

# *after/life*

Second Chances  
Beyond A Life  
Sentence

## **Volume 1 of a Series**

“Real Stories of Reintegration”  
A workbook for Students of  
Law, Social Work, Psychology  
and The Humanities.

Personal Stories of Re-entry  
After Years Behind Bars.



What does freedom really look like after decades behind bars? In this first volume of a unique workbook, former prisoners share their own raw, unfiltered stories of life on the inside, and outside, prison walls—navigating technology, rebuilding relationships, and confronting a world that has moved on without them. Designed for students of criminology, law, psychology and social work, each section pairs powerful firsthand narratives with thought-provoking prompts, discussion questions, and reflection exercises. More than just reading material, this workbook is an immersive learning experience that challenges assumptions, sparks empathy, and invites students to grapple with the human side of re-entry.

## Introduction

Imagine the profound stillness that settles over a world you've only glimpsed through the narrow slits of a cell window. After decades of confinement, the clamor of freedom is almost disorienting, like stepping from a black-and-white photograph into a world of vivid, pulsating color.

This workbook is a chronicle of that jarring transition—an exploration of the difficulties, challenges, and joys experienced by individuals who have spent much of their lives behind bars and are now granted a second chance at the world outside.

For those who have endured a life sentence, the notion of re-entering society is not merely a change of scenery but an intricate dance of adaptation and reinvention. The

road to freedom is fraught with obstacles—reconnecting with a society that has evolved in their absence, battling the weight of regrets, and forging new paths from the rubble of their past. Yet, amidst these trials, there is an undeniable undercurrent of hope and resilience.

Through interviews and photographs, this book delves into the stories of men and women who are embarking on this extraordinary journey.

It reveals the complexities of their inner lives and the multifaceted nature of their reintegration. Their experiences are marked by the clash between a past they can't change and a future they must navigate with both trepidation and resolve.

# A life sentence is the harshest sentence on the planet.

Anonymous / ex-lifer  
turned attorney

I think a lot of the guys who get out have such low expectations upon being released and so for us to exceed those expectations, restores a sense of community and allows him to find a place in society and restores their sense of self. Especially the way we really love them immediately. It sets in.

Joelle Kirtley, Ph.D, CEO Mass Liberation

After decades behind bars, returning to society can be a daunting, overwhelming experience. Imagine living a life for decades where one is told when to wake up/go to bed, what time to eat, a set menu at every meal. Everyday living is in a room the size of a bathroom and leaving it is for mandated work, school or groups. Meals and medical visits add to the variety. Punitive in nature, our correctional system is designed to isolate and punish in a sensory deprived environment.

Aileen Hongo, MSW Adjunct  
Instructor, College of the Canyons

The lifer who receives a parole grant is resilient. They have risen to achieve the extraordinary. They have navigated the path of self-control, self-realization, self-discovery, self-awareness, empathy and insight. They have gained the tools of patience, wisdom, knowledge, understanding and compassion. The journey has transformed them 180 degrees, from the criminal defendant handcuffed in the courtroom, to the parole-ready individual in the boardroom. A life sentence is based on the elements of the crime. A grant of parole is based on the reformation of the individual. If more people in society possessed the coping skills, the maturity and the tools that the former lifer has, the sun would shine brighter.

Anonymous / ex-lifer turned attorney



# Barry Hughes

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One thing was the phone thing. I thought everybody was crazy because they all looked like they were talking to themselves. That was one thing that was a big adjustment for me. I didn't understand people having conversations that were usually private out in the open.

Write a one-page narrative from the point of view of an elderly parolee on their first day out. What shocks them, what frightens them, what gives them hope?

How might someone who has spent 25+ years inside understand "freedom" differently than others?

I was in for 25 years. For first-degree murder. Someone lost her life by my leave. That was a long time ago. I was working for the Department of Health while incarcerated. That was the type of work I was doing while I was incarcerated, caring for the terminally ill. For me, I just wanted to be sure that I was there for my Mom the way I was there for people that I didn't know in prison. That was my main focus.

