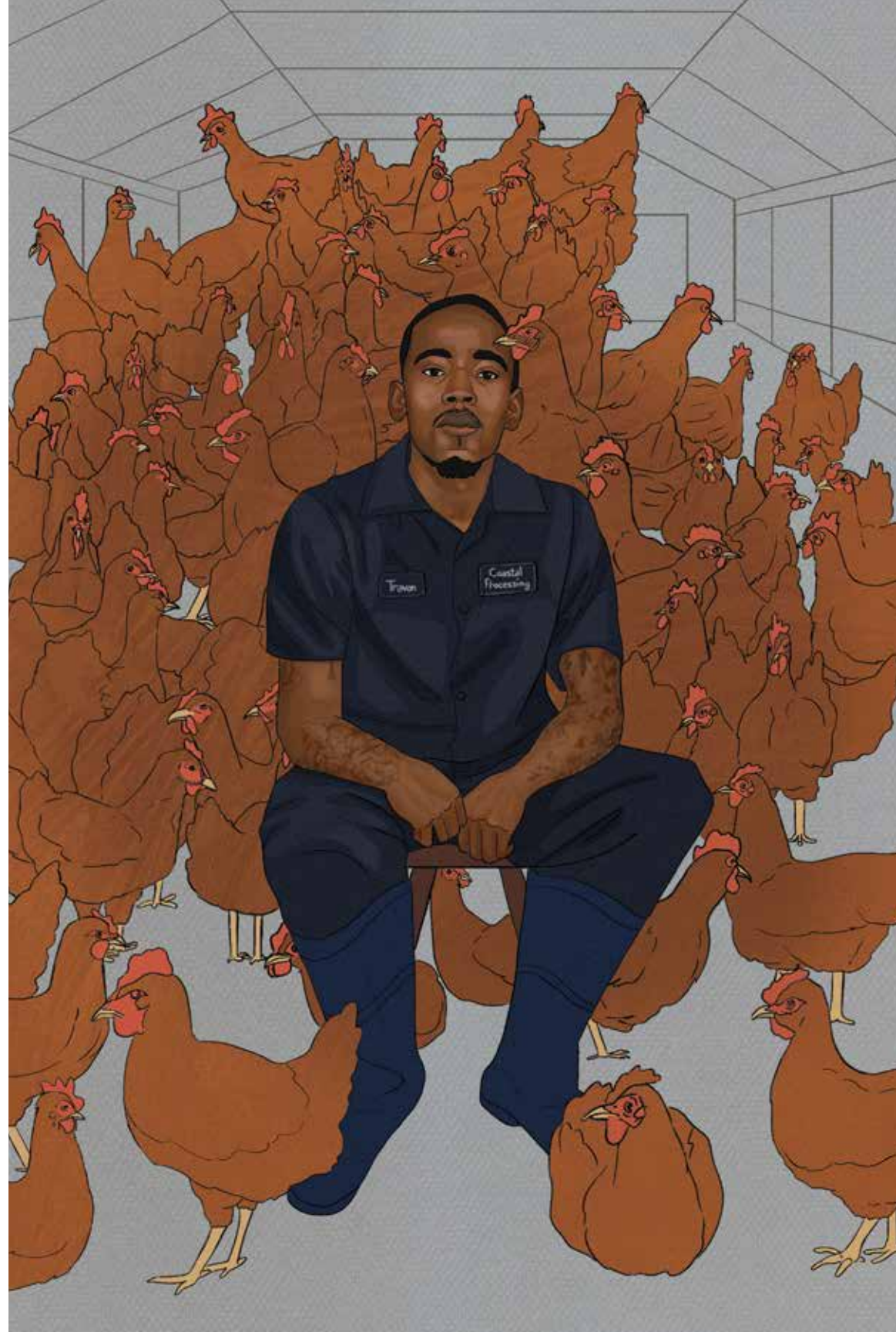




# DEGREES OF FREEDOM

A Georgia man sees a new start in a prison transition program, even when it means work in a grueling industry.

by PARISH HOWARD





# THE ALARM BLARES AT 5:55 A.M.

Before the dew dries on the razor wire surrounding his bunkhouse, Travon Archie pulls on jeans and a T-shirt, what he calls his “free world clothes,” and claims his seat on a crowded van bound for a chicken plant.

His companions on the van could be neighbors carpooling to the same work shift. They’re part of a Georgia prison transition program designed to help men who have spent years incarcerated find the purpose and means to fit back into a world that has moved on without them. They sleep in a prison but spend their days wrenching opportunity from dying birds.

Archie punches in by 6:45 a.m. He likes to arrive at Coastal Processing with time to walk the floor he supervises, getting the knives “right” for his wing cutters and making sure everything is ready to run like it should. Convicted of an armed robbery charge, he’s spent most of the last seven years incarcerated.

Nine months after first walking into the chicken plant, he’s now a supervisor. This work provides experience and training; points toward an early parole; and a release from the dehumanizing monotony of four blank walls and a concrete floor.

