Kevin Lofton Will Finish Strong

Jail or hell, I only had two ways to go. I thank the Lord he sent me on the road to jail.”

Kevin Lofton took the path that eventually turned his life around and has been recognized by his peers as Goodwill’s Employee of the Year.

A Raleigh, Mississippi native, Kevin has worked at Goodwill for more than two years and has accomplished much in that short period of time. He has earned certification as a forklift operator, his truck operator’s license, and a scholarship from Goodwill to attend Holmes Community College, where he has a 3.0 grade point average. He is a committed worker, a team player, and has a positive outlook.

It is the road Kevin followed to arrive at Goodwill that taught him valuable “life lessons,”- lessons he freely shared for this interview.

“I sold drugs and they had a big impact on me, but I didn’t know my impact on other people because of the dollars. On the street I was called “The Legend.” I thought I was controlling me, but the drugs were controlling me.

I went to prison for eight years. During that time, I lost my Momma and never saw her buried. I lost my wife too, and all she did was go to church and work every day – and that can be a very rare woman to find.

I was hired by Mr. Don (COO of Goodwill Don Simpson) out of the halfway house. I was going to show that I appreciated my second chance, so I did everything he said for me to do. I started as a helper on the truck. Later I told Mr. Don I wanted to drive the truck. He said, ‘Do it, and I’ll pay for the license.’ No one had given me a second chance to prove myself. He would work with me and encourage me to keep moving forward.”

Kevin has since reconnected with his children. Of his five kids, he has a daughter making straight A’s and a son whose life, he says, “is an instant replay of mine.” That son and two others decided to rob a man. They wound up with a pair of keys and a cell phone, but they could have been killed. “I thank the Lord he wasn’t killed,” says Kevin, “and now he has been out of jail for eight months and is a star running back in high school.” One of Kevin’s proudest moments was seeing his son play for the first time, and hearing, “That’s Kevin Lofton’s son.”

His experiences have taught him, “You can’t give up. You have got to keep pushing. Not everyone is bad. You have to do your part – when people see you are trying they will see you are trying and respond.”

But maybe the most important words of wisdom came from his Momma: “It ain’t where you start, baby. It’s where you finish.”

Kevin Lofton will finish strong.
Stearlon was born in Lumberton, Miss., and moved to Jackson when he was 8, soon after his grandmother passed away. His upbringing was very difficult. While his mom raised him as well as two brothers and a sister, she had a drug habit. At times the water was shut off, or they had no lights and sometimes, no food. Often he had to stay with his aunt. As Stearlon points out, “It wasn’t stable. My days at school weren’t good and I was influenced by the streets. I didn’t know any better.”

He was 17 when he first went to prison, serving 7 years in state and 3 years in federal prisons. He was released to a half way house in Hattiesburg. Less than 6 months later he was back in prison for four more years.

At 33, he has spent 14 years out of the 16 years of his adult life behind bars. He is certain, “I wouldn’t have a job now if not for Goodwill. One year out and my life has changed. I probably would have gone back. I like pretty cars and clothes. Now I cash my check for what I need, not what I want. I am a gentleman now, more mature."

“There is a different atmosphere here at Goodwill,” says Stearlon. “You are encouraged, employees are so helpful. Everyone helps everyone. We are like a family."

This life has changed in a number of ways. He has bought a car, lives in an apartment, and his family is proud of him for his accomplishments. “My older friends are proud of me, too,” shares Stearlon.

In his leisure time he is learning to cook and plays basketball. He is a point guard who would rather shoot the rock.

He gives a wry smile and says, “I play point, but I like to drive it to the basket and score. I don’t have a lot of assists. (Miami Heat superstar) Dwyane Wade and I have similar backgrounds and he’s an inspiration to me. His Mom was on drugs, too, but he chose the right path.”

Stearlon is on the right path now, which has resulted in him being recognized by his peers as Goodwill’s Achiever of the Year.

Original Salvador Dali Lithograph Donated to Goodwill

An original signed and numbered Salvador Dali lithograph entitled “Dream Passage” was recently donated to Goodwill of Mississippi, and has proven to be the most successful of Goodwill of Mississippi’s auction items on ShopGoodwill.com. Appraised at $9,950, the print sold for $4,001.
Terry is from Memphis, Tennessee. He has 6 brothers and 4 sisters and attended George Washington Carver HS in Memphis. He came to Mississippi after getting out of federal prison and wanted to pick up and start over somewhere new.