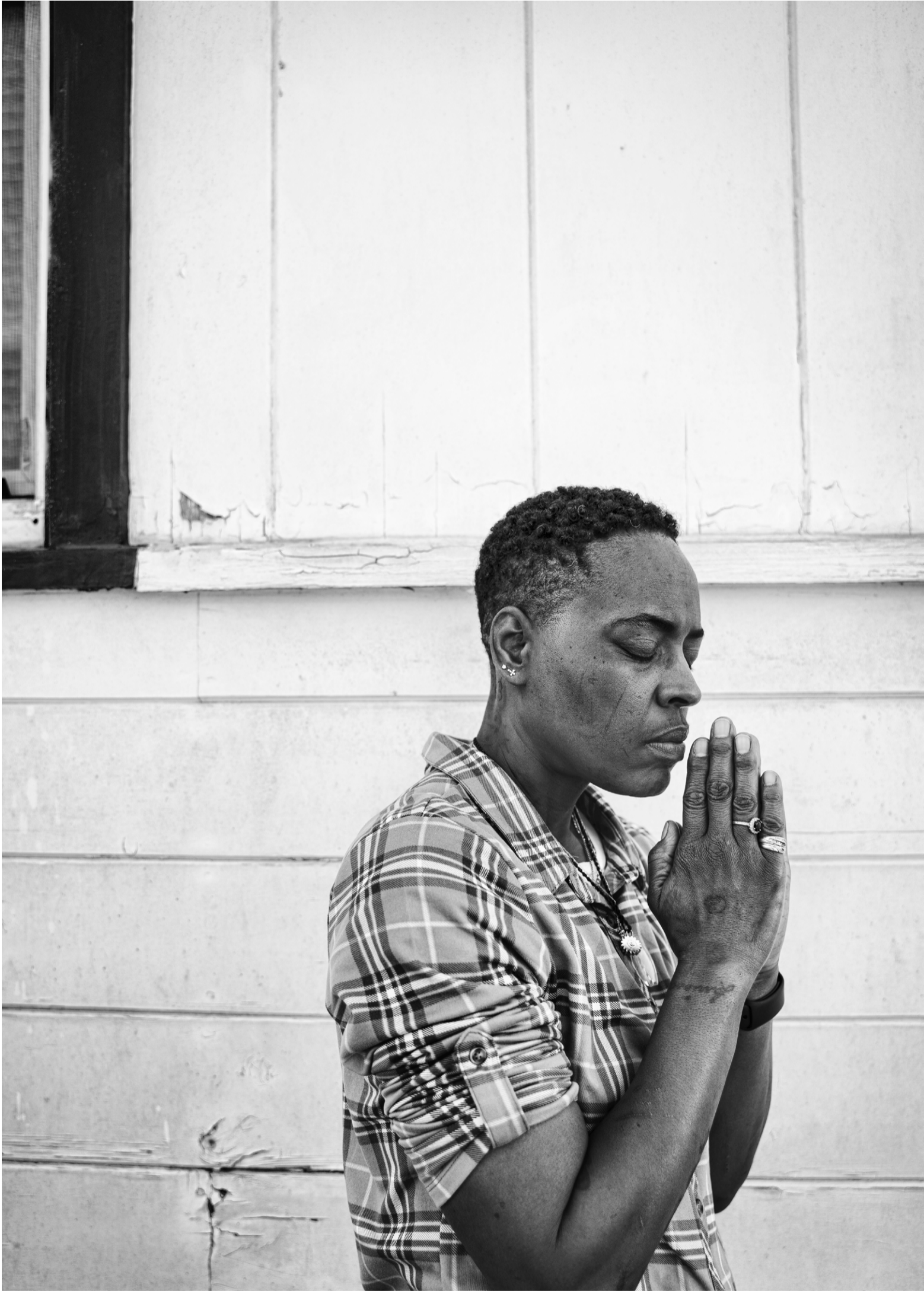
*I was a person that was always trying to hit the road running. But a true human connection was important for me. I lived my life when I was outside the same way I lived it on the inside.*

The type of job I was engaged in, the Gold Coats, prepared me for when I got out. First of all, I found out I was going to be credentialed a whole lot higher than I thought. Because of the hospice training and experience that I had. So here at the VA they thought that was something very useful. That was a great advantage. I continue doing the same things, as in prison. I volunteer a lot. I worked with the Twilight Brigade, end of life. Where you sit bedside with people who might not have had someone come in to see them.

I use a lot of my training that I learned in hospice with the Gold Coats. That served me well. Other people observed that. So when I did seek employment here, they knew who I was and my experience. **I ended up having about five promotions in a very short span.**

**The Gold Coats**  
<https://thegoldcoats.com>

**A Prison Hospice Program for the Living and the Dying**  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/06/us/california-medical-facility-hospice-prison.html>



Jordan 49

In 2004 I got sentenced to 25 years flat sentence for a case of domestic violence. I didn't know how to control my anger. I had a self-esteem problem. I want to say I still struggle with it because I do.

*"I love choosing my clothes and all the different colors and patterns. I'll wear pink shoes just for the color!"*

*-J.N., Formerly incarcerated Lifer*

That's what my goals are. There are people that don't wanna leave the streets. They're complacent. They're comfortable. They don't believe in themselves to do better.

What situations might trigger anger for someone newly released, and why might those reactions be heightened after incarceration?

Write a "reaction plan" for a hypothetical scenario (e.g., being disrespected at work, a parole office misunderstanding). Identify: the trigger, the internal feeling, and a constructive response.

The violent part of my mindset does not exist to where I want to hit a woman, to abuse a woman to the point where I mess up her mental state or I cheat on her or something like that. I don't play in that field anymore. I try to be as honest as possible. I do socialize with exes and I haven't learned that that's not a healthy thing. I mean people are people, if you're not into that people anymore... I'm trying to really figure that out.

I'm trying to figure out the do's and don'ts of dealing with family members, of responding to people because I do a lot of travelling on the bus.

I never really asked for help when I first came home. I came home with a job working at a warehouse for 7-Eleven serving 98 stores across the city. I'm picking and picking and picking until I don't wanna pick anymore. So I got another job. I moved up to \$20 an hour because I was working at a building where I had to clean human... And everything. It was horrible. But you know what? I love to clean. Because it's a peace of mind. It's meditation. Nobody's over my shoulder telling

me what to do. I know what to do. I know how to figure out what else I need to do. I like to take something that looks so nasty and dirty and make it new.

God has a divine timing the way he does stuff. He does. Before I go on, I took myself off of social media five days ago for my mental health. Right now, I'm trying to work on the basic things I need to do.

I need a license. That's been a hindrance for me. I've taken the test six times. I know I'm not dumb. I know I'm not stupid. I started my own clothing line. I want to take it to the streets to help people. I want to take these pieces of garment into the hands of people who need clothing. I'm not saying I don't want my money. Like walk up to the people who don't have shoes on, I want to give them a pair of shoes, a pair of socks. If they were willing, put them in the room for a day or two with a real bed because some of them don't want to live in a program. Meet them where they are.

