Big Change Leads to New Life

BY MELANIE GRAYCE WEST

Tyrone Wheeler hit a low a decade ago, serving time in prison for dealing drugs and aggravated assault. On Monday he graduated from Seton Hall University's Stillman School of Business, with a near-perfect 3.9 grade-point average.

"It's kind of surreal, this whole thing," the 41-year-old said during an interview on Sunday. "I know it's true and I've worked really hard to get where I'm at, but a lot of times when I do think back to where I was, to where I am—it just seems unbelievable."

Mr. Wheeler's path from a life of crime to a life full of promise started with a shift in thinking behind bars. Back in 2005 he was on his fourth incarceration and two years into the minimum 38 years of a 25-year prison sentence. His daughter wasn't a part of his life. His mother was growing older. His future, he said, was prison well into his 50s and 60s.

Mr. Wheeler decided that it was "time to make some real changes," he said.

He began reading self-help and motivational books, and took courses in paralegal work, and heating and cooling systems. He surrounded himself with positive people.

In the fall of 2011, out of prison and living in a halfway house, Mr. Wheeler was on his way to class at Essex County College when he had a moment of clarity. Littering was second nature to him then, he said, a reflection of not caring about his rough New Jersey surroundings or much of anything else.

But on his way to class that day he decided not to drop the trash on the ground. "If I can stop littering," he recalled thinking, "I can change anything in myself."

Mr. Wheeler's competitive nature kicked into gear. The self-described class clown became a student who sat in the front row at Essex County College. With good grades came scholarships and awards.

Upon receiving his associate degree, Mr. Wheeler had three college offers. He chose Seton Hall for its low student-to-teacher ratio and its friendly professors. He jumped into class projects, volunteer work and the school's management society.

It was sometimes difficult to be the oldest student, and often, the only African-American in class, he said. His first semester, he would sometimes go the whole day without speaking to anyone.

He ate by himself. A few friendly classmates would josh Mr. Wheeler about his studiousness, calling him a nerd. It was a title he embraced.

Michael Reuter, a professor at the school's department of management, was an adviser to Mr. Wheeler. He described his student as having "a relentless pursuit of being more than he ever dreamed he could be."

"I always get choked up," said Mr. Reuter. "I am so happy for the guy. This is just the first step. He will accomplish great things in life because of his passion, because of his renewed purpose."

Through a professional connection, Mr. Reuter helped his student to secure an interview at Wakefern Food Corp., a Keasbey, N.J.-based retail cooperative that distributes for ShopRite grocery stores. Mr. Wheeler begins his role there as a procurement analyst on Tuesday.

As a result, he is skipping the big graduation dinner in favor of a family lunch.

"I'm fortunate enough to have a job," said Mr. Wheeler. "I want to get to bed early."