



How to Be a Helper

Winter
2025

The first time I met Chuck Manning Sr., he was sitting in a small black plastic chair bolted to the floor of the Durham County Detention Center lobby waiting to talk to me about a job. The chair was too small for Chuck, as were most spaces he was in. Everything about Chuck was big—his size, his heart, his energy, his intellect, his appetites, his love, his temper, and his feelings. With a near-constant grin plastered on his face, surrounded by a big bushy beard, Chuck had the vibe of a young heavily tattooed Black Santa Claus. Quick to laugh and cry, Chuck was a force of nature.

Not a man meant to be contained, his fourteen month stay at the jail on serious assault charges several years earlier was one of the lowest points in his life. "I really thought it was over for me," he recounted. "I thought I was going to spend that 26 and a half years behind bars and I would never see my kids again." Even through his fog of depression at the jail, he would search his Bible for inspirational quotes to write on pieces of paper to slip under people's cell doors. No matter how bad you're feeling, he would say, somebody might be feeling even worse. It cheered him up to help in whatever small way he could. While in jail, he made a promise to God. "I said, you allow me to get out of this situation and I'll do everything in my power not to return." Chuck was true to his word and then some. Not only did he not return to jail, but he devoted the rest of his life to making sure others stayed out as well.



His path after jail wasn't easy. Like so many others facing reentry, he couldn't find a job due to his record. Years earlier, he had learned to cook from two guys he lived with when he was dealing drugs, Bones and Kenny Mayonnaise. So when he got out he started selling plates, towing a borrowed smoker behind his truck and setting up shop to cook wherever he could. A nerd at heart, he also had another hustle called Knowledge T-Shirts. This involved printing shirts featuring fun facts he and his children found interesting. Later, he started work as a violence interrupter with the Durham County Public Health Department. He loved working with young people in the same situation he had been—in gangs, in trouble with the police, in danger of getting locked up or killed. He was passionate about the work and searching for ways to help save lives. This passion was mixed with a healthy dose of disrespect of authority—especially when it came from a woman. According to him, he heard of a fight that was going to happen outside of a club and he went to try to stop it. His boss had told him not to get involved, but he went anyway. The next day, she fired him.

That's how we met, sitting in the jail lobby. Chuck's friend and colleague Randy knew he was looking for a job. Since Randy had some work to do at the jail, he figured the lobby was the best place for me and Chuck to meet. There, Chuck told me how hurt he was by losing his job, how wrong he felt his former boss was, and how very much he wanted to help people. At the time, I was working with the City of Durham. We were looking for a

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community organizer to help design programs to support our justice-involved residents.

There was just something about Chuck. It was easy to get caught up in his passion. His desire to help was an unstoppable force. Maybe it should have been a red flag that Chuck didn't feel the need to listen to authority. But that was just who he was. He wasn't going to let anyone stop him from doing what he felt was right. After an hour talking with him, I knew he was the right person for the job.

Once Chuck started working with us, it was obvious he was a natural organizer. He seemed to know everyone. Walking around with him felt like hanging out with a local celebrity. People greeted him with enthusiasm everywhere we went, stopping him on the road or shouting his name from buildings or passing cars. One day, we were walking to the jail and a man leaned out of a moving car, raised a fist and yelled "rump shaker, rump shaker" at Chuck, cracking up before the car sped off. Chuck stopped in the middle of the road to yell back at him and laugh. "Rump shaker was the name of my first gun," he told me as we continued walking, shaking his head while he laughed.

Chuck had learned a lot in the University of the Street, where he began his education at the age of eleven. Hustling and fighting from that early age, he learned to survive. Along the way, he picked up transferable skills. Hustling taught him to be entrepreneurial, to make something out of nothing, to not take no for an answer, to fight for and protect your crew, and to convince people your product is the best on the market.

Now in his 40s, Chuck's product was no longer drugs. Instead, he was pushing peer support and he pushed it hard. He knew how to package and sell it and he knew it worked because of how much it had helped him. He knew nothing was better than a lived experience when it came to helping folks coming home from prison or jail. All the degrees and years working as a social worker or case manager were no match for knowing what it was like to walk out of jail with no shoelaces and no plan. I watched as Chuck kicked doors down all around him to get us so-called experts to recognize that peer support specialists are the people best qualified to help someone coming out of prison or jail.