**When Intimate Partner Violence Meets Same Sex Couples**  
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6113571/>

**Clean Decisions**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oz7rYXCOIk>  
<https://cleandecisions.com>

## Orla Bewley

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How do trauma and resilience coexist in re-entry journeys?

Draft a short guide explaining a modern tool (smartphones, online banking, email) to someone who has never used it.

#### Goal Setting Activity

Identify three achievable goals for someone in their first month after release.

I had cancer. Got introduced to Vicadin. Got strung-out on that. And during that time, a whole group of people- gang members- moved into my house. Criminal element took over my home. I was partying with them, so I'm not a victim-victim. And I didn't know how to get them out of my house. And so a lot of crime was happening and we all got arrested. I kept thinking that, surely the DA will recognize that I'm not a part of that. But the law doesn't care really. If you're present when the crime occurs, you're guilty of the same crime. My co-defendants committed some crimes and I was present. Because I didn't try to stop them, I was guilty of the same crimes. And because I didn't call the police while the crimes were going on, I became an accomplice. Aiding and abetting. I ended up getting a life sentence. 10 to Life.

My jurors weren't allowed to know what the sentence that they were convicting me, carried. They deliberated for five days and couldn't come to a decision. So, when they were deliberating, they wrote on the decision form to the judge, we think this woman, Orla, should be sentenced to a drug rehabilitation program. That's what they thought that my participation in the crime warranted. But the state had to sentence me to the mandatory minimum. The jurors found out and came to my sentencing hearing, begging the judge not to sentence me to a life sentence. But she said her hands were tied.

Prisons were never intended to be nursing homes or long term care facilities. It seems long over due for national and global policy changes. Notably in the US, there are discussions around 'second look sentencing' which would give inmates sentenced to life in prison the opportunity to have their sentence reviewed through a more compassionate and rehabilitation-focused lens. In many cases it does not even make financial sense to keep older people in prison. Perhaps now is the right time to create humane and human rights-based policy for this group of vulnerable inmates and focus on the specific challenges they may encounter upon re-entry vs. being long term care facilities.

-Anne Katz, Ph.D., L.C.S.W. USC professor of Social Work

I was the first one in my family that went to prison. We had a lot to learn about the system.

I didn't even know that there was such a thing as an indeterminate sentence. I followed the rules. I programmed well. I didn't know how they can deny me twice. That was hard to take, after my first board hearing. It was my third time before the board that they found me suitable. But the governor objected to my parole. He wasn't satisfied that I wouldn't be associated with those sorts of people, my co-defendants. Even though he had no proof of that.

Coming out? Mom and Dad picked me up. I was in the back seat and he had this thing in his hand. And I'm like, "What is that?" I'd never seen a smart phone. I'd never seen apps before. I was floored by that. When I went away, I had a state-of-the-art flip phone. The second thing? I couldn't believe the homeless people. It was astounding to me to see that. It still is now. But in the beginning, it was astounding. I don't understand in 10 years, how it got like that.

First thing I wanted to do when I got out? Spend time with my family. They've been so good to me. Supported me from day one. Emotionally, financially, spiritually, just every way. Just to be able to spend time with them.

**Treating Drug Abuse and Addiction in the Criminal Justice System: Improving Public Health and Safety**  
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2681083/>

**Addicted to punishment: Jails and prisons punish drug use far more than they treat it**  
<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2024/01/30/punishing-drug-use/>

People aren't talking to each other anymore...why are they all looking at their phones instead of talking?

- J.J., Formerly incarcerated Lifer



I was a troubled youth. I was given a sentence of life without the possibility of parole. I went to prison in 1989 and I got out in 2023. 34 years. Childhood trauma. I didn't know how to express it and get it out. It was a common trend for boys growing up in inner cities to be men without emotions. Men don't cry. So I just had to bury it and live with that pain. Pain that came out in ways which affected other people. I was in and out of juvenile hall systems.

It was a car accident. I robbed a store and got into a chase with the police. I was going around 50 miles an hour and there was a head-on collision and I killed a woman. I was charged with first-degree felony murder and I was given the term of life without the possibility of parole.

I had a daughter who was born in 1989 just before I went to prison. My mother raised her. My mother passed in 2006 but my daughter was like 18 by that time and she continued to come and see me. It forced me to work on myself. I started mentoring kids. They would bring groups of kids in and we'd be talking with them, giving them advice, telling them stories. Giving our testimonies. I filed for a commutation

before (Governor) Brown left. And the last 10 people that he looked at, he turned them all down. And I was in that group. That's my luck.

The DA wanted to keep me in. So he reached out to the victim's sister, to write a letter to oppose my commutation. So she says, I didn't even know he was still in prison. Let me get in touch with him before I write a letter.

We had a visit face-to-face. They set it up. Me and her, we hugged, we cried, we hashed it out. And so finally she says, I'm going to see if I can get you out of here.

And she did. Without her intervention, I'd still be in prison right now. Their family didn't believe in capital punishment.

Her husband's a quadriplegic. Because of a car accident. Somebody hit him. So I take him out to the movies. I go see him often. Once or twice a month. She had a big enough heart and open mind to be able to see all these things and all the good that came with it. The healing. Her family and my family.

Write about a moment in the interview materials that surprised you. Why did it stand out?

What internal conflicts could arise when trying to form new relationships without institutional structure?

Reflect on the concept of "second chances." What does it mean in practice, not just in theory?

Californians Once Facing Life without Parole Give Back  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/28/us-californians-once-facing-life-without-parole-give-back>

I Just Want to Give Back  
<https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/06/28/i-just-want-to-give-back/reintegration-of-people-sentenced-to-life-without-parole>

**John Johnson**  
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This is my restitution. It's all thanks to her. This whole story is amazing. I share it with people because I use it as a way to show people that forgiveness is big. You can get healing through forgiving.



