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ALAINA COMBS

Louisville, Kentucky

Alaina was caught in the cycle of incarceration but learned how to break that cycle through personal recovery and personal development. Alaina is an advocate for criminal justice reform, speaks regularly with policy makers and works with many organizations to help women reduce their chance of reoffending and becoming productive members of society.

GFSF: Today, we have the opportunity to speak with Alaina Combs from Louisville, Kentucky. How are you doing, Alaina?

Alaina: I am doing well. How are you?

GFSF: Things are great in Pennsylvania, including beautiful weather. How are things in Kentucky?

Alaina: It is gorgeous here now that the rain has subsided, it's absolutely beautiful, and it's pretty hot, so I'm okay with that.

GFSF: Awesome. Go ahead and take a few minutes to share a bit of yourself with our readers if you would, Alaina.

Alaina: All right, my name is Alaina Combs, and I am 38 years old. I was born in Lexington, Kentucky, where I have spent my entire life until 2013. I was born to a family where alcohol and things like that were pretty much the norm. So my upbringing was a lot different from many of the traditional households that people grew up in.

I was caught up in a lot of drugs that led to a lot of criminal behavior. I got caught up in the cycle of incarceration, with just one messed up thing after another. Each time I kept going back to the same environment. I didn't have a chance to improve or get any different results because I had no resources to help. Then I was sent somewhere where I was actually able to get some help. I have not returned to prison since. I have not had any drugs or alcohol since 2012, so I am happy about that. Being a mother and an employee, I have lived a productive life—things like that make life a completely different ball game when you come out on the other end.

GFSF: How many times were you in prison, and how old were you the first time you were incarcerated? Also, how old were you when you were last released?

Alaina: The first time I went in, I was a few weeks shy of 18 years old. I was a minor at 17 years old. There are a lot of college towns here in Kentucky, and one of those college towns is Richmond, Kentucky. I could go to the bars and clubs there at 18 years old, but I couldn't drink. That was very attractive to me. I was able to get my hand stamped to drink when the police pulled up on us. So, that was the first time I ever was arrested.



I've probably been arrested over 30 times in total. The last time was a felony charge. I've been charged with escape, numerous possession charges, theft charges, things like that. The last time that I went to jail was in June 2012.

GFSF: Many of our readers can certainly relate to your story. Can you pinpoint a specific thing or time that led to your transformation, or was it a gradual process?

Alaina: It was gradual for me. My dad was from eastern Kentucky, and he ran moonshine. Both of my parents were over 40 years old when I was born. My brother and sister were a lot older than I was, so I was kind of like an only child. Because my parents were older, they were not doing many things with me. They were done with that part of their life. So I felt left out and always felt different. So I always felt like I had to be extra to fit in.

I don't know if anybody can relate to that, but I remember being a child, and I wanted all the kids to play with me because my dad wouldn't let me out of the yard. I remember giving the kids popsicles and cookies to play with me. Once all that stuff was gone, everybody would leave. So very early on, I felt that I had to do something extra or give something to people to get their attention. My father died when I was 13, and he literally died on a barstool when he had a massive heart attack. I grew up in the house on the same street as my mother's best friend and was connected to a bar. Alcohol was a major part of my life and was normal to me. Of course, everyone was a UK fan, so every one of those University of Kentucky basketball games was an excuse for me to drink. Alcohol and drugs have always played a huge part in me. Even when I went to jail, I still had this mental obsession because you are caught up in addiction and substance use disorder that takes over everything.

I never really had an aha transformation because even when I went to jail, I was trying to figure out how to get my next drink or drug. For everything that motivated me to break the law, the underlying issue was always drugs and alcohol-related- either directly or indirectly. All roads led to drugs and alcohol, and I never lived in a stable environment. I never really had anybody positive in my life. The first time someone overdosed and passed away, I was about 13 years old, which was just the norm for me. I didn't know anything different. Living a life of crime was very normal. Addiction is a pretty tough nut to crack for a lot of people. In other words, many people don't figure it out.

GFSF: How did you figure it out? What program or process helped you kick a life of drug and alcohol addiction to live a much better quality of life with a loving family, healthy relationships, etc.?

Alaina: I went to jail one time and remembered laying there, and my stomach started hurting bad. I laid in the cell all night and was in a lot of pain. Finally, a guard came in and made them take me to the hospital, where I had to have my gallbladder removed. I was lying there shackled in a hospital bed with a green jumpsuit on and a guard posted with me at all times. I remember the humiliation. They would make me walk shackled to the shower.

I was eventually released, and exactly a year later, I had access to substances inside the jails and institutions, especially the county jail. I still wasn't clean and sober inside the jail to even have a moment of clarity because my mind was still crowded with the substances. I was incarcerated and under the influence when one of my prison mates came up to me and said, you are yellow. You can't look at yourself very well at the mirrors in prison. The nurse drew blood, and my levels were very high.

