

Queens

## Ex-con's STEPS program helps freed prisoners 're-enter' world, gives women hope for life after jail

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MARIELA LOMBARD FOR NEWS

**Sharon Richardson is a re-entry coordinator for Steps to End Family Violence, a nonprofit group that works with families dealing with incarceration.**

After two decades behind bars, [Sharon Richardson](#) is returning to prison - this time without shackles.

Richardson is a "reentry specialist" who uses her own experience with incarceration to help former inmates adapt to life on the outside.

She'll be taking her work one step further this fall by counseling women still in jail - some who may even be former jailmates.

"I want to help save lives," said Richardson, 52, who lives in southeast Queens and works for a nonprofit group called STEPS to End Family Violence. "I'm giving back - I have to."

STEPS runs a number of prison-related programs, but Richardson's position is the first in the 25-year-old organization dedicated to the cause of reentry.

It's been a long journey for Richardson, who was convicted of conspiracy to commit murder in 1990 and sentenced to 20 years to life. She was at the time a 30-year-old city Correction Department officer struggling with an abusive

partner. Richardson's roommate witnessed the abuse and the roommate eventually got some friends to kill Richardson's boyfriend, she said.

Richardson spent 20 years in jail as her two children grew up without her.

"There were times I didn't think I was ever going to get out," she said recently in her [East Harlem](#) office, where she counsels about a dozen women trying to get back on their feet after serving prison sentences.

She joined STEPS in September 2010, a few months after her release. "My passion for helping others is coming to fruition. It's like an awakening," she said.

While in jail, Richardson helped lead group sessions, said STEPS founder [Sister Mary Nerney](#). "I think she has an inner strength that she has had all along," said Nerney, who recruited her for the job.

Nerney said Richardson will be an inspiring presence to inmates.

Outside of jail, Richardson is already changing lives, said [Yolanda Fisher](#), 37, a former inmate.

"She understands what I'm going through. She's been more of a friend than a case worker," said Fisher, a cook who lives in [East New York, Brooklyn](#). "She's opened a lot of doors for me."

Unique Richardson, Sharon's daughter, said she is proud of how far her mother has come.

"She has such a big heart. She's really willing to help people," said Unique, 31, of [Bedford-Stuyvesant](#), Brooklyn. "She's just like an angel to me."

For Sharon Richardson, it is really an opportunity to give women in prison a sense of hope.

"I want to let them know what's on the other side," she said. "I'll be waiting for them."