My life is  
*good* right  
now.



**Fred Dickes, 68**

**Prison is Living Hell for Pedophiles**

<https://abcnews.go.com/US/prison-living-hell-pedophiles/story?id=90004>

**The Impact of Wrongful Imprisonment**

<https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/jr13/p5a.html>

**How does long-term incarceration shape someone's sense of identity?** Write about how identity might need to be rebuilt.

**Imagine being reunited with family after decades.** What might be joyful? What might be difficult or awkward?

**Write about a moment in the interview materials that surprised you.** Why did it stand out?

When it comes to sex cases, whatever they say, that's it, unless you can prove otherwise. To this day I don't know why she did this. I went through the whole trial and they gave me 63 years in prison. And I had to do half of that.

I never in my wildest dreams or imaginations imagined that something like that would happen. But it did. And this is the other side of that. I'm coming out of the really bad part and I'm moving into a life that I'm happy with. Yeah. I'm happy with it. My life is good and it's only getting better. When you go to jail for things like that, it's not a picnic. I made it through. Some days were better than others. I kept to myself. I'm the same guy as when I went in. I'm just an old man now.

I don't like to tell my story. I really don't. It's not a story that I like. It's kind of embarrassing.

I have to live my truth. What happens in my life. I'll never be able to stop telling it 'cause every time you come in contact with somebody, I feel I have to tell them. Because I don't want them to hear this shit from someone else.

I kept everything undercover when I was in prison. I don't keep it under cover out here. Anybody who gets close to me, finds out about this, then they can make their own decisions. I tell them is, "if you think I'm the kind of guy who did that, then stay away from me".

When I was in prison, I caught another case. Somebody came at me because of the sex case. I was upset about all that. It wasn't a good idea to come at me about that. Because I wanted revenge. I was mad. So whoever got in my face, got my anger. So I stabbed a guy. Thing was, he brought all his friends with him. They killed me on the yard that day. They beat me to death. The MTA's were pretty good. They brought me back. They cut my throat, stuck a tube down my throat. Got me breathing again. My head and my

face are all wired together with screws and wires. I understand why they did what they did to me because they think I'm the kind of person that committed that crime. Like I said, that's the bottom of the barrel in prison. I wasn't mad at the guys that did it, just more anger at the people that did this to me. I've got a lot of anger but I'm not gonna let it control my life.

I have a good life now. I have a good life. And I'm old enough and wise enough now to not let very many people into my life so it's not gonna go down the tube again. Nobody's gonna get another chance to say something about me.

Everybody I knew stayed on my side. My family. My friends. They knew I didn't do that shit. It was one of those things that I got the shaft. I just happened to let the wrong people into my life.

These people at this place over here [Mass Liberation], they changed my life.

I wake up every day knowing I didn't do it. So my conscience is clear. I'm shooting for a better life. And I got one planned and it's working out. It's all good.

My family's waiting. I'm not coming home with my hand out. They kept saying, "don't worry about that!". I told them I was gonna stay here and work this job until October 2024. Then, I'm gonna go to the Social Security Office and I'm gonna retire. Whatever they give me, they give me. Pack all my shit and go to Omaha.

My baby brother has 6 1/2 acres on his land outside Omaha. So I'm gonna go over there and stay on his place. He's gonna give me a place to live for the rest of my life.

My daughter is there as well. I was so happy when my brother offered me to come live in his house. He just jumped right on it and he said, "come and live with me". I'm gonna buy a camper trailer and live out behind his barn. That's where I'm gonna live the rest of my life.

I was a 25 year old man. I already did a few years in the Marine Corps. I was running with an Outlaw biker club. I was all grown up. The wrong people came into my life because of the things I was doing. I was dealing drugs. Screwing with all kinds of women. And the wrong one came into my life. That's what happened. A girl that I knew said that I molested her kids. I didn't commit the crime, but I couldn't prove that I didn't commit the crime because there was no physical proof.



We're all afraid to be forgotten. We want to be relevant, not irrelevant to the world. The first two months out was really difficult for me. All I knew was prison. I got out. And it was about meeting expectations.

It overwhelmed me. Now I have all this responsibility. Car payments, gas. Find your own clothes, shoes, your own food. In prison, you don't have that. It got to the point for many guys, they'd ask me, "Where's the nearest prison? Where can I sign in there?"

It's dangerous in there. Less responsibility. Less expectations. I got to the point where I wanted to kill myself. I had suicidal thoughts. Thoughts I couldn't share. My brothers and sisters at API Rise [Asian Pacific Islander Re-entry and Inclusion Through Support and Empowerment] helped out. Talking to people who have been in my shoes. You don't have to say much. They know what you're talking about. Sometimes you just need someone to be there to listen. That it's okay to be vulnerable. It's okay to share your emotions. And that's what I've been doing since then. I ran a hotline in prison. A suicide hotline. Suicide. Love. Heartbreak. Depression. Just trying to help them find a way out without saying it.

My Mom and Dad are still around. They love that I'm out. My Mom thinks I'm still that 15 year old, in the gang. She hears the word 'friend', and she thinks it's still that same old gang member. I'm showing her that I do know how to conduct myself as a citizen, as a member of society.