They took me to the University of Kentucky Hospital. A doctor said I had something wrong with my liver because I abused drugs and alcohol and would probably die of liver disease. Then, with no compassion, they sent me back to jail. I remember being in that jail's medical unit, and it was awful.



That was the only unit inside the institution where they mixed men and women. You only got out an hour a day. I was in pain, and when my skin was touched, it looked like a highlighter or a marker was taken to it.

It was bad. I remember lying there crying and thinking, I will die here. This is what my life has amounted to. I am going to die inside this jail. Finally, I fell on the floor, and they sent me back to the University of Kentucky Hospital. I was lying there and with a guard beside me. It was a guy I went to high school with; it was chaotic. It was a hospital attached to a school, so students were coming in and out, and all of a sudden, everything got very quiet.

This lady walked in, and I still feel like she was some guardian angel or something to this day. She just walked in, and everything got very quiet. She sat on the end of my bed and asked me if I had any family. I said, yeah, I have a sister and a brother, and I live here in Lexington. She asked how often I call them and to let them know they need to come up here. The guard sitting beside me said, "You know, that would be a security breach; we cannot let her family know that she's here because she's an inmate."

That woman just looked at him and said, "You know, she's probably not going to make it through the night, so I highly suggest you have her family come up here." So here I am, faced with this moment where due to my substance abuse and the destructive cycle I was deeply caught in, I was reduced to this completely yellow person in a green jumpsuit shackled to a hospital bed, and they refused to let my family visit me.

GFSF: Very traumatic.

Alaina: Yes. It's just something I'll never forget. I'll never forget the way that I felt at that moment. I'll never forget what I looked like at that moment. I'll never forget any of that. It was very powerful. You would think it would be powerful enough to wake me up, but substance abuse can be even more powerful than that. They eventually let my family come and see me. I remember my sister walked in and looked at me and just lost it because she figured that that would be the last time she would see me. How heartbreaking to see her baby sister in this hospital bed in this jumpsuit, and they tell her that I am probably not going to make it.

They tell her that she can only stay a few minutes then must leave, and if something happens, they will be notified. I felt like my actions did this to my family, terrifying. I just lay there, and finally, they came in with the news that I contracted Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C. Weeks before being picked up by the police, which was my final time ever being arrested. I was with a guy and let him give me all his stuff because he would probably get a lot of time in prison. I remember taking his syringes and putting them in my pants' waistband. I got stuck with his syringes, which I attribute the Hepatitis to.

I did it to myself, another self-imposed crisis. I laid in the hospital for about seven days when they finally tried this medicine out. They said they didn't know if it would work because my organs were shutting down, but they were going to try. I did get better and was sent back to the institution. I would love to tell you that was my Aha moment of clarity, and that was when I decided to do things differently, but that is not what happened.

What happened was I went back into the institution and continued to find ways to get and use substances. Finally, the commander of the jail came to me and said, "I learned that you're getting substances brought in here. I can't prove it, and I can't catch you, so I'm having you transferred". So I got kicked out of jail! They didn't want me in that institution anymore. So I am very innovative, driven, and able to get things done but wasn't ever going towards anything good or productive.



That was the last time that I ever used substances. It was on November 1, 2012. I remember the morning of November 5; they transported me to a tiny county jail where I didn't know anybody, and I stayed in a very small room.

They had a work camp, and most of the girls would get out to pick up trash or something similar during the day. I couldn't do that because I had an escape charge for leaving a work camp assignment in the past. So I stayed in that very small room for about six or seven months and started working towards getting my GED. It was then that I began to get clarity on my life. If I go back home, I tell myself I don't have a shot of getting straightened out. I didn't know what I needed to do or where I needed to go, but I knew that I didn't have a chance if I went back to the same environment.

I didn't have anywhere to go to or anyone to turn to. I burned all my bridges, but I knew that if I went back, I would get caught back in the same cycle. It's the same; it's the same culture, the same town, the same friends, and where there's no other choice but to go back down that same road again. I just knew that I could not go back to doing the same thing that I had previously done. So I wrote my judge and asked if there was any way that I could please get some help.

I continued working on my GED because I didn't have anything else to do. One day, I took my GED test, and as I was walking out of the GED testing room, one of the guards told me I was being released and would be going to the Healing Place in Louisville, Kentucky. I remember thinking, thank God, and I knew at that moment that I finally had a chance. I didn't know what would come out of it, but I knew that I had a shot and hope. It was the first time I ever had hope for a different life.

I had experienced hope before, hoping that the drug dealer would answer his phone, but I had never had hope of being normal in the sense that anybody knows what normal is. So I just knew that was the first time I had ever had hope, that maybe I could learn what was wrong with me and why I kept living the addicted life.