“When I got out of the halfway house, I applied for Goodwill and I was working the next Monday,” says Terry, although his journey to Goodwill wasn’t that easy. “I talked to Charlotte (Charlotte Miller, Goodwill Metro Facility Manager) and got the wrong address and I went to Centre Street. I asked to see Mrs. Miller and they said she was at the Metro store. So I took a bus back to Metro. I think that impressed her because I found my way to the Metro store being new to Jackson.”

Soon after he started working, he was able to apply his passion for working with his hands and his carpentry skills to his job. “I have carpenter skills. Charlotte asked me to fix a sliding door to the sorting room and since then I have been fixing everything,” says Terry. “I am looking to remodel homes. I have already redone a whole bathroom and built a deck in a backyard.”

“Goodwill helped me establish myself,” states Terry. “I have an apartment, own a car, and earned a fork lift license. It has been an all-round blessing. It’s hard as a federal criminal and I really appreciate the opportunity. I like the people I meet and work with, like Chris (Goodwill employee Chris Simpson, who recently passed) – he gave me good advice. Miss Linda (Assistant Manager Linda Ephraim) gave me good advice. Chris made me laugh. Mrs. Miller takes care of her workers.”

Terry sums up his two years working at Goodwill that has culminated in being recognized by his peers as Achiever of the Year: “I’ve met a lot of great people and I guess I’ll meet a lot more because I’m going to be here for a long time!”

Deonte was recognized as the Spirit Award winner – and there isn’t a more fitting recipient.

He came to Goodwill from Vocational Rehabilitation and was interviewed for this story along with his social worker Margaret Luckett and close friend Justin Lonie (recipient of last year’s Goodwill Achiever of the Year Award).

The words used to describe him were kind, helpful, caring, and considerate. He would often help Chris Simpson (former Goodwill employee who was blind) move to and from his work area. He is always asking about everyone and how they are doing.

Deonte was born in the Delta and raised in a group home at Hudspeth. He has since moved out and lives on his own in an apartment in Brandon. He first came to Goodwill to work at the Pearl store, and then moved to our Metro location.

He has built a special bond with Justin, who discusses their relationship.

“Deonte started in donations. He didn’t converse with anyone. He was in a shell like me. But it is amazing how he has grown. He has moved from donations to the warehouse to the store. He does it all, except driving trucks and the fork lift. He motivates me, and I motivate him.”

Justin then smiles and says, “He really likes loading and unloading trucks. I believe he would leave me if he couldn’t unload a Goodwill truck, and especially an 18-wheeler. Deonte chimes in with a “yes” as he enthusiastically shakes his head.

Since he was hired, he has become more independent, and he learns things easily. Once he gets in a routine, it is very hard to break, which makes him an excellent worker.

It is Deonte’s work ethic and his compassionate and caring attitude that earned him the Goodwill Spirit Award for 2014.
Goodwill earns CARF Accreditation

Goodwill of Mississippi has been accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), International. This 3-year accreditation commends our organization for its dedication and commitment to improving the quality of the lives of persons served.

CARF is an international organization whose primary business is to evaluate and recognize health and human service providers as having met high standards for quality of service. A 3-year accreditation is the highest outcome awarded.

In the final survey report, CARF surveyors noted a number of strengths of Goodwill of Mississippi, including the following:

- Goodwill Industries of Mississippi has a very involved board of directors. Board members bring many talents, skill sets, and a wide variety of professional backgrounds to the organization. Board and board committee processes are well organized, productive and effective.
- Goodwill Industries of Mississippi has a unique workplace culture, due in part to the fact that so many of the employees transitioned from receiving services to being staff members. This commitment to hiring persons with disabilities, individuals with an incarceration history, and other barriers is one of the great strengths of the organization.
- Two long-time staff members (Gray Wiggers, President and CEO, and Don Simpson, COO) who have served the organization extremely well over the last several years will soon be retiring. They are recognized for their loyalty and adherence to the mission and values of the organization and can certainly feel proud of how well they have led the organization through some difficult and challenging times.