

Breaking free from the past

By Rick Farrant

rfarrant@kpcnews.net | Posted: Monday, April 1, 2013 11:04 am

Isaac Edwards, dressed in a snappy donated suit and tie, sat in a small conference room at Blue Jacket Inc. and spoke openly and articulately about a life of dumb decisions.

The 32-year-old father of two said he began walking down a path of self-destruction when he held up a Fort Wayne gas station at the age of 18. Over the course of the next 14 years, he twice landed in prison again — both times on charges of being a felon in possession of a handgun.

His missteps led to a total of seven years in prison and a life seemingly wasted — until he entered a job preparation program at Blue Jacket after his release from Westville Correctional Facility on Feb. 4.

“The skills they taught me,” said the aspiring artist, “are life-changing. I’m going to take them with me for life. I’m shooting for the stars, and I don’t think anything can stop me.”

Blue Jacket, a Fort Wayne nonprofit now in its eighth year, provides ex-offenders — and to a lesser extent other difficult-to-employ individuals — with the soft and hard skills necessary to seek jobs and be successfully employed.

The organization recently unveiled an 8,000-square-foot space at its facility at 2826 Calhoun St. that has been dubbed the Blue Jacket Clothing Co. It is a place where program participants can get free donated clothing — including suits — and the general public can pick up slightly used clothing at bargain-basement prices.

Blue Jacket also oversees a subsidiary, Opportunity Staffing, that helps place people in jobs who have graduated from Blue Jacket’s intensive four-week, 60-hour job prep program.

More than 2,000 people have enrolled in the program since 2005.

Since 2009 — the first year for which complete statistics are available — more than 70 percent of enrollees have graduated. Nearly 60 percent of people who start Blue Jacket’s program are employed within three months.

Tony Hudson, founder and executive director of Blue Jacket and former director of programs at Allen County Community Corrections, said the job placement figure is a solid one considering general economic challenges and a pool of candidates with checkered pasts.