Women tell me, 'You've been down for 20 years, You're not ready for a relationship. You're not serious. You've been deprived of sexual activity. Now that you're home, you're a horndog that would get in bed with anybody and everybody. Remember, my deal is that I got locked up as a 15 year old kid. As a 15 year old boy, my thing was going to the beach. Theme parks. Cause I'm still a kid at heart. Yes, I'm 34, I'm a man now. I know my priorities. But at the same time I like to have fun. I go skateboarding on the weekend with my friends. I got hurt a couple times. My body's different. When I fall, I really fall.

When I got out? I wanted to get laid and eat some burgers. Seeing my family. Everything was so surreal. Like, I'm out here! Sometimes, when I'm driving, I think, I can't believe it, I'm out here! I'm doing pretty well for myself. I got my car. Got a job. A lot of people have this misconception about prison: that all that prisoners really are, are people that are locked up, all uneducated or animals. But we're not. We're just people who went down the wrong path. Can you really blame me for doing drugs?

Choose one returning citizen's story. What part of their experience felt most challenging? Most hopeful?

Imagine being reunited with family after decades. What might be joyful? What might be difficult or awkward?

What does a healthy first step toward rebuilding trust with his parents look like?

What social pressures might pull teen gang members back toward their past life?

## Macy Bountert 34

'America' by Macy Bountert

We say we live in America, right? The land of the free. But the majority of the citizens are incarcerated. You say that you live in the home of the brave. But yet, when juveniles are acting out, you are too afraid to get to the bottom of what's going on. You think that by locking us up that its gonna solve the issue. But it's not. It's not. I mean you deal with it. You kind of find out what it is that teenagers are going through. I didn't feel the love at home. I didn't feel like my dad loved me. Because even though we're mama boys, we still wanna be like our fathers. We feel like our father is like Superman and when we don't feel the love, we feel like he don't love us, so what happens.? We turn to the street and you have people there who, oh damn, he's easy for the picking. Go ahead and do this, go ahead and do that. You are so in over your head that all you wanna do is be accepted, so you do these stupid things. 20 years down the line you're in prison, not knowing what the hell happened, not dealing with your emotions. You do drugs just to feel, because you don't wanna feel the pain. You want to numb everything. And sometimes people just be successful when they kill themselves. you know?

While My Friends Graduated High School, I Sat Behind Bars  
<https://prisonjournalismproject.org/2023/07/11/coming-of-age-prison/>

Poetry Gives Young People in Prison a Voice-And a Fresh Start  
<https://www.aecf.org/blog/poetry-gives-young-people-in-prison-a-voice-and-a-fresh-start>

# KEVION LYMON

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**Dad's Back! Academy Helps Formerly Incarcerated Fathers Returning to Society**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yO9rQanUC0>

**Dad's Back Academy helps formerly incarcerated become reacclimated into family life**

<https://lastandardnewspaper.com/index.php/news/1002-dad-s-back-academy-helps-formerly-incarcerated-become-reacclimated-into-family-life.html>

I was born in 1991 and my dad left in 1996. You don't really know what's happening. Your life is just occurring. Even going to prison, what I did was out of my routine. I shot at somebody. Gang related attempted murder. Nobody got injured at my crime. The gun jammed. They gave me 19 years. I did 11.

I found out I had cancer at the same time. Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma. In my elbow. I was at my low. I was like, "This is not me". What do I do to get out of this situation? I started reading. I started feeding myself. I started reading, 'Nation of Islam' and I became real, real pro-black at the time. And that's what gave me the self-confidence in myself that I didn't have. I started getting into spirituality. It took me six years from when I realized I shouldn't be here. This is not living.

I'm not used to feminine responses at all. She [his daughter] has attitude with me and all. She teaches me a lot. My Momma was rough. All that happened to me and she was rough. I didn't grow up with a Momma that hugged me. I didn't hear frequent, 'I love you's'. My Momma was raised with four boys and one girl. She'd say "You messin' up in school? I don't like you cause you're messin' up."

What situations might trigger anger for someone newly released, and why might those reactions be heightened after incarceration?

**Goal Setting Activity:** Identify three achievable goals for someone in their first month after release.

I believe in God. I gotta believe in who ever made this happen like this, I gotta believe in it like that. I look at [my life] like it gotta be God. I mean, I've always been a nerd. I'm into art. I read poetry. I know who Basquiat is. Especially when it comes to my own people, I'm into the culture. I gotta teach her [points to his daughter sitting on his lap], so she doesn't have lack of confidence, and go out there and be something that she's not. I believe in, 'as a man thinketh, so he is'. It's hard to grasp it, but that's what I believe.

Biggest challenge when I got out? Everybody's expectations. To some of these people [family members], I was a constant in their life. I was gone for ten years. My values and my morals aren't the same as ten years ago. So if I don't respond the same way... now you get those conflicts. They expect me to respond similarly as to when I was 18. And I say, 'Is there something wrong with me'?

I live by axiom now. Stuff like 'Dad's Back [program]' gives the way that I live ammunition. Cause it's knowledge. And the way that I live is simple. I'm living the simple life. Teach my baby 1,2,3. Then we can go to 4,5,6. Let's do this in steps. No rush. I rushed.



Back in the 60s, I had only one parent that was raising me and my sister because my mother and father couldn't be together because of the racial thing. My dad was Puerto Rican and my mom was Puerto Rican and Irish, so she looked like a white woman and he looked like a black man.

I started transitioning back in '76 or '77. It was accepted back then in the gang. Because of my lifestyle, most of my family cast me aside.

I was laying in my bed and the officer says, Jolina, they want you for parole, and I said, What? They gave us a call and said you gotta go up right now. So the officer came and took me over there and they said you're going home Saturday. I said what? I expected to stay for seven more years. They said, your gun and your gang enhancements have all been taken away. You haven't gotten into trouble over the last seven years, he said, and we're getting ready to release you because you fit all the criteria.

