



Get Free And Stay Free are stories of hope, information and transformation told only by those who have been in prison and who have become productive and honorable returning citizens. To learn more about us or to share your thoughts please let us know. Contact info is at the top of this page.

All stories are recorded by audio and transcribe into words. All transcripts are available for free at www.GetFreeAndStayFree.com or for your convenience the first **Get Free and Stay Free** edition (paperback book) is available for purchase at www.Amazon.com. This transcript is with our guest Dirk Van Velzen.

DIRK VAN VELZEN

Washington State

GFSF: Hi, Dirk. Thank you for taking the time to speak with Get Free and Stay Free. How are you today?

Dirk: Really well. Thank you for inviting me.

GFSF: Go ahead and start by sharing your story with our readers, many who are in prison.

Dirk: Okay, great. I guess I will start with the short version of a very long story. I was incarcerated in 1999 for a series of commercial burglaries. When I got to prison, I figured 'this sucks, but there is not much I can do about that'. What I did do was decide how I wanted to spend my time. I figured I would get the Pell Grant and go to school. That's when I found out that the Pell Grant was taken away from prisoners in 1994 and there wasn't much I could do about that either. I wrote many letters to churches, charities and local businesses trying to get somebody to sponsor my education. Nobody would. I wrote about 600 letters. The only response I got was from the Mormons telling me they would not fund it because they only fund religious things.

At least they wrote back. It took me about two or three years to get my dad back on team Dirk, because he was not very happy that I went to prison. We did not have the best relationship and when he started paying for my education, I took courses from Penn State. At that time, Penn State had the world campus, which was paper-based distance education. I could do it through the mail with no institutional support other than proctoring. Around 2006, they went to the online model. I had not finished at that point and it took me about 10 years to get my four-year degree. Luckily, they



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opened a couple of classes that had not gone online so I was able to complete them through the mail. I was finally able to get my degree.

I started the Prison Scholar Fund from prison in 2006 while I was incarcerated and taking my courses. I bumped into many people in prison just like myself. They were just as smart, hardworking, and passionate about changing their lives as I was but there were hardly any programs available in the prisons. They did not have a dad with a checkbook who could pay for their courses and that really spoke to me. We raised about \$60,000 writing grants and were able to support about 110 students before I was released in 2015.

Part of that was because as a private prison in Arizona they really did not care what I did. While drugs and contraband flowed into the prison, in my case, grant applications flowed out. I was able to raise quite a bit of money from a loose environment. In 2009, I was transferred back to Washington State where they ran the prison with more control, so I was not able to write grants anymore. They were not supportive of a person running a nonprofit from prison. That is understandable even though I had pure motives and I tried to do it the right way. I do not think they are in the game of trusting people who run businesses from prison.

The one thing that helped keep me out of trouble was there were no DOC polices that said I could not volunteer for a nonprofit. We had a board of directors on the streets and even though I was the Executive Director, technically I was only a volunteer for the organization. Even though I was not getting in trouble with the project, the economy had crashed, and we had trouble fundraising. I was cut off from the education department where they had the computers, so everything was on pause until I was released in 2015.

GFSF: Washington State is where you did your time and you received a paper-based education from Penn State. Is that Penn State University in Pennsylvania or a different Penn State?

Dirk: That is the one. My criminal history was long. I started in Washington State with a bunch of crimes and then fled to California because the police were hot on my trail. I committed crimes in California too. I also had federal gun charges in the mix. When they finally caught me, I began my prison sentence in California, which is where my education started. I did five years in California and was transferred to Washington where I served a 12-year sentence. From there and because of overcrowding they moved me to Arizona. I did about five years in Arizona and they brought me back to Washington. I never really did federal time except for about a year and a



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half in the Federal Detention Center because the federal sentence ran concurrent with the Washington and California sentences.

