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

By TARRA SIMMONS  
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“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.
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.

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.
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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._
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