My councillor came in the door. He says, you can't go. He says you have to have a psych evaluation. I said, no way! So my whole heart sank into my stomach. So I say, when is this supposed to happen? You're gonna have your psych evaluation on Monday and if you pass everything you're supposed to go home on Tuesday or Wednesday. So, a few more days, that's OK, because I really wasn't supposed to be out for another seven years. That's how I was looking at it. When I went back to my cell, I felt that everyone was looking at me different. Once I told them, it was

like wildfire. They wished me well. They did a prison spread for me. They were so happy for me.

When I first came home on the freeway, and we were going to the halfway house where they were taking me to, I was so amazed. Like, this is downtown now? All these different high-rise buildings, I was like, wow! Then I see people in downtown LA walking their dogs on the sidewalk. No way! This used to be Skid Row down here. I was really shocked.

This is my third transitioning home, because at first I thought I was going to do it my way. I was too overwhelmed. They made me a house manager over 24 people and it did a lot to me. And I went and got a beer. And the owner smelled it on me and she said you gotta leave. I had no place to live and I was in a park and I got stabbed and beat up... so they took me to the hospital and my case manager came and got me out of the hospital and put me inside of a boys house. Wrong place. Thanks to Michelle at Mass Liberation, she came and rescued me. As soon as I got there, they introduced me to so many different programs. I even went to tattoo removal already. It hurts. But it's worth being hurt.

I want to do better for myself. I'm an older person and I want to give back to the community the best I can. Me personally, I want to be like an activist for the girls coming out of prison. I can help them out. If I could just reach one person out'a twenty people, I'm fine with that.

Create a two-column comparison:

- Column A: The internal resources an LGBT lifer might have built (discipline, patience, conflict resolution).
- Column B: External barriers an LGBT lifer will face (employment restrictions, housing, technology gaps).

What might be the most overwhelming changes for someone who hasn't been in society since the 1980s or 1990s?

Write a one-page narrative from the point of view of an elderly LGBT parolee on their first day out, what shocks them, what frightens them, what gives them hope?

More California Prisoners are Requesting Gender-Affirming Health Care

<https://calmatters.org/justice/2023/06/gender-affirming-care-california-prisons/>

Recommendations Regarding LGBT People in California Prisons

<https://transgenderlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/99831645-TLC-Policy-on-LGBT-People-in-Prisons.pdf>

Reflect on how these sets interact.

I went in in 1982. I did a 40-year stretch. I was in there for kidnap, murder, robbery, burglary. They gave me a life sentence just for the kidnapping. What I did was I just took my mate and made him go to the bank so I can withdraw money, and they gave me a robbery for taking him with me, taking the money out of the bank. And they gave me the burglary because I received the money. They gave me the kidnapping 'cause I made him drive me from the house to the bank. From Point A to Point B, it's kidnapping. The murder came in 'cause I had a shoot-out with the officers and I killed their dog. It's a service animal. But it's still a police officer. They give me a full murder for that and every time I went to the board, the police department was there. They stopped me. They put a wall up and said, you're not going nowhere. And if I fought it, I would've lost. They were gonna give me LWOP [life without parole].

# Jolina Olivia Diaz 64



My case consisted of murder/robbery. It was predicated upon either a death penalty case and or taking a deal and accepting life without the possibility of parole.

I was at my job with another individual and we were doing illegal activities on the job. My instincts were impulsive. I'm a first timer. I never had any contact with the law. I just snapped. I lost it and I take full responsibility for that. I'm not in denial. I'm not suppressing that. I realize it was my fault. There's no justification in killing that man. I'm very remorseful. I'm filled with guilt every day of my life now.

I was originally arrested on August 3, 1985. I was incarcerated at the LA County Jail for a period of 40 months. During that time in 1988, I was handcuffed and beat by the LA County Sheriff's deputy. They were kicking me with the foot of their boots. Steel-toed boots. While I lied on the floor. Because I turned around and looked at a CO while I should have been facing the wall. That was his excuse. He said, why are you 'F-ing me?' He came over and kicked my legs apart as far as they can go and I fell on the floor and that's when he started kicking me with his boots in my back. And I'm handcuffed from behind my back. I had not been convicted at that time. [Ever since] I've been confined to a cane, a wheelchair or a walker. I've been barred by the courts, law firms and by the district attorney's office not to litigate this case. To this day I'm still suffering.

In the course of my incarceration, when I was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole, I wondered how I would ever get out of prison. However, I never give up hope. Prayed and confided in God, I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour once again. I no longer straddled the fence. I made a vow to God, if you ever get me up out of here, I will faithfully

serve you. On December 24, 2018, before Governor Brown left office, he commuted my sentence to 33 years to life with the possibility of parole. Which is why I'm now physically free in society.

I was released from prison January 6, 2023. And now I'm outside in society trying to find a place to live and doing the extent of my parole which is three years or less.

Even out here after all those years, I still have aspirations, hopes and dreams. I wish to be with my family, my loved ones who have supported me. All those friends and people who have supported me throughout my incarceration and since I've been outside. I'm humbly grateful to have them in my corner.

My wife at the time, in 1985 when I got arrested, we had a three-year old son. My wife, she died in 1992 at the age of 36. My son was 10 years old when she died. My home town's in Mississippi, so my wife and kid went back to Mississippi,

My son is 41 now and he's in my corner. He got his first diesel truck the other day and he's a family man with a wife and two kids and they can't wait for me to relocate and come back home. They are beautiful. We speak every day.

