

LEARN MORE ABOUT SUBSCRIPTIONS

More cruises may leave Florida as debate grows about vaccines



Body camera footage shows Lake County deputy shooting man in wooded...



BBQ Around Orlando chef Chuck Cobb: as restaurants collaborate to

ADVERTISEMENT

GUEST COMMENTARY OPINION

For ex-felons, justice comes in many small steps | Commentary

By **TARRA SIMMONS**
GUEST COLUMNIST | MAY 07, 2021



“Finally, we did it. We crossed the finish line.”

I heard that hopeful sentiment after Amendment 4 passed in 2018 to restore voting rights to 1.4 million returning Florida citizens.

Advertisement



I heard it a few weeks ago when the governor signed legislation I introduced and got passed in the Washington state legislature restoring voting rights to tens of thousands of people with past convictions.

And I've heard it after every hard-fought policy victory that restores some level of dignity to people with criminal convictions.

ADVERTISEMENT

But the truth is our work is never done. The finish line is way off on the horizon. The fight to bring humanity and empathy to our justice system — and to remove the system's degradations and needless heartache — will last for generations.

The carceral state in America was not created overnight. It was built atop the violent structures of slavery and Jim Crow. It was woven into the fabric of America at her birth and has grown along with her for nearly two and a half centuries.

We will not end hundreds of years of injustice in a single day. But each victory is a step toward equity, each win a milestone for justice.

As the first person with a felony conviction elected to the Washington state legislature, I've watched with hope and excitement as advocates across the nation — including in Florida — have fought tirelessly for the rights and freedoms of returning citizens. Each victory must be treasured and held close — but we also can never be lulled into complacency.

When an overwhelming majority of Floridians voted for Amendment 4 to restore voting rights to returning citizens, it was understandable that many people thought the battle had been won. But it hadn't. The Florida Legislature undermined the central tenet of Amendment 4 — that returning citizens have the right to be full-fledged members of our communities.

Had advocates simply cheered the Election Day victory and walked away, the legislature's efforts would have worked. But thanks to the tireless advocacy of groups like the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, many of the Legislature's most egregious moves are being met head on. The road is long, but there is hope. Gov. Ron DeSantis even announced promising new civil-rights restoration guidelines last month.

That is what successful, long-term advocacy looks like. We must not only win policy and political victories, we also must protect them from those who want to reinforce and expand the carceral state. The mission of my life is to break down stigmas and barriers. People who have similar stories to mine deserve to have hope and opportunity when they come back from a mistake — and the only way to ensure that is vigorous, never-ending advocacy.

Real change is possible when people who are directly hurt by broken systems engage in the political process. Returning citizens have broken down discriminatory legislation and practices through their resilience, dedication, and desire to make a world that works for all of us.

That's why, after I graduated from law school, I went to the Washington Supreme Court in 2017 to demand that I be allowed to practice law in the state, despite rules and laws barring people like me with felony convictions from being included as a member of the bar. I wanted to not only follow my own dreams to become a lawyer, but also chart a path for other returning citizens to follow.

LATEST GUEST COMMENTARY

On Mother's Day, little reminders of Mom: The smell of soap, the sound of lullabies | Commentary

MAY 9, 2021

Home care is my unpaid second full-time job. Congress can help | Opinion

MAY 8, 2021

By silencing voters, DeSantis again attacks democracy | Steve Bousquet

MAY 7, 2021

My goal is simple — to build a world in which everyone has a first chance at life so they won't need a second chance later on. The road to that world is long and fraught and difficult. And I have no illusions that I will see it in my lifetime.

But we can get there some day. We know that path. The victories by returning citizens for returning citizens is a testament to the power of a movement led by the people most affected by injustice.