My sister came and was just so happy to see me and be alive. They took me to the Healing Place. I walked in the door and was in tears. I was so emotional. I was crying because I knew at that moment that my life was never going to be the same again. I didn't know if it was going to be better or worse, but I knew it would never be the same. There was no looking back from that point. I knew that whatever they were going to tell me to do there, I was going to do it.

I walked in, and all these people were smiling and laughing. There were about 250 women there. I went into detox because whether or not you are detoxing off drugs or alcohol; they still put you in there for a day or two just to adjust to the environment. I started to meet women and just learn different things. I learned about Alcoholics Anonymous. It was a recovery boot camp for nine months while on parole, and we could only go out on the weekends. You had to earn being able to go out in the evenings. I figured out my underlying causes and conditions and that the problem starts and ends with me. It wasn't blaming my parents, where I grew up, or staff; it was that there was something wrong with me. I had to feel that hurt, and I went through that program on February 13, 2013, and completed the program around September. They allowed me to stay as an assistant staff and I was paid a stipend. It's very interesting- one person reaching back and helping another. So, I got to help run the program once I'd completed it.

GFSF: What a great story! So tell us a little more about what has happened since then. Are you now an employee at The Healing House?



Alaina: Yes. You cannot get off parole when you owe restitution until you pay it, which is crazy. I am fighting right now to combat that here in the state of Kentucky. Meanwhile, I became a waitress, had a baby, and immediately had another baby. My two daughters are a year and five days apart.

Interestingly, when I got pregnant with my daughter, I thought, 'oh my God, I have Hepatitis, and am I going to pass this on to my baby'? I went to the doctor, and he told me that I didn't have Hepatitis and that my body cleared it on its own. I realized that it could have only been God; no human power could have done that. I remember arguing with the hepatologist asking if he was sure. He said, "Honey, you don't have Hepatitis. You don't have to worry about your baby." As time went on and there were all these God moments throughout my life- a power greater than me was paving the way. Doors were being opened for me, and I paid off the restitution. One day, one of my peer mentors from when I was in the Healing House program reached out to me and said I would have a job there whenever I was ready.

So, I went back to work there in detox. I created a reentry program for women. We had about 30 women getting out of prison about six months early on mandatory release. They would get out and didn't have anywhere to go. So, I created a program to help them get IDs, social security cards, mental health medications, primary care physicians, and things like that. I ran that program for about a year and a half until we stopped housing women and only had recovery beds.

I then got a promotion and was asked to do phase two when people completed the program. I helped them re-enter society, and I got heavily involved with criminal justice. We formed Smart Justice Advocates and things like that because helping people re-enter from being in a recovery center for a year is like helping people re-enter from prison because they have been institutionalized. Half of our population came straight from prison and were paroled to the Healing Place, which they had to complete before going home on parole. We had a contract with the Department of Corrections in Kentucky to help people with underlying substance abuse issues, which is a common reason people commit crimes. They were in phase two for a couple of years. From there, I helped women transition back to all different locations in Kentucky. This past October, I was asked to be the women's program director. I went from client to director in less than five years.

GFSF: What a great story, Alaina! Tell us more about your advocacy work with criminal justice reform.

Alaina: Sure. Amanda is a mentor friend of mine whom I just had lunch with today, and she was the Women's Program Director before me. She and I work closely together, and we have a group called the Smart Justice Advocate. We do a lot of advocacy work at the state capitol and throughout the criminal justice system. We fight for a seat at the table, and many people make decisions that have affected folks like myself and people reading this.

We are all impacted by the criminal justice system, and many things are not great. I would like to see change in our local community and across the country. Recently, there was a two-day weekend training being offered. I was thinking I was not going because I wouldn't spend my whole weekend at a training that I'm not getting paid for. That was my attitude, but I showed up anyway, and I just want to emphasize the part that I "showed up." That's so important because our minds will tell us many reasons why we shouldn't show up at a particular event or gathering, but when you don't show up, you're not going to receive the opportunity of potential growth.

So, I showed up to this training called Emerging Leaders training here in Louisville, Kentucky, and it turned out that it was amazing. That weekend, I was accepted into a yearlong training cohort with JustLeadershipUSA. This program invests in people who are advancing the cause of criminal justice reform.



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GFSF: When did your yearlong class start?

Alaina: I started in January (2019), and we all flew to New York, all expenses paid, to meet each other. I didn't know what to expect. We met at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. There was Mayor Anthony Weatherspoon from Magnolia, Mississippi. Kemba Smith from the Kemba Smith Foundation and just an amazing group of people from all over the country are part of our class.