I never gave up hope that I would ever get out. The problem with me was the anger that I felt for myself for being so impulsive for doing the crime. It just wasn't part of my character. I tried to take care of my family so to speak. Even though I was doing something illegal, I always had a legal job. I just thought I needed more money because I was living, not so much above my means, but I was beginning to regress to a lifestyle I was already accustomed to.

## James Edward Tucker Jr.

### 68

Impact of Disproportionate Incarceration of and Violence Against Black People with Mental Health Conditions In the World's Largest Jail System

[https://static.prisonpolicy.org/scans/dignity\\_and\\_power\\_now/INT\\_CERD\\_NGO\\_USA\\_17740\\_E.pdf](https://static.prisonpolicy.org/scans/dignity_and_power_now/INT_CERD_NGO_USA_17740_E.pdf)

American History, Race and Prison

<https://www.vera.org/reimagining-prison-web-report/american-history-race-and-prison>

Community Reintegration of Aging Offenders: Gaps in Knowledge Report

[https://cnpea.ca/images/tcas\\_aging\\_offenders\\_report\\_-\\_r2fa\\_-\\_digital.pdf](https://cnpea.ca/images/tcas_aging_offenders_report_-_r2fa_-_digital.pdf)

What does "belonging" mean for someone returning from prison, and how is it earned or denied?

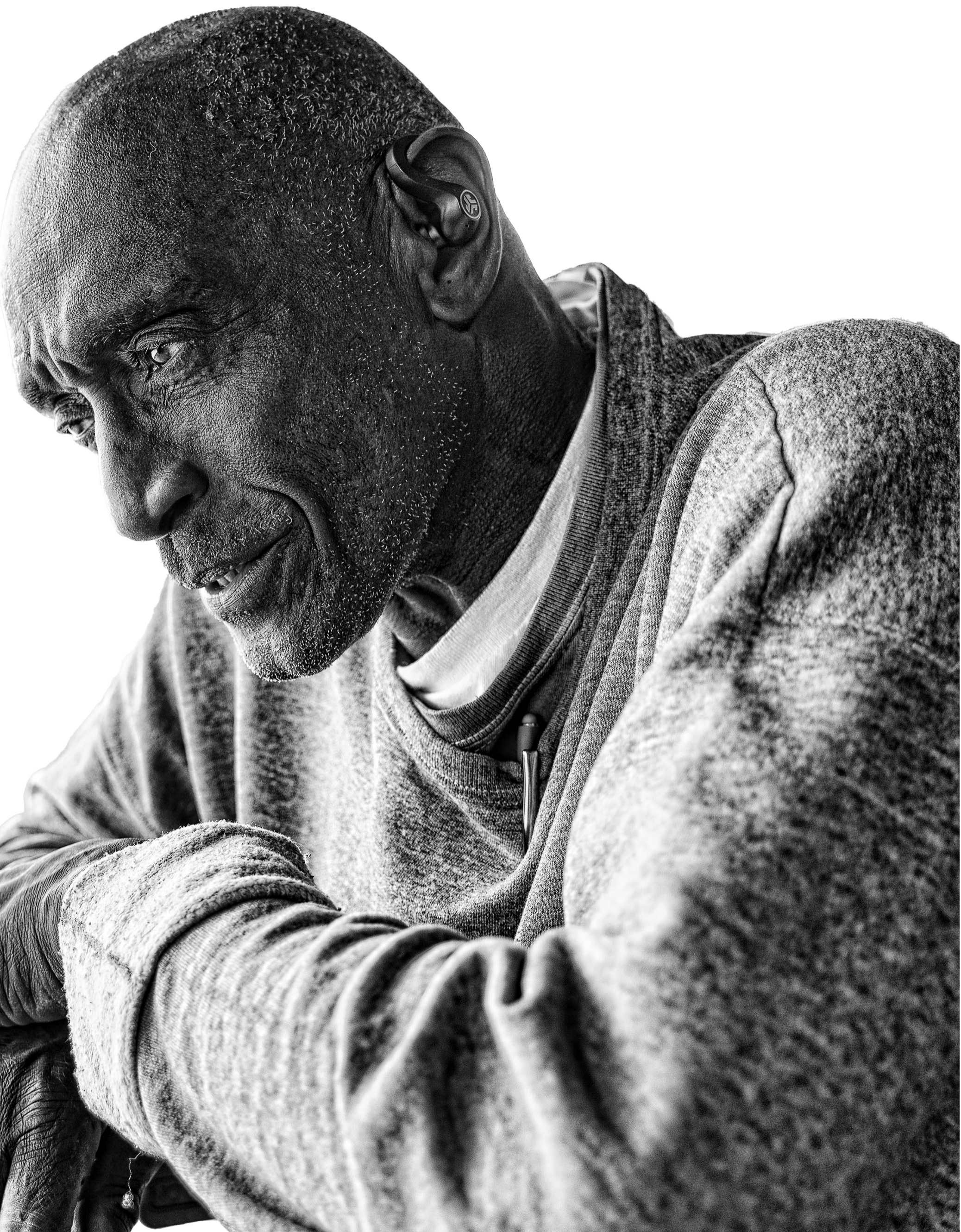
How might someone who has spent 25+ years inside understand "freedom" differently than others?

Why might communities mistrust lifers, and how does that mistrust shape their re-entry obstacles?

How do trauma and resilience coexist in re-entry journeys?

*Even out here after all those years, I still have aspirations, hopes and dreams. I wish to be with my family, my loved ones who have supported me.*





# Melissa Mercado 36

Create a "support web" diagram identifying the people and organizations a returning mother would need in her first 6 months.

