

MIKE NICHOLS



More than shoestrings

Former inmates need hope, and jobs

Michael Shaw bought his home on Grant Boulevard in Milwaukee's Sherman Park neighborhood some 25 years ago. Paid \$50,000 and says he's put in another \$50,000 since, replacing rotted windows and downfallen doors, fixing up the place.

He and his wife raised three kids along what was once, and in many ways still is, one of the city's most elegant streets.

A hundred years ago, the bungalows, stately Tudors and intricately painted Victorians were largely owned by prosperous white merchants, most of whom were German and Jewish. Today, they are mostly owned by solidly middle-class black families like Michael's.

A truck driver married to a Milwaukee Public Schools educator, Michael was on a trip to St. Louis when he saw on TV the BP gas station right there in his neighborhood erupting into an inferno.

"What the hell?" he says he thought. "Where is this coming from?"

The violence and arson in August was "kind of unexpected" but not really surprising, he tells me after turning off his lawnmower and inviting me to sit down on the patio in front of his house. It was the work of "degenerates," he says.

But "I do admit," he adds, "we do need more opportunity, more jobs."

His words remind me of what community development leader Robert L. Woodson Sr. has alluded to. You have to differentiate between the opportunists, what Woodson calls the "riot-shoppers," and those who are disillusioned because they got stuck in a failing school when they were a little kid and can't get a job or maybe can't get beyond serving time. (See related story on Page 28.) It's sort of stunning, and more unusual than you might think, how many black Milwaukeans have served time.

One in every eight black male Wisconsinites is in a cell — the highest African-American male incarceration rate in the nation and almost double the nationwide rate for that cat-

egory, according to a study by the Wisconsin Budget Project last year. It doesn't help that while they're in prison, they're not at home, says Michael.

"Put the black man in the house, and there will be some discipline," he says.

Michael doesn't define himself politically, won't or can't say if he's liberal or conservative. Sort of sounds like both. W-2, or Wisconsin Works, was a good thing, "kind of put foot to ass," he says. "Taking a couple million dollars and throwing it into the community (in the wake of the unrest) is not going to solve the problem," he adds later. "If you teach a man how to fish, he can fish forever."

It's tough, though, when you live on a nice boulevard but don't feel safe working on your car out back. And, no, it's

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— **Michael Shaw,**
Sherman Park resident

not easy when the cop who pulled you over tells you what he thinks about your name on your vanity plate.

"I don't care," Michael quotes the cop as saying, "who the f--- you are."

And about those guys who are just getting out of prison, says Michael, "don't just put them out on the street with \$2 and a shoestring in their hand."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Shoestring?"

"You see them get out, and they've got no shoestrings in their shoes"

because the wardens are worried inmates will hang themselves with the strings, he tells me. So they get off the bus and show up back in the neighborhood with the tongues flapping out of their shoes and carrying their shoestrings.

They gotta be given something more than shoestrings.

"Hope," says Michael. "You know why they go back to prison? They get out here, and there is no hope, no jobs."

The killings in Milwaukee this summer — 24 in August alone — and the discouraging level of what passes for political discourse nowadays make it a harder time to examine this state's incarceration policies. But aren't all of us smart enough to differentiate between the guys holding the matches and everybody else? Between the murderers and the "low-risk" offenders who made a mistake and served their time, let alone all the hardworking folks being pulled down by neighborhoods no business owner is going to invest in



Burned-out cars sit at what's left of the BP gas station at N. Sherman Boulevard and W. Burleigh Street, which was among the eight businesses torched during August riots in the Sherman Park neighborhood in Milwaukee.

without thinking thrice and getting lots of arson insurance?

Anyway, the truth is this state's taxpayers can't afford to continue paying \$1.3 billion annually for the Department of Corrections — seven times more than they paid as recently as 1990.

Forget for a moment about the people going to prison just for the crimes they've committed. Over 40% of people entering Wisconsin's prisons every day aren't being incarcerated for new crimes. They're going back in because they violated the terms of their supervision after being released.

There's no one solution. There are lots of them. That's why WPRI is helping facilitate research on who's being

revoked and why, and that's why we're exploring programs such as Hope for Prisoners in Las Vegas, which is proving just how concerned and helpful many police officers in this country, in Las Vegas as well as Milwaukee, really are.

There are already some good things happening here, people striving to educate kids in innovative new schools and the resurrection of foreclosed homes. But it sort of breaks your heart when guys like Michael Shaw, people who have invested so much, say they're about ready to "get the hell out" of Sherman Park, say they've been thinking that for a while now, long before the recent unrest. [WI](#)

Mike Nichols is the president of WPRI.