Rashaad Washington knows that no individual is a lost cause. He recognizes this from his own life experience, as well as from watching hundreds of formerly incarcerated and jobless Milwaukee residents transform their lives through a remarkable program he established on the city’s north side.
Washington, 33, is the founder of Pro Trade Job Development, a construction trade training program that provides technical and personal skills to men and women facing barriers to employment. Pro Trade trains students in carpentry, painting, masonry, roofing and other skills at its 17,000-square-foot facility at 3227 N. 31st St.

This entrepreneurial, community-based model has gained the attention of Milwaukee parole officers, the Wisconsin Department of Corrections and the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce. But the plaudits and partnerships would have seemed unlikely 15 years ago when the only attention Washington was likely to receive was from local law enforcement.

His parents divorced when he was very young. His father was a drug abuser, says Washington, and he followed in his footsteps, using illicit drugs by the eighth grade. His GPA was 0.8 when he dropped out of high school at age 17. By 18, he had a child on the way and was living the life of the streets.

“I hung out with friends who were young and fatherless as well,” says Washington. “We were misguided. We didn’t have a lot of positive examples. Some of my friends robbed people, some killed people, unfortunately, and some were killed.”

Every indication was that he was on the same path.

But the convergence of three milestone events in 2002 and 2003 caused him to reassess his lifestyle. His daughter was born, he became a Christian and he served a short stint in jail.

“I went to jail, and I realized this was a system designed to keep me in jail,” says Washington, who had received a weeklong sentence and 1.5 years of probation for smoking marijuana. He knew he had to take steps to avoid the cycle of incarceration that traps so many young African-American males.

Pro Trade trains students in carpentry, painting, masonry, roofing and other construction trades at its Milwaukee facility. The program has graduated 120 students.
At the same time, his newfound Christianity taught him that "faith without works is dead." His internal faith, in other words, needed to produce outward fruit.

His greatest motivation, though, was his newborn daughter. "I wanted to create a comfortable life for my daughter," Washington says. "That meant I needed to have a good-paying job."

"I had to disassociate from my friends," he adds, "and basically start a new life."

**Training program is born**

Determined to get some practical experience, he approached a construction firm and volunteered to work for free. Over the next few years, he also worked for Master Lock and became a real estate investor, appraiser and consultant. When the economy crashed in 2008, he returned to construction.

In 2009, he established Pro Paint, a house-painting business. Before long, he was approached by a young man who had just gotten out of prison and was looking for work.

Hiring him made good financial sense to Washington. Through a Wisconsin Department of Corrections program, his business would receive a $1,500 tax credit and $3,000 tax refund. At the same time, Washington thought the opportunity might keep the young man from returning to jail.

Over the next few years, Washington continued to hire former inmates and others facing employment obstacles, equipping them with marketable skills, emphasizing integrity and professionalism, and addressing personal issues such as goal-setting, substance abuse, time management and self-discipline.

Out of this was born a training program that eventually became Pro Trade Job Development, launched in 2013. Since then, nearly 200 people have participated in the 10-week training program that Washington developed.

The goal, he says, is to create "agents of change" — role models and mentors who will positively affect their households, neighborhoods and city.

Of the 120 people who have completed the program, only 10 percent have returned to prison, says Washington, though there has been no independent analysis of the program’s success.

Seventy percent of the graduates are working in the construction trades.

While most of Pro Trade’s participants are men, women also have graduated from the program. One is Jesika Anderson, 25.

She earned a carpentry certification and recently finished her first assignment, working on a freshwater construction project. Anderson was the only black woman on the job site.

While Anderson does not have a criminal record, she notes that most of the people in her class were felons. Their determination inspired her. "They’ve been incarcerated but were trying to keep their dreams alive," she says.

**Building up people and skills**

It’s the combination of practical training and personal development that caught the attention of MMAC President Tim Sheehy, who is a WPRI board member. He heard about Pro Trade after the August riots in the Sherman Park neighborhood.

Sheehy recalls someone saying, “We shouldn’t react to Sherman Park; we should respond.” As he was looking for ways to do so, a mutual friend introduced him to Washington. Sheehy was impressed.

"Rashaad has an entrepreneurial way of connecting young men with themselves and with job opportunities," he says. "This is as much about building themselves back up as it is about carpentry and masonry skills."

Most of Pro Trade’s funding has come from government job-training programs or nonprofits, which often means strings are attached. MMAC has contributed about $40,000 for a pilot project that allows Pro Trade to accept 10 individuals to the program without restrictions.

When Sheehy first visited Pro Trade, he was struck by how many idle young men he saw throughout the neighborhood. Inadequate day care options, failing schools, high incarceration rates and a lack of economic opportunity all stack the deck against young African-American males in these communities, he says.

"You can’t look at a group of young men in the city and write them off," he says. "This is way too much talent to have on the sidelines of Milwaukee’s economy."

Terry Triblett, 23, of Milwaukee may well have been one of those on the sidelines were it not for Pro Trade.

Triblett was released from prison in June 2015, after serving 18 months for felony possession of a firearm. His case manager recommended that he look at Pro Trade as an opportunity to get on his feet. Triblett enrolled a week later.

The course was very strict, he says, and taught participants as much about life as it did about a job. The self-described former “stone-cold drug dealer” graduated as a certified mason and has worked for Greener Roofs & Gardens for over a year. Triblett is considering pursuing a degree in business management and administration at Milwaukee Area Technical College.

He attributes the program's success to Washington’s own experiences. "Rashaad understands people," Triblett says. "He’s been there."