

## EVERYDAY HEROES

*The boss had every reason to turn his back. Instead, he befriended a troubled man—and hired him.*

# Forgiveness Is Job One

BY Jen McCaffery

JERAMIE MILLER IS the last guy you'd expect George Vorel to hire. After all, Vorel's company, EnviroSafe, is an industrial steel processor outside Pittsburgh where employees operate heavy equipment as they sand-blast and paint steel used in bridges and buildings around the country. And Miller is a former drug user and dealer. What's more, he introduced Vorel's own daughter to heroin soon after she graduated from high school, in 1998.

It took Vorel's daughter until 2005 to get clean. Once she was, she became a drug and alcohol counselor. Among her goals was to get her friend Jeramie clean too. He'd ended up in jail for selling and possessing drugs and aggravated assault, and she thought a job would help him get his life on track. "I remember her saying, 'I'll mention something to my dad,'" says Miller, now 40. "And I was like, 'Huh? Are you sure? Your *dad* dad?'" Yes, George Vorel—the man who'd once chased

George Vorel, second from left, with employees who got a second chance. From left: Gregory Fowler, Kevin Mann, Zachary Allen, and Patrick Thunberg.



PHOTOGRAPH BY Tom M. Johnson

this dangerous guy out of the house.

Vorel had always resisted hiring anyone with a record at EnviroSAFE. "This business is tough enough without bringing in addicts and criminals," he would say. But Vorel, now 70, developed a newfound faith in his later years. Through his church, he became a teacher in a prison ministry. Empathy and forgiveness are important to him. "God equipped us to have a heart," he says.

So Vorel offered Miller a job as a laborer and even invited his new employee to carpool. Miller was a nervous

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wreck the first time he settled into the passenger seat for the 70-minute trip. But "within five minutes, I relaxed," he says. "I thought, OK, he's human."

Storytellers both, the men talked and talked. During their trips, Vorel would learn that Miller had once been a baseball phenom. Miller learned that he and Vorel both shared a birthday with Abe Lincoln: February 12. Soon, a genuine friendship flourished, as did Miller's performance at work, where he was promoted to a supervisory role.

In part because of Miller's success, Vorel hired more men with checkered pasts, including one who served time

for homicide and another who was living under a bridge. Vorel, who runs the business with his son, estimates that of his 30 employees, 80 to 90 percent have backgrounds that would make it tough for them to get work. Men such as Gregory Fowler, Kevin Mann, Zachary Allen, and Patrick Thunberg all landed jobs they otherwise might not have. Thunberg was hired as a laborer in 2014 and has since been promoted to shop foreman. "We are saving lives, and that's huge to me," Vorel says.

In hiring former addicts, Vorel isn't naive. He knows that many of them won't work out. In fact, that's what happened with Miller. After three and a half years on the job, he relapsed following the death of his grandfather. The company gave Miller several chances but let him go after a few positive drug tests. "It broke our hearts, but we had to send him on his way," Vorel says. He is undeterred by Miller's setback, and he still refers former inmates from the prison ministry to work at EnviroSAFE.

Miller now has a job painting trucks and is clean again. But he and Vorel realized that something was missing in their lives: their conversations. Now they meet for lunch a couple times a year and catch up just the way they did on their car rides, greeting each other with big hugs.

"I say, 'I love you, man,' and he says, 'Hey, I love you, too,'" Vorel says. "That's what I live for." **R**

## Medal of Fellowship

BY Andy Simmons

IN 2012, KIM STEMPLE, a special-education teacher, found herself tethered to an IV in a Boston hospital being treated for one of several diseases she had been diagnosed with, including lupus and lymphoma. The normally ebullient Stemple was naturally getting very depressed. And then a friend gave her a medal.

Before she got too sick to exercise, Stemple had been a marathon runner. The medal came from a racing partner who had just finished a half marathon in Las Vegas and hoped the keepsake would act as a kind of vicarious pick-me-up. It worked like a charm—and then some.

After Stemple hung the medal from her hospital IV pole, other patients said they wanted medals too. That got Stemple

thinking. "A medal is a simple way to give a positive message," she told [pilotonline.com](http://pilotonline.com). And so was born her charity, We Finish Together, which collects medals from strangers—runners, dancers, swimmers, singers, and even spelling bee winners—and donates them to all sorts of people in need.

Recipients have included hospital patients, residents of homeless shelters, and veterans. Part of the process involves the donor writing a personalized note on the ribbon. "This gives them a connection to someone," says Stemple. "If they receive a medal, they know someone cares."

Can a simple medal really make a difference? Yes, says Joan Musarra, who suffers from pulmonary fibrosis. "I opened my package containing my new medal and the notes of positive, warm thoughts. I was overwhelmed," she wrote to Stemple. "At that moment, I was sitting on my couch breathing through an oxygen cannula because my lungs have deteriorated so badly. It means so much to me to feel that I am not alone." **R**



Kim Stemple celebrating after a race. The simple message of the medals, she said, "is kindness."

COURTESY KIM STEMPLE