







# COOKING FROM SCRATCH

**How a food truck is helping ex-prisoners  
find their way on the outside**

by **Scott Korb**

I.

**S**nowday once traversed the streets of New York City in the service of the Consolidated Edison energy company. Over the past year, she's been reborn, painted silver blue, covered with a lattice-work of salvaged wood slats, and outfitted with two new griddles, a fryer, and a sink. In mid-February, she was nearly ready for her debut.

Jordyn Lexton, who conceived Snowday (and Drive Change, the nonprofit that will power the truck) took me to see her mid-makeover. Lexton is a young white woman who seems most comfortable dressed in black, and who speaks with a flat intensity and a kind of choppiness

that give the impression she's racing against something big and fast. She pointed out where the steam tables and the induction burner would go, stepping over a two-by-four and a monkey wrench in the truck's center aisle. She was especially pleased with the truck's interactive feature: along the service side of Snowday is a sliding box where cooks will create its signature dish, "sugar on snow," a taffy made by pouring hot maple syrup onto a bed of crushed ice. It's a nostalgic nod to a vacation Lexton took as a teenager to Quebec's Mont-Tremblant, where she watched huge troughs of boiled-down syrup drizzled directly into the snow. She

loved its consistency. She loved that it was both warm and cold.

What's more important, however, than bringing *tire d'étable* to the streets of New York is Drive Change's mission to reduce the state's youth recidivism rate—which now stands at about 70 percent. The truck's employees will come almost entirely from jail or prison. By first offering them training in the culinary arts, hospitality, social media, and marketing, and then providing them jobs, Drive Change is counting on keeping those young people in the free world. Gainful employment has been shown to slow the movement of prisons' revolving doors.

Lexton discovered her social mission—advocacy on behalf of formerly incarcerated young people—while working as a high-school teacher at Rikers Island, New York City’s main jail complex, as she pursued a master’s degree at Pace University. Her earliest ideas for Drive Change were centered on advocacy, not food, and originated in a campaign in New York State to raise the age at which young people charged with crimes are prosecuted as adults. New York is one of two states that treat sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds this way. (The other is North Carolina.) Lexton recalls thinking while still teaching, “What if more people knew that this is what New York was doing to kids?”

One of her final assignments at Rikers was to have her students write letters to state officials about their experiences being treated as adults in the criminal justice system. A few of the letters, including some to a key raise-the-age advocate, New York Court of Appeals Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman, she keeps framed above her bed at home.<sup>1</sup> “Initially,” Lexton says, “I saw the truck as totally, literally a vehicle for that voice. Kind of thinking foghorn style, having kids read out their letters, driving around”—selling sugar on snow to keep the whole thing moving.

After school, and while she was developing her ideas for Drive Change, Lexton worked for the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO). There she learned the idea of “transitional work models”—from reentry into the community to permanent placement in a job. She says

---

<sup>1</sup> For example: “I was at the wrong place at the wrong time. But adults that’s 18 and older its different because they should know more than the younger ones. I also think being on Rikers Island at 16 is mess up because it some adults going to pick on the ones thats 16....”

that CEO’s success has profoundly inspired Drive Change.<sup>2</sup> Lexton found CEO’s system of paying employees every day particularly compelling, because it recognized a “clear immediacy and need” in people trying to get back on their feet after incarceration. Snowday employees, working for \$11 per hour, will be paid weekly.

With employment front and center, and with the knowledge that nonprofits cannot legally lobby for any particular pieces of legislation, Drive Change’s focus now is food. And beginning in March—as I’m writing this—it will offer a full menu of maple-themed dishes inspired by French-Canadian chef Martin Picard, and first created by Drive Change culinary arts director, Jared Spafford: maple pulled pork, maple bacon brussels sprouts, maple grilled cheese, and the Danish stuffed pancake known as an *æbleskiver*.

## II.

**R**oy Waterman will admit that the bank robbery was his idea. Friends of his were in Virginia doing the same kinds of things he was doing in Queens, “selling drugs, walking with guns, using drugs, hurting people”—behaviors he now refers to as the “street package.” Waterman decided to join them down South.

In late 1995, when Waterman was nineteen, one of his friends had to visit the bank, and just being there—no Plexiglas, just a counter

---

<sup>2</sup> In August 2012, Marilyn Moses, a social science analyst for the National Institute of Justice, published findings in the American Correctional Association’s *Corrections Today* that challenge the basic assumption that job-placement programs reduce recidivism. Two programs, however, are singled out in this report for their effectiveness against long odds and “the overwhelming body of evidence” against success: New York’s CEO and Chicago’s Safer Foundation, both of which, Moses notes, “have built strong and trusted relationships with employers.” Through Lexton’s relationship with CEO, Drive Change is now one of these employers.