He had a wisdom I could never have. I never hustled on the street. I never lived the life of a Black boy and Black man, underestimated every step of the way. I never served time behind bars, having to face every day missing my family and friends, fighting to protect myself. It doesn't matter how much I care. I've never been to those schools of life. Chuck's life experiences made him a far better person to work with people coming home from prison or jail than me. He had graduated from the University of the Street, and he was ready to share what he had learned with others.

Together, Chuck and I designed a peer support program called Welcome Home. He poured his wisdom and passion into the project. Welcome Home provided people coming home to Durham from prison with a month of peer support as well as a Welcome Home box with food, toiletries, a cell phone, a Wal-Mart gift card, and a welcome letter from the mayor. Chuck would figure out what people needed and do what he could to support them during a fragile and often frightening time. Some people needed IDs or medication or an NA meeting, so he would take them where they needed to go. Many people needed housing and jobs so Chuck helped guide them.



"Sometimes you can feel as if the world is against you," Chuck said, describing the overwhelming emotions many people struggle with when they first get out of

prison or jail. "When your head is spinning like that, that's when you tend to make some bad decisions." It can help to have someone by your side when everything feels like too much. Chuck was there for that.

In a world of rapid technological change, Chuck helped folks who just got home figure out how to use a smart phone for the first time or buy groceries. He knew Wal-Mart was overwhelming with its crowds of people and options, so he took people shopping. He also offered a lot of practical advice to men getting out, like to be careful not to have a baby right away because of all the stress that would cause in the long run. Pace yourself, he would tell folks. "I look at this just like a case manager, but a case manager who's actually been there and done that," he explained. "A case manager with a heart."

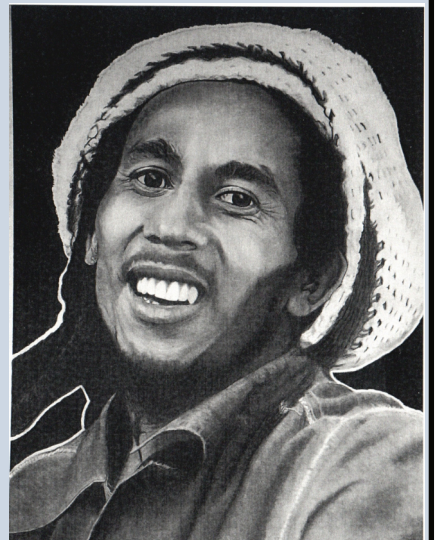
"That's a job for a social worker, or a case manager, or a probation officer," people who ran programs that provided reentry services would often say. It was peer support specialists, however, who helped Chuck turn his life around. Tony Carrington first exposed Chuck to the model of peer support. Several years earlier, Tony spoke to a group of guys about peer support and Chuck was there. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that Tony was as big a man as Chuck, but Tony's work and witness left an impression. Chuck went around town, looking for Tony, finally catching up with him through his barber. In Tony, Chuck found a model of change, an example of who he could be and how he wanted to live his life. As we were designing Welcome Home, we turned to Tony for advice and support. Tony is now a peer support specialist for the Welcome Home program.

