

# FAMILIES OF THE INCARCERATED

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Wells County's Hometown Connection

BLUFFTON, INDIANA

### A Conversation and An Obituary

By MARK MILLER

**Saturday's Sub**

I have been struggling with what to do about a conversation I had more than two weeks ago.

When I drove up to the Uniondale warehouse of Christmas Behind Bars to do a story on that ministry's latest efforts during the pandemic, there was one person who wanted to remain in the background. He didn't want to be a part of the story, but he wanted to share some things.

He was a business owner in Bluffton when I came to town more than 20 years ago, an early acquaintance with whom a friendship would develop as our paths crossed from time to time. He didn't want to be in the picture we took and he wanted to remain anonymous.

His main point was to express the gratitude he and his wife have for Lemuel Vega and the Christmas Behind Bars ministry. Theirs is on a very personal level, as two of their sons have fought — and continue to fight — drug addiction.

"It's not just the jail visits," he shared, "but Lemuel has counseled our sons and us." The example and hope of Lemuel's story of redemption have been helpful, he continued.

It is not a story with a happy ending, at least yet. Trust needs to be re-established; re-lapses have occurred.

What it is a story — no, a lesson — that drug addiction can and does impact too many people, even in the best of families. It does not discriminate. While he wanted his identity hidden, he wanted that point exposed along with the hope that Lemuel's ministry has brought, which is why he is involved as a volunteer.

His testimony and sharing did not fit into the narrative of the story I wrote, but I knew I could not ignore it; I needed a context in which to place it. That came last week in the story of the young man who died of an apparent suicide inside the Wells County Jail. The family of Aaron Rittenhouse, just 26 years old, shared a glimpse of a young man who "knew how to make people smile and was good-hearted."

I was taught by my parents to count my blessings, but we often discover we have blessings we did not know we have and therefore cannot truly appreciate, such as having raised children who have thankfully avoided these temptations.

"The pain of his death is heartbreaking," the family wrote for his online obituary, "which is why stories like Aaron's should not be ignored." The Rittenhouse family shared that "In our area of the state there is little help or resources out there."

My friends have found some help and a resource in Lemuel, although he is not equipped with the staff or materials for intense counseling and treatment. But he can point you in the right direction.

"If we can help one family from having this kind of ending, we've won," the Rittenhouses concluded, which I believe is also what my friend was trying to do by sharing his story, if not his identity.

There is much to pray for in this troubled world, not the least of which includes these two families and others like them.

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