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In every person's life there are those people whose path we cross that leave an indelible mark on our life. Some of those marks are life changing. They are the marks left by a person that has set us on a course toward higher purposes and on the path to success. Mrs. Norma Stokes is one such person in my life.

As an inmate at Julia Tutwiler Prison, I wanted nothing more than to be productive within the confines of the fence. I sought to stay busy and make the most of my time while incarcerated. As I neared the end of my sentence, I asked for and was assigned to work in the ACI Clothing Factory based on what I had heard from the other inmates that it was a place that allowed time to pass quickly but also the inmates were treated well by the factory supervisor, Mrs. Stokes. While I had only sewn on a machine a few times in my life, I was assured that Mrs. Stokes was an excellent teacher. I soon found that Mrs. Stokes was that and much more.

During my time at the factory, Mrs. Stokes was a constant source of encouragement and advice. I was about to go home and reenter the workforce after having served 16 years. While I had been in the workforce since I was 12, after my release I would find myself in what was essentially a brand new world. Mrs. Stokes took the time and made the effort to prepare me for the challenges I would face. Thanks to her I learned more about the manufacturing process from both the perspective of a laborer as well as from that as a manager. She mentored me and provided a role model to whom I could truly look for advice no matter the situation.

In the weeks before my release, Mrs. Stokes took the time to answer my questions and address my concerns, frequently taking time from her lunch hour to talk to me. After I was released, she graciously wrote letters of recommendation and offered bits of wisdom as I tried to find my new niche in life. When I was hired at my current company as a Dispatcher, I remember her saying that all I had to do was be true to myself and work as hard as I had for her and I would someday be running the company. As it turns out, she was right. I am the Operations Manager now, and every day I can honestly say that I follow the advice given to me by Mrs. Stokes years ago: be the manager you would want to work for every day. And my favorite: Kindness is a free gift, so give freely.

For the guidance, wisdom, and support given me by Mrs. Stokes I will be forever grateful.

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