

# Daily News Record

## Gemeinschaft Alumni Graduates Again

### Saunders Own Recovery Spurs Plans For Counseling Career

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By David Reynolds

**HARRISONBURG** — In 2002, Kirk Saunders was in prison, serving out the final months of a three-year sentence for possession of cocaine with intent to distribute.

At the time, his future looked about as bleak as his past — a mix of foster homes, drugs and run-ins with the law.

Today, though, that future is as bright as ever. On Saturday, just five years after his release from prison, Saunders completed a remarkable turnaround with his graduation from James Madison University. For the 35-year-old Harrisonburg resident, his degree in psychology represents more than just the hard work and preparation for a career in counseling — it's also a symbol of all he's overcome.

#### Role Model

When Saunders arrived in Harrisonburg in 2002, he wasn't a wide-eyed freshman, but a streetwise adult, eager to make a fresh start on life.

"When I came out of prison, I had to do something," Saunders said. "Education was the key."

Saunders became the first person in the recent history of the Gemeinschaft Home to complete the post-prison residential program and graduate from college, according to Executive Director Jennie Amison. Gemeinschaft is a transitional program that offers substance abuse treatment and helps parolees from middle-security prisons ease back into society.

"He's an excellent role model... He's showed the guys that this can be done," Amison said.

#### A Troubled Past

When he came to the Gemeinschaft home in 2002, Saunders had no idea that in just five years he'd be celebrating his graduation from college. He didn't let himself think that far ahead.

His childhood had been a mix of slums and foster homes in Los Angeles. By age 11, he was using drugs.

After moving to live with family in Lynchburg, he graduated high school, then entered rehab. Although he kicked drugs, his troubled past haunted him.

“That didn’t make me immune to criminal behavior, [which] was all I knew,” he said. “When things got rough, you fall back on your ace in the hole and that can be [illegal].”

He was convicted on the drug charge and served his three-year term in Botetourt Correctional Facility.

Amison remembers that when Saunders arrived at Gemeinschaft, he wanted to become a counselor so he could help others.

“That has always been his dream, and what he talked about doing,” she said.

### **Graduate School**

Since graduating from the Gemeinschaft Home’s six-month transitional program, Saunders’ life has been a blur of activity.

“When you raise your hand and say you want to be a changed person, a person of character — that’s when you strap on your seatbelt,” he said.

He started with remedial English at Blue Ridge Community College, still uncertain if he’d ever accomplish his dream of being a counselor

“I just wanted to be able to say, ‘I tried,’” he said.

While in school, he worked at Applebee’s and scraped by, paying child support and insurance. Now his two daughters — Natasha Banks, 15, and Elizabeth Jones, 14, live with him in Weyers Cave.

He’s been accepted to a graduate program at JMU to continue his counseling training.

### **Mentor**

But he’s already using his education to help others.

Saunders has mentored fellow JMU students as well as men at the Gemeinschaft Home — the place that he calls the springboard that helped him get back on his feet.

“It gives you six months to breathe and work and focus on yourself for a while,” he said. “So when you step back into life, you’re prepared to handle it.”

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