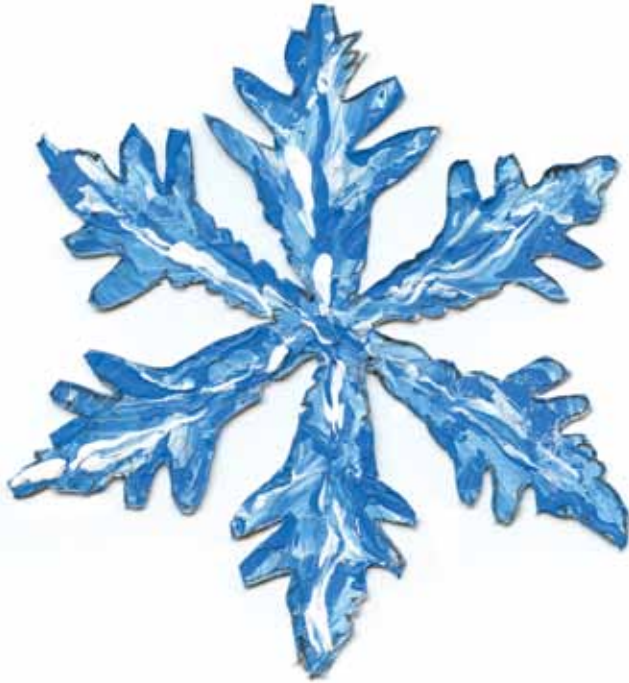
to hop over—planted the seed in Waterman’s head. “I’m like, I’m gonna rob this place. We gonna rob this place,” he recalls. “And sure on enough, we set up a time to rob it. Three of us went in there, masks on, guns out, and robbed the place.”

Waterman had friends in Albany too, where there was also money to be made. In the months after the Virginia robbery, he regularly traveled from his home in Queens to the New York state capital to sell crack cocaine.

One of the other dealers in Albany, Allen Johnson, who sold heroin, enlisted Waterman and two of his friends on the evening of July 29, 1996, to help him collect \$180 from Georgie Cruz. Cruz lived with Anthony Ingoldsby in a basement apartment at 51 Elberon Place. Johnson’s girlfriend drove and stayed in the car as the four men approached the building.

Johnson knocked at the door, and finding Ingoldsby alone, he grabbed him by the throat, demanding to know where Cruz was. Ingoldsby fell, and the other men kicked him. Within moments, Johnson and Ingoldsby ended up together in a bedroom, door locked, and Johnson set to work on him. The noise boomed inside the bedroom, while the other men searched the rest of the apartment for the money Johnson was owed. Behind the door, Anthony Ingoldsby, who owed Johnson nothing, begged for mercy.

Finding nothing of value—although Ingoldsby was offering Johnson any money he had—one of the men rammed his shoulder into the door and found Ingoldsby bleeding from his neck and shoulders. Grabbing Johnson, the man encouraged him to stop, and then left, proceeding with Waterman and the other accomplice out of the apartment and back to the car. Johnson



followed a minute later. While alone in the bedroom, he had stabbed Ingoldsby seventeen times and then left him for dead.

Arrested August 1, 1996, and first held in the Fishkill, New York, Downstate Correctional Facility, Waterman ended up serving time not only for his involvement in the murder of Anthony Ingoldsby, but also for the gunpoint robbery of the Virginia bank. All told, he was imprisoned for more than twelve years in both Sing Sing and the Clinton Correctional Facility, about twenty miles from the Canadian border, for the Albany crime, and at federal facilities in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Ray Brook, New York, near Lake Placid, for the stickup job—before being released August 13, 2008, into a Brooklyn halfway house, where he lived another six months.

Waterman's parole finally ran out on February 6, 2014, just days before we first met for a Black

History Month panel I moderated about soul food and food justice at New York University, where I teach. He is now married and the owner of a Caribbean and soul-food catering company in Queens, not far from where he grew up. After meeting Jordyn Lexton last fall through a mutual friend, Yuval Sheer, deputy director of the New York Center for Juvenile Justice, Waterman joined Drive Change as a chef and mentor.