We are all meeting and sharing powerful individual stories, and there was a moment that I broke out into tears and thought, how was I that fortunate to get here? How did I get in this room with these fantastic people? I heard all about the work they were doing and the adversities they have overcome, and it was very powerful. We bonded instantly. Then we went back again in March, and we just went back this month in June. Every time we get together, it's like a family reunion. It gives me the tools and resources I need to be able to fight forward for criminal justice and sentencing reform. So besides my recovery and my kids, JustLeadershipUSA is probably one of the best things that I've ever been a part of.

GFSF: Just to clarify, JustLeadershipUSA is only for those who have been incarcerated at one point in time or do they accept applicants who were never incarcerated before?

Alaina: That was the first year they picked a few people impacted by the criminal justice system that was not formerly incarcerated.

GFSF: Interesting. Glenn E. Martin is the founder of JustLeadershipUSA, and I had the opportunity to speak with him. He, like many, has an incredible and empowering story post-incarceration. Many folks like yourself are tirelessly trying to help nudge our nation's relatively dysfunctional criminal justice system into a more effective restorative justice system. Get Free and Stay Free believes there is more hope than ever towards that place. What are your thoughts? Do you think we are heading in the right direction?

Alaina: When you think about the civil rights movement in the 1960s with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, when people get sick and tired of something, they build momentum around the country. We've had many people who have led the way in this area of criminal justice reform and have laid a strong foundation. We're still setting the foundation, and collectively we are rising up.

Great people like Vivian D. Nixon and Glenn E. Martin have set this foundation and have already been doing this work. Now we have all these people who have been affected, and we're tired of it. So we're mobilizing, and we have created a movement across this country, and we are not backing down. We're slowly but surely making an impact state by state. We have people all over the country that are doing this work. I believe that we are going to change the criminal justice system. The goal of JustLeadershipUSA is to cut the prison population in half by the year 2030, and we also work on the Close Rikers Island campaign.

We have a campaign to close two completely inhumane prisons. Every state is doing legislative work, and we are doing work surrounding the needs of each state. We also have people working on the federal level. So, yes, we are a force right now, and we're getting stronger. We're getting more people, mobilizing more, and we're going to impact this country. We're going to make a difference. Times are changing. The decades of lock 'em up and throw away the key mentality was a good way to get elected for many years, and now all sides of the aisle are getting together to make things better.



Even those not thinking about fixing things on a compassionate human level are looking at the cost of incarcerating somebody versus educating a child through the public school system. There's a stigma in this country that you have all the power if you're one of these old white men. I think that is all changing. If you're the person who believes that everybody should be locked up and never have an opportunity, then you're eventually going to be on that island by yourself.

The end game is to produce healthy, productive, thriving communities. When we can't break the cycle of incarceration, addiction, and trauma associated with incarceration that results in criminal behavior, the cycle goes all the way down to families and the community. It spreads: it has a ripple effect. If we can slow down and, better yet, stop the cycle of incarceration, our communities will get better, and we'll get healthier. We all want to live in a healthy community. It flows over everywhere, so this is an American problem. This is not a poor local community problem. This is America's problem right now, and we all have to come together to do something about it. The Department of Justice says that over 10,000 men and women are released from prisons into communities all across the country every week. Nobody is isolated from it. And yes, things are changing for the better, and there's more hope than ever before.

GFSF: Alaina, this has been a fantastic conversation. I am grateful for your time. Before we end this conversation, could you speak directly to the incarcerated men and women across America and how they might also find their story of hope and transformation?

Alaina: The message is that while you're incarcerated if you have found yourself caught up in the cycle, I would emphasize taking responsibility for part of that and looking for the underlying issues. Be willing to acknowledge the truth about yourself. Then, when it comes time to be released, embrace family support and community resources. If there is a reentry service in your area or someone coming into the institution to try to work with you to get you somewhere different, take them up on that opportunity. A change of environment is vital. Finding the underlying issue and having support are absolute necessities. You don't want to be released from the institution and go back into a negative environment that's going to suck the life out of you, especially if you have a mental health disorder, substance abuse issue, or something like that. You need to get those things taken care of because your chances of re-offending are greater if you do not.

When you get out of the institution, community wrap-around services are necessary, and there is hope. There is a way to break that cycle. There is a way not to do those things anymore. Many of us out here right now can help show you the way. We can show you how to do these things. We love you and are working tirelessly to transform this system, not only for you but for your children and your children's children and everybody else in this country.

Lastly, you have to take care of yourself. Men and women might be very passionate about helping others or pursuing a dream or business, but please make sure you get grounded with yourself first. There is no better time to do that than while you are incarcerated. If you get the mind under control in prison, then you will be much more prepared to succeed when you get out. Thank you for allowing me to share my story.

GFSF: Great, real-world, and practical advice Alaina! Thank you.