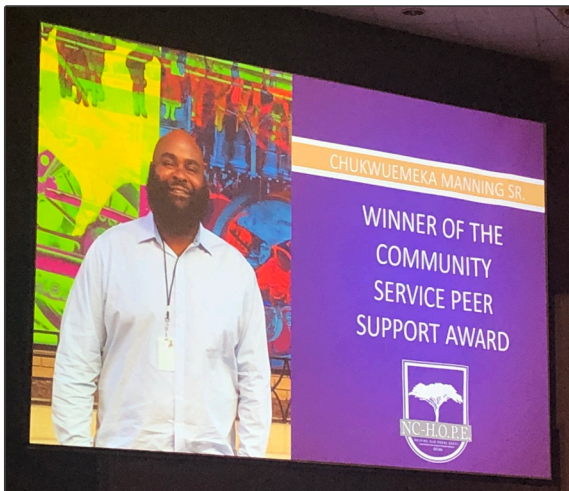
"The passion he had was one of a standing model of change. He always wanted to help someone transition back to the place of rebuilding, reconnecting, revitalizing the community that once was destroyed by individuals like ourselves." Tony explained as he described Chuck's approach to peer support. "I'm gonna take you, wherever you need to go. I'll advocate for you if you don't know what to say at the moment." There was nowhere Chuck wouldn't go to help the folks he worked with. Running around town, he would wipe the sweat off his brow with a white hand towel he kept in his back pocket. Sometimes, during the summer when someone in the office had a bumper crop of cucumbers from their garden, Chuck would walk around eating cucumbers like apples. He said they helped him stay hydrated. For a while, he drove around in the Pontiac Vibe our boss Josh had given him. The car was far too small for such a big man. It also came equipped with bluegrass music playing in the CD player. The first day Chuck drove the Vibe, he returned the CD to Josh with a look of great distaste plastered on his normally smiling face. He dropped the CD in Josh's hand as if it were on fire. "You can keep this, bruh," he informed Josh.

Chuck preferred to drive around blasting gospel music, 90s hip-hop, or 70s funk as he took people to find housing or jobs or IDs or dropped off Welcome Home boxes. One day, when all the more responsible people at our work were somehow not in the office, Chuck and I found a 70s funk station and blasted the music in our City Hall office, jamming out as we did our work. It was a whole vibe. Chuck was a whole vibe.

"I never thought I would get a job at the City for my brains," he would say a lot. "A big guy like me, maybe I could hope for a job picking up trash or fixing the streets. But my brains, I never thought that would get me a job." His intellect and his street smarts were in high demand from many local officials trying to understand what was happening on the streets. There was talk of him running for County Commissioner. He met with the governor to advocate for the needs of his people.

An emotional man, he wore his heart on his sleeve. He would





often cry when he presented at national conferences or talked to politicians and funders about our program. His work meant so much to him. Not only was he able to help people coming home from prison and jail, but he also played an important role in changing the culture of reentry services in his community. "In Durham, he shifted the entire trajectory of reentry from something people had to seek out in government offices to something alive and present in the community," Chuck's friend and colleague Drew Doll remembers. "He helped create a model that was hands-on, relationship-centered, and grounded in the lived experiences of those who had already walked the path home."

Chuck's boundless energy, passion, and ability to relate to a wide range of people helped those in power see that the knowledge that mattered the most was usually not found in books or classrooms. Instead, it was gained in the struggle to survive hard times and find a way to thrive. It was this culture change work that helped Chuck win the "Peer Support Specialist of the Year" award in 2019 from NC Voice, the organization that had trained him in peer support. "It's an unexplainable feeling," Chuck said. "To be able to help people like myself, I wouldn't trade it for the world."

Chuck saw no limits for himself or others. In many ways, the perception of limitless potential served him well. It pushed him forward onto center stage wherever he was. There are times when knowing your limits can save your life. There are other times when knowing your limits can keep you small. We need people in our lives to help us know when to hold back, especially when it comes to substance use and any addictive behavior. We also need people in our lives who remind us of our limitless potential for growth and our powerful ability to be a force for good in the world.

While Chuck straddled a lot of different worlds, there were demons on his back he couldn't shake. A couple of times, he disappeared for days. Yet this seemed more the exception than the rule. He moved up at work, bought a house, was an over-the-top proud father who would talk your head off about his son's college football career. Then one week in June, his family and colleagues couldn't find him.

On Father's Day, 2023, he was found dead. I was shocked and heartbroken when I heard the news. Several months earlier, I had seen him at a Reentry Day event. He was manning his smoker in a church parking lot, in his happy place handing out plates. It had been close to a year since we had seen each other. He gave me a great big sweaty hug. We caught up on how our families were doing before he went back to what he did best, caring for his people. I couldn't believe someone so alive could be gone so quickly.