Waterman's a good talker and has lots to say about the soulfulness of soul food and the ability of a good meal to bring people together. But bromides like these are not why he has found a place with Snowday. Waterman notes, almost in passing, that the five years he's been out of prison have felt longer than the twelve years he was in. Spending some time with him, I've come to believe that it's this paradox that shapes the philosophy behind his mentoring. For Waterman—who's

a big man, though he's purposefully slimmed down since leaving prison—the lessons that matter are not about good food creating good communities. More simply, good food means good work. And though Spafford, the culinary arts director, is going to purchase quality meats and local produce and maple syrup, and train his employees to prepare delicious sandwiches and sides, in Waterman's eyes the food that comes out of Snowday will have its goodness measured by the employment of one, and then another, and then another formerly incarcerated young person. This will be hard work.

"This, out here, this is about responsibility," he tells me. "This is about working hard, paying bills, being there for people that depend on you—that's what makes this time, since I've been released, the five years, feel like it's so much longer than the twelve years, because it hasn't been easy. To me, the prison thing was an emotional, mental, not really physical thing, and out here in society, it's emotional, mental, and physical. It's taxing in so many different areas. And you get up every day and it's a routine, yes, but before you know it, days are blinking, going by, because you've got so many things to do. And before you look up, the day's over."

The grind of daily life in the free world is central to what Waterman has begun teaching the young men he's helping to prep for Snowday. Right now that's Tyrone McRae, Fredrick Coleman, and Christopher Thomas—young men recently out of prison who've found transitional work and housing at the Doe Fund. To these men, and a few others who have recently signed on to work with Drive Change, Waterman offers his own life as an example.

For the five years that he remained under correctional control

after his release, “working hard [and] paying bills” meant a couple steady jobs in general building maintenance, another maintenance job in a church, and scattered employment in the field of heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning; most of 2011 he spent working part-time, collecting unemployment, and sitting for countless job interviews. His felonies, he believes, kept him out of many jobs.<sup>3</sup> Waterman credits his wife, whom he met in church shortly after his release from prison, for providing him stability and keeping him just on this side of debilitating depression. He applied for and was awarded seed money to found his catering company, which he opened in March 2012.

### III.

**W**aterman will be on the truck several days per week to supervise and cook, serve food, and clean up. And behind the scenes he’s participated in training sessions in the kitchen and directed team-building activities in the Drive Change offices, housed in a shared workspace in Manhattan. “My role,” Waterman says, “is more mentor, leadership, guidance than it is chef.” And it’s a role that suits him: “I’m an assertive personality, sometimes even aggressive. I know when to address individuals. And when I start speaking people stop and they listen.”

Waterman is primarily concerned about the young men he mentors because he knows they belong to a vulnerable community, even once they’ve gotten past the infamous question—*Have you ever been convicted of a felony?*—even after they’ve landed this job. Because beyond the

work itself, the men on Snowday must be comfortable with being identified as formerly incarcerated.

Among people involved with Drive Change, asking about the facts of someone’s crimes generally isn’t done. In any case, Waterman’s time in prison, not his crimes, seems to carry real weight with the men he’s working with on Snowday. So does his dogged pursuit of steady work in the free world. “Who’s going to talk and deal with these young people in a place where they can relate? And that’s why I tell them when I first meet them, ‘Look, I did almost thirteen years in prison. So, I’ve seen it all and done it all. And I’m not talking from an old, old man’s perspective. I’m only thirty-seven.’ So I let them know, ‘Listen, I’ve been where you’ve been. Keep pushing. Stay focused. Pull your pants up.’ You know. ‘You’re representative of the company. Always remember that.’”

And on the matter of race, when pressed, he’ll admit that it probably matters to these men that he’s black. Fredrick, Tyrone, and Christopher are, too. “Obviously. Let’s face it. Jared is white, right? And, yes, he’s the chef, but having Jordyn, having a white lady who grew up on the Upper East Side, and having Jared, he’s a white man, says what exactly?”

Serving food to lunch crowds in New York City is grueling. And yet, more difficult for their crew, Lexton

and Waterman worry, may simply be showing up for work to face the crowds. As Lexton has said, “Disclosing, or the fact of letting someone assume, that you have had some contact with the criminal system, is crippling—implicitly.”

Within the company, Lexton says, “There’s no expectation from us that you’re talking about your criminal history. Our message is about the future. About who you are now, and who you want to be in the future. Not about the past.” But Lexton is also hopeful that, as she’s found within the queer community she identifies with, more general openness—or *being out*, as it were—will help dispel public misconceptions. And so, she says, while Drive Change is “not necessarily putting that weight on the young people in our truck,” she believes that the visibility of their work may help their customers continue “toward a place where we’re questioning what gets people arrested or incarcerated in general.”

