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Returning citizens running for office is reason to celebrate | Opinion

By DESMOND MEADE AND NEIL VOLZ

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Jason Mariner, congressional candidate for district 20, in a video posted to his YouTube account, Mariner For Congress on Aug 16, 2021. (YouTube of Mariner For Congress/Courtesy)

No matter who wins this Tuesday's special elections in South Florida, there is reason to celebrate. The reason to celebrate is the fact that people with past convictions, or returning citizens as we call ourselves, are running for office in both the Democratic and Republican primaries. Such an expansion of democracy would not have been possible just a few years ago.

More returning citizens running for office in Florida is a reason for all of us to celebrate. After all, when returning citizens are able to fully reintegrate into society, including running for office, everyone benefits. Study after study shows us that economic growth goes up and crime goes down in communities where people impacted by the criminal justice system are able to quickly and fully reintegrate into society.



Desmond Meade, right, is the executive director, and Neil Volz is the deputy director, of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition.

Look at Jason Mariner. Mariner is the Republican nominee in the race for Florida's 20th Congressional District. He has openly shared about how his drug use led to time in prison, and how he has used that past pain to create a new life as a nonprofit leader, family man and contributing member of the community.

"I've been addicted to drugs, I've spent time in a cell. Multiple times. I've had a knee on my neck. I know what it's like," Mariner said in a campaign video. His story is a strong reminder for all of us about the power of forgiveness, redemption and restoration.

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Then there is Rod Kemp. Kemp is a Democrat running in the open primary for state representative in District 94.

Kemp also talked in a video after losing his voting rights because of his conviction: "I've been the one out recruiting people and doing registration drives so how could this happen to me ... what happened 32 years ago came rushing to the forefront of my mind."

Like Mariner, Kemp is open about how past mistakes transformed his life into that of a local business leader, activist and well respected member of the community.

Whether Kemp or Mariner win — and we are not here making an endorsement — we believe their efforts should be applauded as examples of the kind of more-inclusive democracy we can have in our state. An inclusive democracy that leads to policies that put the real lives of people first. Policies that include stronger voting laws and the development of a more humane reentry system based on the fundamental understanding that returning citizens are more than what any of us did on our worst day.

Helping people reintegrate into society is not only good for the individual returning citizen, or even their family, but is good for everyone. We all benefit when returning citizens are able to flourish and break down barriers to opportunity. Data shows that formerly incarcerated individuals who are able to become active members of the community are much less likely to reoffend than those who are not. It's good for local businesses, public safety and the overall community.

The progress we are seeing in our communities since the passage of Amendment 4 in 2018, when Florida voters ended the state's lifetime ban on voting for people with past convictions, is encouraging. Seeing leaders like Kemp and Mariner embrace community reintegration and leadership will help encourage others to do the same.

And win or lose at the polls, that is worth celebrating.

Desmond Meade is the executive director, and Neil Volz is the deputy director, of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition.