

# [ D | *profile* ]

THE LIFESTYLE MAG OF DETROIT

[HOME](#)

[PROFILES](#) 

[COMMUNITY](#) 

[SCENE](#)



[DINE & DRINK](#)

[EVENTS](#)

[REAL ESTATE](#) 

[ABOUT US](#)

[Home](#) ▶ [Good Works](#) ▶ [Life On The Rise](#)



 [DETROIT](#)

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 1 REPLY

## LIFE ON THE RISE

  [GOOD WORKS, PEOPLE, PROFILE](#) 

The bakery's story begins 10 years ago, when a man named Edward Collins

walked into the Capuchin Soup Kitchen after 32 years in prison.

The Department of Corrections had made a baker out of him during his time in the system, and his newfound skill took him to wardens' birthdays and prison anniversaries. Upon his release, however, his felony gridlocked his ability to find employment, and Collins, disheartened, decided to return to the living he had known: selling drugs

His encounter with the Capuchins, a Catholic order that serves the poor through a number of programs, thwarted that plan. "We asked him to bake in our kitchens at night," says Ed Conlin, known as Brother Ed among the Capuchins. Brother Ed serves as a chaplain and addiction recovery counselor for the Capuchins. "He would take his [baked] products to different churches around Detroit and sell them on Sundays."

Through Collins's experience, which proved to be a success, the Capuchins saw the potential to help other men who had served time for a felony. Edward would train the men, which eventually led to On the Rise Bakery, a cozy corner bakery-café just off Gratiot and

I-94 on Detroit's East side. To date Edward has trained 70 men how to bake.

Yet as much as the bakery exists to teach these men a new skill, Brother Ed insists that it's not all about baking skills. "We realized the most important thing about this bakery is that these men learn how to cope with life even more than learn how to bake," he explains. "We decided they should live in a house of accountability. These men run their own program. We realized that they need to learn how to stand on their own and need to learn about community."

The house, as it turns out, is a block from the bakery. From a modest kitchen, Charles, one of the men in the program, has produced fried chicken and a series of sides, each of which smells nothing short of intoxicating, for their weekly meal together. Normally Brother Ray, who leads the program, would join the five men, but tonight they gather around the table with Brother Ed and, after a short prayer, prepare to dive in for a family meal and conversation.

Less than two weeks after Randall, one of the bakers, started the program, his housemates bought him something for his birthday and something to give his 15-year-old daughter on her birthday as well. "If there was a lot of other programs like this there would be a whole lot less people with the problems they have," he muses.

His story is unlike some of his house brothers. “I was the kid with the Jordans; I never had to struggle,” he confesses. “My two older sisters and aunts from my father’s side spoil me now, but I don’t use that to my advantage. My family’s kind-of well-off, but I think it’s better for me...to do what I gotta do. They’ll appreciate it more at the end.”

The process is somewhat uncomfortable at first: daily journaling and accountability to “some form of personal prayer,” according to Brother Ed, are morning staples. Throughout the week, the men attend several Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings every week and volunteer somewhere, an experience that will show them how to become contributors, not victims. “We felt very strongly that if the environment could be strong enough to make them a family, that culture could perpetuate throughout the years,” Brother Ed expounds.

Perhaps it’s the journaling or the environment, but living in the house has helped Randall, another one of the bakers, to open up even in this short time. “After my mom passed, I had drinking issues. I had to get over that. I haven’t talked about that in years,” he says, “but since being here I’ve talked about her.”

Yet creating a culture of honesty and trust is challenging. “These men have been trained in prison culture: no snitching, don’t trust anyone, and at best you conform to authority but you would never be in community with authority,” Brother Ed says. “We asked these men to join us in our mission, to genuinely be part of our team. They come to the churches we service and tell their story. They come to the meetings we run in the kitchens and support the homeless. They meet with us once a week to talk about their relationships together. We eat meals together. We do everything in our power to help them regain their family during the year.”

Serving with the Capuchins through his time in the program has encouraged George, another baker, to live out their mission upon his completion. “I’m hoping to take the objective and goal of the Capuchin soup kitchen... in terms of being of service to mankind: volunteering. The goal of the Capuchins has gotten into the very fiber of my being. I’m starting to see from a spiritual perspective.”

He continues, “My situation is different than most. I didn’t have a drug or alcohol issue, but I was raised in a drug and alcohol environment. [The program] gave me insight into the underpinnings of alcohol and drug dependency and depression. I’m actually learning specific strategies on formation and foundation of addiction. I’m in control of

strategies on behavior and formation of addiction. I am in control of my life. It's not other people's actions that control me. It's helping me live more successfully. I'm not saying it's a cakewalk, but I'm moving forward incrementally."

To build community, the program retains strict standards. And while the strictness makes the men feel secure, the response to program violations is what builds trust among them. When one of the program participants violates a standard, the men will meet as a house as every man tells the violator how he feels about the violation. "That's usually the most powerful therapy available," Brother Ed explains, "because the offender realizes how much his life is linked with these men; that's where the love is tangible."

Through their work in the bakery, men that were once perpetrators of crimes now prevent them. On the Rise has provided a popular place for the neighborhood to meet each other. "We've only had one incident here," Brother Ed declares. "Urban decay is effectively based on lack of community."

What has surprised the Capuchins is how much community has grown around the bakery. In their door-to-door rounds in the neighborhood to advertise the bakery, the bakers have been clear that the neighborhood is a drug-free zone; now, neighbors will call the bakers instead of the police to report suspicious activity.

With over 85% of the men remaining clean after the program, the Capuchins produce results staggeringly higher than the national average of 12% and have as a result earned the respect of the Department of Corrections and the metro Detroit business community. Men leave the program less often to bake and more often to manage security teams, drive trucks, or work in factories or retail. It's a testament to the change that they've undergone, when learning to bake masks so many other lessons happening between family dinners with the other men and engaging with the neighbors. "As they integrate with the Capuchin community," Brother Ed explains, "they realize God works mostly through people, and they begin to see the hidden face of Christ in the poor, the disenfranchised, and the broken they serve in the [soup] kitchen. This spiritual awakening slips up on them." He adds with a smile, "Brother Ray and I love to watch it happen."

For Ray, a baker, that awakening was already underway when he joined the program. His story is wrought with addiction, 25 years of struggle that drove him to his knees. "I'm an ex-addict, an ex-heroin addict, an ex-crack smoker, a thief, a petty thief," he says. "I was on probation – one probation – for five years. Not that I was given the five years by the

judge but I just couldn't stop using drugs.

One zero-tolerance probation violation should have sent him to prison, but the judge sentenced him to a county class and treatment instead. Ray confesses that he had no intention of staying clean: "I was just going to do what I needed to do to get back to the streets, but... somewhere along the line, it kicked in and I didn't want to get high."

By the time he met Brother Ray, his sincerity and persistence pushed him ahead of the three men on the waiting list before him, and, as he says, "the rest is history." But he was skeptical at first. "I said to Brother Ray, 'What's your angle?' I didn't believe he was a priest, that there are still good people that really want to make a difference," he explains. "It's reaffirmed my faith in myself and in men period."

He remembers "days I was using drugs and I would cry and pray and I used to say to God, 'If You don't save me there's no use; I'm just going to be like this.' I feel like God has sent me through school all over again – first it was treatment, transition, and now He's preparing me to get out there, and I won't let myself down this time. I've been blessed with a second opportunity to get it right, and they don't come around all the time."

As Charles, who came to the Capuchin program through the Salvation Army, explains, Brother Ray and Brother Ed don't remove participants from the program: "you put yourself out. The rules and regulations are simple." And standards aside, Charles enjoys giving back through his volunteer work at churches on Sundays. "Being able to give my testimony about my life and about the program, that's basically one of the best parts," he says. "After we serve our baked goods, [church attendees] will share about their son or daughter dealing with addiction, and I'm able to give them encouragement."

Out of the streets, away from drugs, in shape, clean, and saving money, he marvels at the program setup: "This by far beats any program that I know of, and I've been in a few. Everything is paid for; they just want you to save money," he says.

Brother Ray and Brother Ed may credit participants' success to the Capuchin way or the work of God, but they, too, are woven tightly into the testimonies of the men in the program. Paul, for one, arrived at the Capuchin house on felony probation for home invasion with several other felony warrants to boot. When he was summoned to court, Brother Ray spoke on his behalf and secured bond for him. "Both [Brother Ed and Brother Ray] took me to all my court dates and helped me with whatever I needed," Paul says. "Them standing by me through

the whole thing was the only thing that kept me out of [12-36 months in] prison. I'm a total stranger to them, but they still did everything they could to help me."

He calls it "providence – the gentle guidance and protection of God. Invisible hands have been influencing things around me for things to come into place. A great number of miracles had to occur for this kind of thing to happen." When he leaves the program, he plans to emulate the Brothers' service. "I'm obligated to extend that human compassion to others," he says. "I couldn't in good conscience deprive somebody of that same consideration."

For Brother Ed, the best part is watching the men catch a vision for community and receive love in return for their service. One Sunday, Collins was distributing his baked goods at a church when four small, elderly women approached him to ask him for the recipe. As he explained his recipe to his rapt audience, "I began to cry," Brother Ed confesses. He sits in On the Rise on a cold but sunny January afternoon, and around him volunteers and program participants alike are hard at work cleaning the floor and preparing sandwiches. The experience of guiding the bakers through their journeys has been profoundly impactful. "As I worked with these men I realized this was a holy place – the struggles are genuine, very intimidating, but very beautiful."

To learn more about On the Rise Bakery or the Capuchins' work in Detroit, visit [cskdetroit.org](http://cskdetroit.org) or call 313-922-8510 and ask for Brother Ray.



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