His funeral was a meeting point of his many worlds. Family and friends, city council members and gang members, sheriff's deputies and former residents of the detention center all came to pay their last respects to this complicated and big hearted man. His brother, who had been a stand up comic among many other professions, had people laughing through tears as he remembered his younger brother. All the time, an enormous photo of Chuck stared back at us from the front of the church. As I sat trying unsuccessfully not to sob in the pew, my heart hurt—and still does—for the hole his loss leaves in his family's life and in our community.

Chuck's fire was so big and so bright. In some ways maybe he burned himself out. But he didn't leave the world in a blaze of gunfire and pain. He left the world filled with people who were stronger, healthier, and happier because of his vision, passion, and purpose. When you light a fire in someone, it can keep burning without you. Chuck provided the spark for so many people. Even in death, his spirit takes up a lot of space.



The peer support program Chuck started continues to help people, now with three staff members working for the Community Safety Department in the City of Durham. His friend Sala, a community organizer at the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, created the Chuck Manning Reentry and Rebuild Project to help provide food and other resources for people coming home from prison in four cities throughout North Carolina. The organization Our Journey, a reentry support organization in North Carolina, honors Chuck's legacy with the

Chuck Manning Excellence in Service Award. Every year, this award goes to a justice-impacted community leader. Last year, his friend Drew won for his service as Reentry Coordinator for the Religious Coalition for Nonviolent Durham.

"The most important thing I learned from Chuck is the power of presence," Drew remembered. "Being willing to show up, listen, walk alongside someone, and simply be there — that's where transformation happens. Chuck modeled that every single day. If there's one lesson I hope others carry forward from his life and work, it's that reentry isn't something we deliver; it's something we do together."

When Chuck would give talks about Welcome Home, he would often share his favorite Mr. Rogers quote: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" What does it mean to be a helper? Who can be a helper? Everyone has the capacity to help others. We can all be first responders to people who are struggling. How we help and the way we show up for others, however, really matters.

Help that comes from a belief that you know best rarely works. Help that aims to just fix without understanding what's broken and why doesn't do much good. This kind of help is more about making the helper feel good than supporting the person in need. Help that recognizes our shared struggle and humanity, however, is empowering to everyone involved. Help born from hurt and pain transformed into power is how we heal together. That's the kind of helper Chuck was. That's the legacy he leaves. —Peace to all, Erin

Letters

Hello,

My name is D and I would like to share my story with everyone! When I was 19 years old, I was convicted of "open murder." I have no children and was a high school drop out. When I committed my crime, everyday I was reminded that my days on this earth isn't over.

My first two months, I was in 'protective custody' for my case being high profile and my age. Everyday, I sat in my room by myself and kept reading Psalms and Proverbs. I would even read Revelations from time to time. When I finally made it to General Population I felt free and alive. I no longer had to be locked down 23 hours a day or eat in my room by myself. I had a great cellmate and talked to a few people.

My attorney started seeing me every week and during those times, he came with somewhat good news. I got to tell him my reason for being here. Truthfully, I was taken for granted (my body) and in a way I was defending myself from anything that can hurt

Many thanks to our artists: page 2: Charles Van Horn; page 3: John Blaes; page 5: Abraham Hayes; page 6: Abraham Hayes; page 7: Yao Chen; page 8: John Sanger.



me internally. My attorney's words were "You remind me of my daughter-in-law and I will do my best to help you." Those words were like music to my ears. So my attorney signed a deal for 5-20 years on voluntary manslaughter.

I have faith that my higher power has something worth a lot more for me to deliver. I am now 26 years old and have plans to talk to women about being sexually abused and that talking about it is a process of healing. It was my therapy to get over the rage, anger, and disgust about myself, but also telling myself: I'm beautiful, I'm strong, and I have faith. I will soon be out in 2027. -D

Dear D,

Thank you so much for sharing your story with us! It's really brave and vulnerable for you to share about your experience of sexual abuse. I'm really proud of you and the work you are doing to name and understand what happened to you and work towards your own healing. Sharing about your pain and your healing process isn't just healing for you. It also helps others because they can see they're not alone.