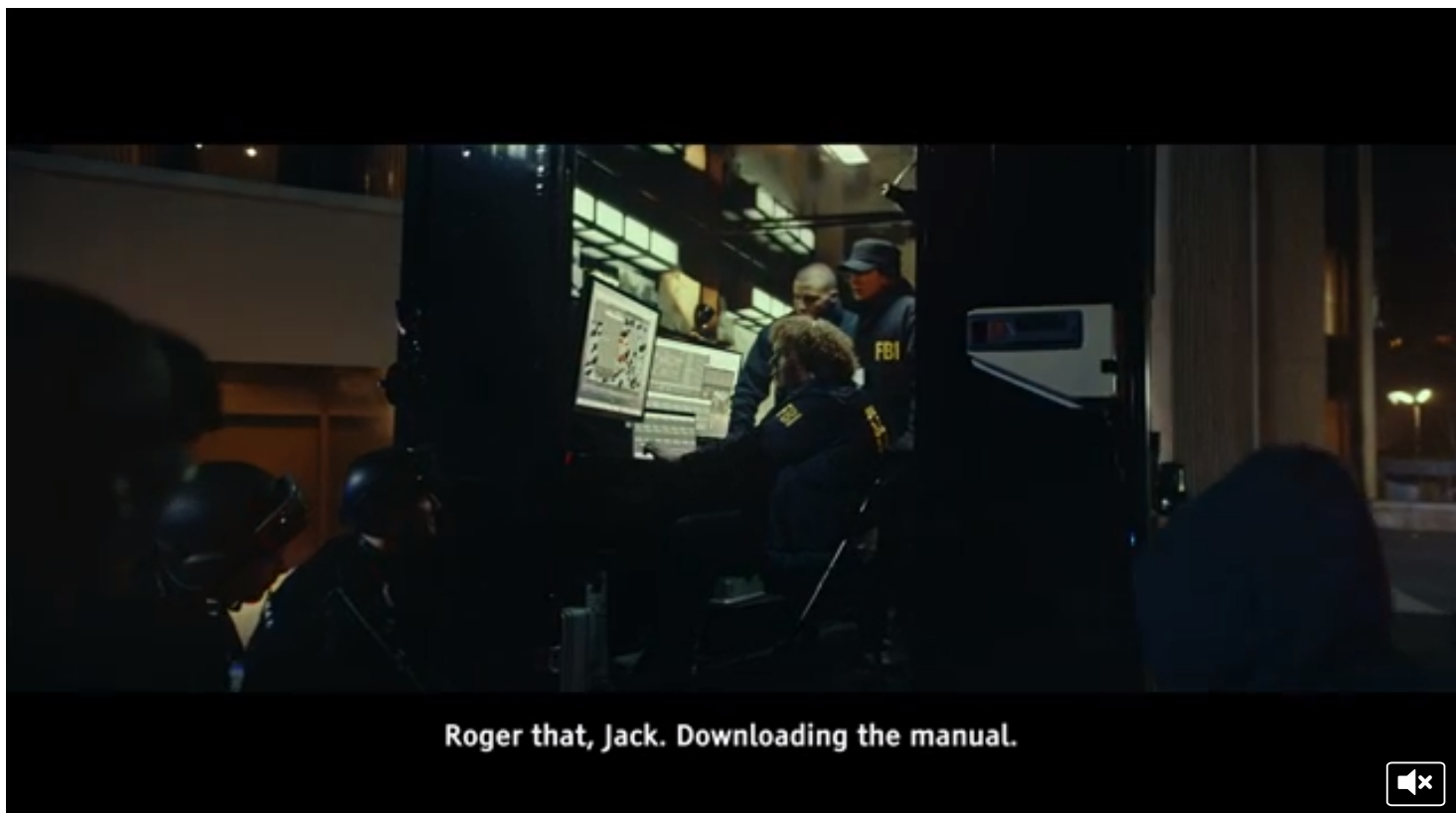
The lesson is clear: Keep fighting. Keep winning. Then keep moving on to the next battle.

Tarra Simmons is a returning citizen, a lawyer and the first formerly incarcerated person elected to the Washington state legislature.

6 Credit Cards You Should Not Ignore If You Have Excellent Credit

NERDWALLET | SPONSORED

Sponsored



Military veteran shot, killed after fight over walking through downtown Orlando crowd

By MONIVETTE CORDEIRO

 NY DAILY NEWS

Models don eye-popping looks in tape-only swimsuit show

It's Not Too Late To Lock In A Lower Rate For Potentially The Next Decade.

QUICKEN LOANS NMLS#3030 | SPONSORED

[Learn More](#)

14 Beach Towns Where You Can Live Dirt Cheap

THRILLIST | SPONSORED

 ORLANDO SENTINEL

Dolphins sign former Alabama offensive lineman

 ORLANDO SENTINEL

Another cruise line will require vaccines; DeSantis says no

By **DOMINIQUE**

MOST READ • NEWS



At Arizona election audit, Republicans search ballots for watermarks, bamboo fibers or any evidence to prove their conspiracy theories are true

12m



Seth Rogen says he doesn't plan to work with James Franco after sexual misconduct allegations

19m



Florida gas prices likely to increase after pipeline cyberattack

39m



You May Like

Sponsored Links by Taboola

Bitcoin for beginners: what you need to know before buying Bitcoin

eToro

This game will keep you up all night!

Hero Wars

Try Now

Living in Florida? Don't Buy a Hearing Aid Before Reading This

Hearing Aid Advice

No Appointment? No Problem - Upgrade to the World's Smartest CPAP Without Leaving Home

The Easy Blog by EasyBreathe.com

ADVERTISEMENT

CONNECT



TRIBUNE PUBLISHING

Chicago Tribune

The Baltimore Sun

The Morning Call of Pa.

Daily Press of Va.

The Daily Meal

New York Daily News

Sun Sentinel of Fla.

Hartford Courant

The Virginian-Pilot

Studio 1847

COMPANY INFO

Careers

Contact Us

Place an Ad

Help Center

Classifieds

Orlando Sentinel

Privacy Policy

Terms of Service

Manage Web Notifications

Copyright © 2021, Orlando Sentinel