What emotional barriers might a returning mother face when trying to reconnect with her children?

What does a healthy first step toward rebuilding trust look like?

How might the child's perspective differ from the mother's?



**The Painful Reality of Being an Incarcerated Mother**

<https://www.aclu.org/news/prisoners-rights/the-painful-reality-of-being-an-incarcerated-mother>

**Children of Incarcerated Parents**

<https://cahealthadvocates.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/11/V7N2.pdf>

**Babies Behind Bars**

<https://www.cwla.org/babies-behind-bars/>



I was in for a gang related murder-retaliation crime. They dropped it down from first degree murder to manslaughter. I was 16 years old. I was already living in the foster system for a lot of years. At seven years old I went in. It was neglect, they said. My dad was a drug addict and an alcoholic and my mom was just turning into an alcoholic at the point that they took us. They said neglect because we didn't have proper shoes or clothes. Because my mom was getting welfare. She was so young. She was just trying to keep the family together. I fear my dad was stealing money to buy drugs. They both passed while I was inside. I gotta admit that it was a very traumatic experience. I didn't feel like I was being saved from these evil parents but that I was being kidnapped by the government. You can imagine what a child must feel when they've been taken from their only home and they don't know that they're not being taken care of well. It was just how their life was. I know now as an adult that it was probably bad but I felt loved, taken care of. So when they came and took us into these strangers' homes, different culture, different language. I didn't speak any Spanish, only English. My family's been here for so many generations, they're pretty much American. Like I said it was culture shock. Pretty hard to communicate. And we kind of rebelled.

I went to the streets. I felt safer. I felt strong. I felt in control. If someone tried to hurt me, I was able to protect myself and I was praised for it. Instead of being reprimanded for it. I was sentenced to 21 years without life. Otherwise I would've gone to trial and lost. At the time that I was arrested I was four months pregnant with my first son. I was 16 years old. I have two sons with my first husband. They're 15 and 17 years old. They're with their father now. Because of incarceration, I lost my marriage.

I met my present husband when I got out. On a blind date. And I didn't expect it. I was 33. When he found out I was incarcerated, he told me at first, he didn't believe me. Because of the way that I talk. But then I showed him some of the other side and he said it made sense. He said it happened so long ago that it doesn't matter anymore. Everyone grows and changes.

I enjoy being a new mother. I never thought I'd have any other children. I thought I was going to get out when I was 40. I get to raise him like I didn't raise the others. Not that it's a replacement. But I thought I'd never experience that again. And it's something I've mourned in there. I cried, thinking that I'll never have any other children. I'll never know what it's like to raise my children. It's one part of who I am as a woman. I feel grateful and blessed to do that.

I have so many plans. I want to travel. I want to see the world. I want to go to different places. See different things. And I'll take my kids.

What excited me when I got out? It took me the longest time to open the door without asking permission. I thought every door was Locked. It didn't even occur to me. And one day someone said, you know it's open? I felt so stupid. And then I thought to myself, oh my God I can open this door if I want to. I don't have to ask permission. Like, I can go outside. I can do this. I can do that. It was endless.

## Additional Information on Re-Entry

### Menendez Brothers Self-Help Groups in Prison

<https://apnews.com/article/menendez-brothers-murder-erik-lyle-freedom-prison-b1eede9677e78df88f6709703cc8b716>

### San Quentin Gun Violence

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/aug/21/california-san-quentin-gun-violence>

### Knife Skills/ Documentary Film

<https://vimeo.com/227171872>

### A Documentary About Re-entry

<https://www.prisonfellowship.org/2021/06/prison-fellowship-documentary-a-new-day-1/>

### Milwaukee 53206 Documentary

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cqXt3h1FCK>

### Navigating Re-entry

<https://centerforhealthjournalism.org/our-work/reporting/navigating-reentry-two-men-share-their-journeys-after-decades-prison>

### Education is the antidote to recidivism

<https://www.governing.com/workforce/for-ex-prisoners-education-is-the-antidote-to-recidivism>

"I just Want to give back" – The reintegration of people sentenced to

### life without parole

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/06/28/i-just-want-to-give-back/reintegration-of-people-sentenced-to-life-without-parole>

### Redefining Recidivism

<https://dream.org/news-articles/recidivism-reentry-new-approach/>

### Reentry Planning Toolkit

<https://www.rootandrebounds.org/resources/reentry-planning-toolkit/>

### Family social support during incarceration: implications for health upon release

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-025-11274-6>

### Family reunification after fathers are released from prison:

#### Perspectives on children's adjustment

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10424776/>

### Mass Liberation

<https://www.massliberation.net>

### PREP

<https://partnershipforreentryprogram.org>

### The John Howard Society

<https://johnhoward.ca>

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## Class Discussion Questions

For more Class discussion questions, please visit the following QR code.



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**Ron Levine** is a photographer and educator, with over 25 years experience interviewing and creating portraits of inmates that have been exhibited around the world. His work can be seen at [www.prisonersofage.com](http://www.prisonersofage.com) and [www.ronlevinephotography.com](http://www.ronlevinephotography.com)

**Abdullah Ahmed** is a multi-disciplinary artist and graphic designer. You can see more of his work at [www.abdullah-ahmed.ca](http://www.abdullah-ahmed.ca)

For more information about this project, visit [afterlifeproject.net](http://afterlifeproject.net) or contact us at [info@afterlifeproject.net](mailto:info@afterlifeproject.net)

*after/life*

Second Chances Beyond A Life Sentence