can tell he does so much for his family, every day, every week,” she added.

Directly after being released, Woodland took a job at a bakery which proved quite inconvenient, but was ‘something rather than nothing’ from his perspective at the time.

“As far as the commute... no trains would be running like, you know, things like that. People had to pick me up in the middle of the night. So, I was just going through it,” Woodland said.

In 2022, Woodland would be offered a newly-created position at Second Look Project. “They [SLP attorneys] were like ‘we’re thinking about creating a position here at the office for you, what do you think?’” Woodland recalled.

From his perspective, most released individuals naturally understand that their responsibility is to be re-entry coordinators, whether they tote the title or not.

“I’m blessed. It’s a blessing. We [formerly incarcerated] all think that we are reentry coordinators. We always say, ‘you should go out here, check this out. So that’s a natural thing to do anyway. You know, look out for people in that same position,’” Woodland said.

“Who’s checking back? You see the guy who was 16 ? He’s 73 now, you know, who’s checking back to see like whether or not he’s a danger, what could he do now?,” Woodland said.

Birkel emphasized the significance of personal connections and relatability in reentry services. “There’s nothing that can replace the trust and comfort that comes from somebody who has walked in the same shoes as you have,” Birkel said.

“So, he’s there in the late night or when there’s an emergency or something. He has built the relationships with the clients to where they can trust him and know that he’ll pick up the phone and help them figure out next steps,” Birkel added.

Woodland does extensive fieldwork for Second Look Project, gathering letters of support from prisoners’ families, and transporting them to hearings, or resource appointments with their parole officers or in the Mayor’s Office on Returning Citizens Affairs (MORCA).

Oftentimes on prisoners behalf, Woodland will contact organizations to confirm orientation dates for court mandated re-entry programs. “Aside from that, you know they can pick my brain about stuff, and I can sort of give them insight,” Woodland said.

For returning citizens who may have no family left in DC, who are required by law to reside in DC for a certain period of time upon release, Woodland books emergency stays at hotels, and other boarding facilities for them.

“As you can imagine with gentrification and everything else that maybe their family isn’t still in DC,” Woodland explained.

Woodland also gives them guidance on how to navigate challenges associated with coming home, learning new technology, employment services, welfare programs, housing, familial issues, and more.

Woodland's story also serves as a call to address systemic issues in D.C. and around the world. He highlights the over-incarceration and neglect that many inmates who are serving decades in prison face in the system.

According to [data reported by Prison Policy](#), Washington D.C. has an incarceration rate of 899 per 100,000 people.

“Definitely take it slow, but take a little time and research and you got to invest in yourself, whatever it takes – either paying a couple of hours to take a course or get some training,” is Woodland’s advice for someone re-integrating into society after serving prison time.

To view more information on Bryant Woodland’s story view this video on [The Second Look Project’s Instagram](#) page or [website](#).

Visit [Howard University Youth Justice Advocates](#) website to learn more about how the organization advocates against the youth school-to-prison pipeline.