Across the prison work camp’s yard,

another group of men, all wearing white shirts and pants with navy blue stripes down the outside seam, shoulders bush hooks and loads weed eaters and other tools. Work crews from the Jefferson County Correctional Institute (JCCI) medium-security prison camp operate the landfill, pave roads, landscape government property, and take on small construction projects. Unlike Archie’s labor, their work is unpaid, the newest iteration of what some still call the chain gang.

Both sets of men are part of a long American tradition of blending punishment with labor. After the Civil War, forced labor bound thousands of African Americans to privately owned industries. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Slavery by Another Name*, Douglas A. Blackmon describes how law enforcement across the South arrested men and women on trumped-up charges, usually violations of vagrancy and Jim Crow laws, and sold imprisoned labor to steel mills, coal mines, corporate farms, and sawmills.

Formerly enslaved, Ezekiel Archey (no relation) was one of thousands sold like secondhand tools to private companies that literally worked people to death. In letters to an Alabama inspector, Archey

wrote in 1884 of dangerous conditions in the Eureka mines outside Birmingham: vermin-infested lodgings; human waste collected in gunpowder cans that spilled onto their beds; and working deep underground, blasting, digging, and raising coal to the surface. “Fate seems to curse a convict,” he wrote. “Death seems to summon us hence.” As Blackmon noted, surges of spurious arrests “appeared more attuned to rises and dips in the need for cheap labor than any demonstrable acts of crime.”

Current prison labor practices grew out of that rock-busting past, and economics still drive the practice. Today, many agribusinesses across the South have a harder time filling entry-level positions. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Jefferson County’s unemployment rate is 3.9, down from a rate of about 15 percent just ten years ago.

Greg Sellars, executive director of the Development Authority of Jefferson County, said that both Coastal Processing and Battle Lumber, the two area companies hiring transition center residents like Travon Archie, want to significantly expand their operations, but they cannot fill the positions.

“We’re just to a point now where everyone who wants to work is working,” Sellars said.

The need for reliable labor at the chicken plant led JCCI Warden Calvin Oliphant to pitch the idea of a transition center, which opened in March 2019.

Oliphant’s office is the first door on the left as you enter the nearly 100-year-old prison camp that houses 190 men. The campus itself was built almost entirely using incarcerated labor. His desk shows his regard for order: Neat stacks of papers and yellow-brown folders are so evenly dispersed that they look like a mockup of symmetrical city blocks.

He has been with the prison for thirty-one years, most of those as a corrections officer. After a stint in the U.S. Marine Corps, he applied for positions at the area’s largest manufacturing plants without any luck. He was beginning to feel the first flutters of desperation when he met with former Warden George Smith in the parking lot outside the prison.

“I told him I needed a job,” Oliphant said. “He asked me when I could start. ‘Right now,’ I told him. He told me to go in and tell them to give me a uniform.”

Oliphant understands the need to work

not just for pay, but for purpose. He knows a task can focus the mind and calm anxieties.

“I believe in giving a man a chance. And I know that if he’s had a life of crime, he’s not going to come up here and change the minute he steps through the door. It’s a process. It’s talking and teaching and trying to be understanding and trying to see things from their perspective when they tell you about the things they’ve seen.”

Through the transition center, he hopes they see a possibility for a future they may have not imagined before.

But spots in the transition center are few. About 54,000 people were incarcerated in the state in 2018, according to the Georgia Department of Corrections. Of those, 4,700 lived in county work camps and labored for free. That same year, 2,553 residents lived and worked in transition centers. Archie’s center only has twenty-four beds.

Oliphant gets letters almost daily asking for transfers into the program. To be eligible, individuals have to be within fifteen months of release, have no recent discipline problems, and not have been convicted of murder or sexual offenses.

They earn the same wages from the companies that employ them as civilians in those positions.

“They are just like regular employees, and a lot of them have gotten raises already,” Oliphant said. Some earn \$14 an hour or more, counting overtime or holiday pay. Still others make as much as or more than the men who guard them.

But the wages come with constraints. The men can’t go anywhere without permission; Oliphant sent a man back to prison after he walked offsite to get lunch. The residents’ paychecks come to the prison, and they get a \$75 dollar weekly allotment for food and other items. They can only send 10 percent of

their savings home to their families. Room and board costs them \$100 a week, plus \$4 a day for transportation to and from work, funds directed to the county’s general fund.

If these fees are fairly standard across Georgia, then the 2,553 residents state-wide are paying roughly \$16 million for the opportunity to work in private industry and earn the wages those companies offer. The state also gets a break on health care costs, since each person gets insurance and medical benefits through their new employment. That amounts to a \$10 million savings for Georgia.

What matters to Travon Archie is how much he’s banking now. Typically, when someone who’s not in one of these work programs is released, the state gives him a new set of clothes, \$25 cash, and a bus ticket. If he doesn’t have a place to stay or a support system, chances are high he’ll be behind bars again.