Yes, you are correct it was Pennsylvania State University. I was trying to find some kind of college program that I could do through the mail that I had heard of before. University of Colorado had a great program, but they did not offer a degree, but I still took a few classes with them. Louisiana State had a program, but they did not offer degrees either. But they had some certificate programs. It was hard to find a place that actually had paper-based courses with a degree. There were a few non-accredited programs that were not terrible but you just cannot take those credits and transfer them anywhere else. I had a sense of value. I knew I was in prison, but I was still a person and thought I had the ability to reinvent my future. If I needed to do that, I wanted the best program I could find.

GFSF: Your total amount of years incarcerated was about 15?

Dirk: Yes. August 1999 to my rebirth date of May 7, 2015.

GFSF: It is interesting and amazing how far you have gone in your endeavors. Share, if you will, your transformation journey.

Dirk: It took me a couple of years to get my head in the game and I spent a lot of time in the hole during that time. That was because of the nature of my crimes. When they caught me in California, it was for breaking into the sheriff's department armory. I stole their guns, so they were not too happy with me. Even though it was classified as a burglary, the police are not happy when you steal their guns. In the county jail, where I was for about a year and a half, they had me in a very small segregation cell. It was like a door inside of a door with metal walls and two cameras. That was terrible going from freedom to complete segregation. I am sure many people in prison can relate because they have gone through isolation at one time or another. I had a very tough time with that. I think if I had done a little bit of prison time first that it might been an easier transition.

They would not give me books, but they gave me a Bible and you can only read that so many times. A Sergeant took pity on me and let me have books. I found out later that my friends could order me books, and eventually I had stuff to read. My perspective changed and time got a lot easier to serve once my mind was occupied for the better and I adjusted to the reality of it all. As long as I had a book to read, I was doing okay.

After about a year of that, I realized while I was reading westerns and novels I might as well read something and get an education. I did not know



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what opportunities there were but heard that when I got to prison from the county jail, there would be a lot more freedom and movement to get around. I heard you could take college classes there. Of course, I did not know at that point that the Pell Grant was taken away.

I was transferred to prison and unfortunately, I was assigned level four custody, which is almost as high as it gets. Being assigned a high security custody level was a mixed blessing because if I went to my previous custody level, I probably would have been in the gym in one of those triple bunks. There were a thousand people in the level three gym and that is a terrible place to do your time. At least I had my own cell with a cellie. Cell living is better, but I wouldn't call it easy. I'd rather do cell time than live in an over packed gym, which is kind of crazy. I was taking college classes and it would have been hard to study in that kind of chaotic environment. I was always lucky to end up with a decent cellie.

GFSF: So, your transformation story begins with an interest in educating yourself and turns into a passion to help others become educated and who do not have the resources to pay for it. It starts while you were in prison and continues to this day on the streets as your full-time work?

Dirk: Yeah, that's it in a nutshell. Once education got a hold of me, I never looked back. During my first two years of incarceration, I continued to think criminally. I would think... 'They wouldn't have caught me if my co-defendant didn't drop his pager on the job. And... The police caught him, and he turned evidence against me. He became the state's witness and gets 10 months in jail while I get 15 years.

I would think 'if he didn't snitch on me, I probably wouldn't be in prison'. I looked at things through that lens for a while and once I started rethinking things it would be more like... 'What if I didn't do the crime in the first place?' That was a fundamental shift of thinking. When you are uneducated, you're like, 'oh shit, I didn't really know I could think and do better.' I had tried to run businesses before as an entrepreneur, but I didn't know what I was doing. Once you learn more about what you could be doing differently, then you believe you can be doing something better.

From there you can chart a new course in life. That is what inspired me to start the Prison Scholar Fund. Once I got going with education, I was studying a lot in the day room. People would see me studying and would come up to me and want to do the same thing. They would say... I would go to the school too, but the Pell Grant isn't available or that there weren't many programs in prison. They didn't have a dad with a check book like me and that really spoke to me. It really sucked to see so many people



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want to change through education but didn't have that opportunity to do so. That is why I started the Prison Scholar Fund.

GFSF: There is a powerful and convincing YouTube video on the Internet of you participating in a Shark Tank venture capital style competition. What was that about and what role did that play in your program?

