

Summary of Podcast Episode

Conversations In Focus

Host: Dr. Bryan Hudson, New Covenant Church / Vision Communications Media LLC

Guest: Dr. Michelle Daniel Jones, Constructing Our Future

Theme: Reentry, Housing, and Rebuilding Lives After Incarceration

Overview

In this episode of *Conversations In Focus*, Dr. Bryan Hudson speaks with **Dr. Michelle Daniel Jones**, returning citizen, scholar, and Executive Director of **Constructing Our Future**, a reentry and housing program for formerly incarcerated women in Indiana. The conversation highlights the life-changing impact of safe housing, community, opportunity, and person-first language for women reentering society after incarceration.

Dr. Jones shares her personal journey—from incarceration, accountability, and rehabilitation to earning a PhD from New York University and becoming a national voice in reentry research and advocacy. The episode also includes the full presentation she delivered at the November 15 Town Hall, *Connecting Community with Returning Citizens*.

Dr. Jones' Background and Mission

- Experienced 20 years of incarceration in Indiana, during which she pursued healing, education, spiritual formation, and creative expression.
- Earned a PhD from NYU and held fellowships at Harvard University, the Ford Foundation, and the University of Chicago.
- Co-founded **Constructing Our Future (COF)** while incarcerated, through a public policy class in the Indiana Women's Prison.
- Leads COF as both a researcher and returning citizen, combining academic insight with lived experience.

Constructing Our Future: Purpose and Vision

COF is a reentry and residential program that provides:

- **Safe transitional housing** for women immediately upon release.
- **Wraparound services:** case management, mental and physical healthcare connections, substance use recovery support, and skill-building pathways.
- **Customized planning**, beginning with each woman's three immediate goals—recognizing that reentry is never one-size-fits-all.
- **Long-term stability**, supporting residents for **6 months to 2 years**, rather than the typical 90–180 days.
- **Autonomy and accountability**, helping women step fully into adulthood with respect, support, and dignity.
- A **community of belonging**, grounded in peer support and shared lived experience.

COF's mission is shaped by the recognition that returning citizens often face “civil death”—loss of rights, opportunity, and personhood. COF interrupts this cycle by offering safety, empowerment, resources, and a path to permanent housing and economic stability.

Key Topics Discussed

1. The Importance of Person-First Language

Terms like “ex-convict” or “inmate” reduce people to their past.

COF intentionally uses “**returning citizen**” to affirm dignity, humanity, and potential.

2. The Carceral State and Barriers After Release

Dr. Jones highlights systemic barriers such as:

- hyper-surveillance and easy parole/probation revocation
- racialized policing
- employment discrimination
- housing discrimination
- criminal justice debt
- poverty and generational inequities

These factors often funnel women back into incarceration—unless communities intervene with support and opportunity.

3. How COF Rebuilds Lives

- Personalized reentry plans
- Access to education, job training, vocational programs, apprenticeships
- Family reunification support
- Financial literacy (developed with Butler University)
- Health and HIV awareness programming
- Opportunities for creative and civic expression
- Connection to recovery communities
- Support for entrepreneurship

4. Lived Experience as Expertise

Dr. Jones emphasizes that those most affected by the system must help shape policies and programs. COF is **built by incarcerated women, for formerly incarcerated women**, ensuring:

- relevance
- compassion
- credibility
- sustainability

Common Misconceptions About Returning Citizens

Dr. Jones addresses harmful myths, including the assumptions that:

- formerly incarcerated people are lazy or uneducated
 - they need everything done for them
 - they cannot lead or shape the policies that impact their lives
- COF disproves these myths daily, empowering women to take ownership of their future.

Future Goals: The Newton House

COF aims to move from a small rented home (serving four women) to a **larger, permanent residence—the Newton House**, in partnership with Broadway United Methodist Church.

Goals include:

- housing 8–10 women
- long-term sustainability
- expanding to multiple houses
- future housing for older women aging out of incarceration

COF has already secured an initial **\$50,000** toward the down payment.

Community Impact and Legislative Advocacy

COF has helped advance:

- **The Ending Automatic Termination of Parental Rights Bill**
- **The Anti-Shackling Bill (2022)**

The organization also hosts:

- HIV awareness and prevention events
- civic engagement courses
- statewide financial and reentry education
- leadership development opportunities

Statewide Survey Initiative

COF launched Indiana's first statewide survey focused on:

- formerly incarcerated women

- their children
- reentry challenges
- housing instability
- employment barriers
- healthcare and recovery access

The goal is to produce **reliable statewide data** to guide policy and support.

Resident Testimony: Joe Walls

A former resident describes:

- serving 18.5 years
- losing family and support
- the fear of being a burden
- the desperate need for safe housing
- the life-changing impact of COF's community
- her vision of housing for returning women in every Indiana county

Her testimony highlights the profound difference a stable home makes for a woman rebuilding her life.

Closing Reflections

Dr. Hudson and Dr. Jones close the episode with:

- a call for churches, community groups, donors, and volunteers to partner with COF
- gratitude for organizations like New Covenant Church who already provide support
- an invitation to educators, professionals, and advocates to join COF's board or assist with property acquisition
- encouragement for the public to visit **constructingourfuture.org** for resources, information, and ways to help

Dr. Hudson affirms that COF's work reflects the heart of Christ—restoring dignity, agency, and belonging to women reentering society.