Under transition center rules, before he can be considered for early parole, Archie has to save at least \$2,000. That’s probably enough for a down payment and a first month’s rent in rural Georgia.

Archie, who was scheduled for early parole in February, expects to walk out with more than \$8,000.

He was the first inmate transferred into the Jefferson County transition center when it opened in March and one of the first hired at the Coastal Processing

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poultry plant. Since then, he has held several different positions. Everyone starts out pulling guts.

After a month, Archie became a floor man. He cleaned the floor for about three months before his supervisor pulled him aside. Others had noticed what good a job he was doing on the floor and how well he worked with other employees in the room. Buoyed by the compliment, he put in for a team lead position. A few days later, his supervisor called him upstairs for an interview.

The plant manager asked how far Archie saw himself going with the plant.

“I told him, ‘So far, it’s good. But one day I want to have your spot.’”

Archie is now responsible for fifty employees and several processing lines. In his smock and apron, blue hairnet and beard net, he relieves employees when they need personal breaks. He helps clean birds, monitors to make sure no one is eating candy, and sees that they all have their earplugs in place.

He is proud of the hairnet—a sign that he’s different, like the free world clothes he donned that morning. Hair nets denote position.

Archie said: “I went from white to red, and now I have a blue. The red is the floor man. [The blue] is a supervisor or lead. You don’t see too many blue ones. A blue one means you have a little bit of

authority around here.”

Before he started at Coastal, Archie had never even cleaned a fish. The blood and guts, the sickening burst of an unlaidd egg, and the smell that had him gagging and retching at first: You get used to it, he said. Prison or chicken plant, either way, you can get used to a thing you never dreamed you might.

“Now, hey, it smells like money to me,” he said.

Sliding their hands inside the warm carcasses of hanging chickens that skitter-flapped around their cages just minutes before, Archie and his coworkers can clean 68,000 chickens on a good day.

In 2018, a Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) report documented how chicken plants are increasingly using prison labor. Incarcerated workers are hypervulnerable. They can’t change jobs easily, complain about poor conditions, or claim labor protections afforded to workers who aren’t in prison. The investigation found dozens of chicken processing companies employing more than 600 incarcerated men and women across seven states, including Georgia, in 2016.

This work is dangerous. One Alabama man, Frank Dwayne Ellington, died when he was pulled into a machine he was cleaning in 2017, and at least twenty-four prisoners were injured while





working in Georgia and North Carolina poultry plants between 2015 and 2018. In some cases, the investigators found that after restitution, court fees, child support and room and board were deducted from pay, they often made just pennies on the dollars they earned.

SPLC attorney Kristi Graunke and journalist Will Tucker detailed the findings for the Marshall Project.

“There’s little question that work release can benefit prisoners, and studies show it can reduce recidivism in some cases,” they write. “Most states have had programs for decades. But as we’ve seen throughout the criminal justice system, privatization and profits can overwhelm the best intentions.”

Blackmon, the *Slavery by Another Name* author, acknowledges that prison labor programs have changed from 100 years ago, but he remains skeptical of any programs that put incarcerated people to work for private corporations.

“The challenge is that for every program that looks promising today, there are multiple others that appear terribly problematic,” Blackmon wrote in an email. “And that many of the problematic programs looked promising when they were [started]. The core challenge of incarceration today is that all programming that may work to the benefit or rehabilitation of prisoners is almost always the first thing to be eliminated in a budget shortfall or the first thing to be altered when political

leadership changes.”

Time and time again, he’s seen cycles of abuse, reform, and abandonment of that reform within the country’s carceral systems.

“The great irony of [the 1890s to 1940s, when convict leasing proliferated] was that the invention of the now-notorious Southern chain gang was applauded as a dramatic new reform in the early twentieth century.”

Warden Oliphant said he doesn’t know much about the old convict leasing system, even if the new transition center model bears the weight of its brutal legacy. No one can be sure of what the future will hold for these programs and those who seek second chances in them.

What Oliphant does know, he has learned from the thousands of men he has accepted responsibility for during the last three decades. He has stood beside them as they strained in the heat and sweated through their shirts even on cold days on unpaid projects. When they were released, he has watched every one of them walk away with little to show for it.

The civilians who work alongside Archie’s crew do not always understand why the guys who arrive on the van with him labor the way they do, focusing so intensely on the repetitious tasks of pulling guts, cutting wings, or packaging frozen meat.

“We hear it all the time,” Archie said. “‘Y’all inmates think you’re going to come out here and take over,’ they say. They talk about us getting promoted. But whatever they say, you have to let it go . . . We come to work. We see it as a career, and they see it as a job. So we’re going to give it all we got. That’s our life. They have lives too, but they get to go home. This is our freedom right here.” 🐦

*Parish Howard is publisher and editor of The News and Farmer newspaper in Louisville, Georgia.*

# THE BATTLE OF SHOAL CREEK FARMS

A neighborhood says “not in my backyard” to an organic farm

BY PATRICIA THOMAS