### IV.

**T**hough he picked up a few things from his mother and grandmother, who were both from Panama and mainly prepared what he refers to as “Spanish food,” Waterman learned to cook while he was incarcerated at the Clinton Correctional Facility in upstate New York. There he was part of the Merle Cooper counseling program, which served one hundred inmates and focused on community living in the Clinton Annex, isolated from the general population. The program served a group of criminals who demonstrated particular difficulty adjusting to prison life or were otherwise antisocial. (Waterman pinpoints the start of his own antisocial behavior at age six, growing up in Cambria Heights, Queens; being held back in



<sup>3</sup> In most cases, refusing someone employment because of a former felony conviction is illegal.

first grade, mainly for what we might today call hyperactivity, humiliated him, he recalls. "I started gravitating more and more to outside influences," he says, "which end up being the street." By twelve he was carrying a gun. By nineteen he was in prison.)

At Merle Cooper, with counseling sessions five times per week—three in groups, twice in private—inmates were encouraged to discuss their crimes and look into their lives for the roots of criminal behavior. And though they were required to eat breakfast in the mess hall, for lunch and dinner they had access to a kitchen.

"I was cooking and baking all the time," Waterman tells me. He watched a little cooking television, and a girlfriend sent him a copy of the *Joy of Cooking*, which he'd asked her to purchase for him. "That book is phenomenal," he says. "I learned to make so much stuff from the *Joy of Cooking*. That book is excellent."

Through the Merle Cooper program, inmates could order thirty-five pounds of food per month from a farmers' market. "That's what made everything good as far as foodwise up there," Waterman says. "As far as the mess-hall food itself, it's horrible."

In Clinton, he learned to cook alongside other people. "Dominicans had *mofongo*. Puerto Ricans had their rice and beans with *sofrito*. So everyone had their signature stuff and I would watch them. They wouldn't even know I was watching them." His own favorite dish was chicken cacciatore. "I always tell guys the twelve years was bad. It was horrible. It was the worst years of my life. It was a long twelve years. A twelve-year nightmare. But I got fed, I had money in my commissary, I was able to eat good for the most part. I ate much better than a lot of people eat in the street

now when I was in Clinton. Much better than a lot of people—even when I was in Sing Sing. I ate much better in there than a lot of people I know out here."

Clinton is also where Waterman learned to cook for an audience. Sometimes other inmates would pay him to do so. They began calling him "the Chef," telling him, "You could open up a restaurant." He baked cakes and pies of all kinds—apple, sweet potato, whatever he could get. And he would sell them. He began thinking, "You know, I could go home and do this."

Last year, Clinton Correctional Facility shuttered Merle Cooper. Tom Mailey, of the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, made the point at the time that the program was not state-mandated. The local Clinton paper, the *Press-Republican*, reported the news in June, including testimonies from inmates being moved out of Merle Cooper who "explained how the program... helped them change their way of thinking, their perspective, and their feelings toward their victims." A man named Darren Davis, in prison since 1990 for murder, wrote: "It was not until I came to the Merle Cooper Program and took on this concept of how to live that I began to see my victim as a human being, a person." Jerry Perez, who was convicted on two murder charges, wrote about finally moving beyond the street package: "My personal change came from confrontational-style counseling to deconstruct my criminal beliefs and principles and to destroy those distorted beliefs I picked up in the street." Ronald Hughes had been an inmate for twenty-three years when Merle Cooper closed. "We must consider the victims and the prisoner when we make decisions to close programs that are actually

changing the lives of men who once didn't care," he said.

In prison, given a kitchen, a place to do some good work, Roy Waterman came to care about the future. This is the most important responsibility he and Lexton and Spafford and the others behind Drive Change have taken on with Snowday. Drive Change sees the young people they hire as vulnerable—this is key, and an unusual way in this country to think of a felon. Facing uncontrolled violence in the jails and without in-facility programs like Merle Cooper, they're more vulnerable still.

And so, the entire organization is intentionally designed to protect these young people—with training, a job, and good wages, a clear path with clear choices. All this, Drive Change hopes, will keep them from returning to the life that first introduced them to criminal justice and still threatens a lifetime of correctional control.

In prison, Waterman would lecture young men who had been released but later, sure enough, ended up back behind bars. Statistically, this happens 70 percent of the time. "Listen," he'd say, "I've been here all this time, and you're getting all these opportunities, and you're still coming back here. What is wrong with you? What are you thinking about?"

Then he'd return to the kitchen and maybe bake another banana-sweet potato pie. It's his specialty. "And I'm the only person who makes it," Waterman says, "even today, out here."

For now, that is. Roy Waterman's banana-sweet potato pie could be just the thing the next Drive Change truck serves, in which case he'll have to share the recipe. But first, he and the young people he's out there cooking with on Snowday must learn to do good work and, together, to make some good food. **LP**