You are not alone. So many other women (and men) have experienced sexual abuse and assault. I was sexually assaulted when I was 16 years old and it took me 23 years to realize it wasn't my fault and I didn't deserve it. I spent a lot of time angry without really knowing why and had a lot of failed relationships because I pushed people away. When I realized I had been a victim, I did nothing wrong, and the men who hurt me never should have, that's when I could start to heal and move from a victim to a survivor.

It was really hard for me to admit I was a victim. I think that's hard for a lot of people because it feels weak. So being angry, aggressive, and violent can be a way to not see ourselves as victims. But then we become perpetrators of pain and the cycle continues.

We can only stop cycles of violence when we stop long enough to look at ourselves and not hide from our pain but start to really understand it. I think a lot of our problems come from not being curious enough about other people and ourselves. We have to ask ourselves why we do the things we do. Why do I feel so angry? Why are things not working out for me? Then we see there are so many feelings underneath, the ones we're more scared of showing other people because we might feel weak. Like fear and sadness and vulnerability. But those are all the feelings we need to recognize and care for in ourselves in order to have real, loving relationships with ourselves and others.

I don't think the healing process ever really ends. I still get triggered by some stuff, especially when I am around men who hurt, bully, and dominate women. It makes me SO angry. But I have to learn to channel that anger in productive ways that don't harm me or other people but instead help me work to protect people from harm in whatever way I can.

I'm so sorry that you were abused. You never deserved that. And I'm so sorry that your anger led you to take a life. The person you killed didn't deserve to die. And I'm so proud of you that you are doing the hard work of healing and sharing with others. You are a beautiful, strong, and faith-filled woman. Thank you for your work and your witness. Sending love, peace, and blessings, Erin

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News, Notes, and Offerings

New Book: *Digging Deep: Writing for Self-Discovery, Healing, and Transformation*

We are so happy to offer a new book to our readers, *Digging Deep: Writing for Self-Discovery, Healing, and Transformation*. This book of writing prompts written by George Wilkerson and Kat Bodrie allows readers to reflect on issues like gratitude, grief, shame, empathy, and much more. We first met George ten years ago when we ran a mindfulness group at Central Prison in Raleigh, NC.

Now, we're delighted to publish his and Kat's book. Writing and reflecting on the many topics covered in this book are great ways to get to know yourself better and build community. This is the perfect resource for a writing group, book club, or for your own personal wellbeing. We hope you enjoy it. Happy writing!

Sacred Community Project

Sacred Community Project is an interspiritual service collective rooted in the teachings of Ram Dass that provides resources on mantra chanting to incarcerated people in the United States. They provide pen-pal letter writing, educational resources, and malas. Depending on your location, they may be able to offer an in-person mantra-chanting kirtan event at your facility. To learn more, contact them at: **Sacred Community Project, 6004 Youngstown Warren Rd #1045, Niles, OH 44446.**

Together-Apart

My dear friends, please continue to sit with us on Wednesday evenings from 7 to 8pm (or any time on Wednesdays that might be convenient for you) as we send love, prayers, and blessings to the many suffering beings in the world. Use whatever practice is meaningful to you, beloveds. "See" you all on Wednesdays! Love, Sita





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**"I have found that the ONLY
antidote to grief, suffering and
despair is LOVE & SERVICE, &
MORE loving service...reaching out
and genuinely CARING about
those who others pass by."**

Jeri, 2002

Art by John S.



Reflection

There is no other. There is only us. When you care for another you care for yourself. See your own face—and the faces of those you love—in all those you pass by today. Ask yourself—what gift might they have for me and I for them? These gifts come from our pain and our joy. What lessons might we learn and share? How are our lives bound together? Recognize and give thanks to the connections that surround us.

Questions

Reflect on a time you showed love by helping someone. How did it make you feel?
Reflect on a time you experienced love when someone helped you. How did it make you feel?
Have experiences of grief helped you show greater love and compassion to others?
Why or why not?
What has loss taught you about the meaning of kindness?