Dirk: That happened soon after I got out of prison. I was released in May of 2005 and was on work release by January 2006. From work release, I enrolled at the University of Washington's Non-profit Management Program. I was taking that course to learn how to run my program better. From there I learned about the Fast Pitch. It was a competition where you do a business pitch in front of about a thousand people in a big auditorium. I won that completion. In my closing remarks, I used a quote from one of the men we funded at Pennsylvania's SCI Frackville. The quote was "***The Prison Scholar Fund means I have a future, it means I have options, it means I have a chance; but above all else, it means I have hope. The Prison Scholar Fund believed in me and now I believe in myself***". That's a powerful thing because a lot of people who we fund tell us they are so surprised that somebody that didn't know them, did something nice for them by helping to fund their education.

GFSF: That was a nice boost to your program especially happening so soon after your release.

Dirk: Yes, but even a bigger boost than that was right after that Fast Pitch win. I took the video from the Fast Pitch completion and applied to a social entrepreneur Stanford University program, which was amazing. It's crazy to think that one minute you realize you just spent 15 years in prison and the next minute you find yourself at Stanford University which is kind of a magical place. None of that would have happened if education wasn't opened up to me just because I had a dad that took one more chance on me.

GFSF: Education is one of the bigger pieces of the puzzle that leads to transformation. Other than the education piece, what else would help those incarcerated to transform themselves in the system without depending on the system?

Dirk: What was helpful for me was I tried to stay connected with society. A lot of people were looking forward to work release because they could work on an outside crew picking up garbage on the freeway or something like that. I had no aspirations to do that just because I felt like I knew what was going on in the world. I was paying attention, reading magazines, watching the



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news, and writing many letters. I stayed connected with people. When I was released in Seattle, even though 15 years had gone by, the only thing different was that the traffic was a lot worse and everybody had cell phones. Other than that, society was the same way I remembered it with more development.

I wrote letters to all sorts of people. I remember when I was taking my psychology classes, I read about Phil Zimbardo, the fellow who did the Stanford prison experiment. I wrote him a letter and we became pen pals for a while. I also wrote a letter to Jack Welsh, who actually wrote me back. I wasn't afraid to write a letter to anyone because if they never wrote back that was okay. If they do write back, then you might have somebody interesting to talk to. This cost some stamps and was easy for me to get envelopes. I didn't mind writing letters. It was good practice for writing and you never knew who was going to respond.

In fact, that's how the Prison Scholar Fund started. I was taking psychology classes and the textbook author was David Myers. I wrote him a letter saying, hey, I am in prison and your stuff works! I understand your concepts. He was a pen pal for a number of years, and he was paying attention when I was trying to start my Prison Scholar Fund. I never actually asked him for any money because I didn't want our pen pal relationship to be some kind of hustle. Out of the blue, he sent me \$1,000.00 and said, "this is for your prison fund project, good luck." That was enough money in 2006 to get our legal 501C3 status, award our first scholarship and had some postage money left over for writing grants.

GFSF: Is there a difference between the name of your organization and its website?

Dirk: The name of the organization is Prison Scholar Fund and our website is www.prison scholars.org. The reason why the website is different is that the PrisonScholarFund domain name was not available to purchase when we went live on the Internet. We are also on the major social media platforms.

We are trying to bring in hybrid online programs and we call it hybrid because the prisons cannot be online unless there is some kind of tablet and digital access. We try to adapt these online programs for the offline environment in a way to deliver high-quality education and so a student does not have to invest 10 years of study to get a bachelor's degree the way I did with the paper-based model.



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The goal of course is to have as many educational programs available as possible to give hope to those who desire to receive an education while incarcerated. It is a painful thought to see men and woman do a lengthy sentence with little or no educational opportunities.

The best thing is to think "Hey, I'll use prison like a monastery; I'll spend my time here, buckle down, work hard and come out a better person when I leave."

GFSF: Where is the Pell Grant heading now? I believe in 1994 it disappeared with the 'get tough on crime' legislation that started on the federal level. Are they starting to bring it back into the prisons?

Dirk: Correct. They eliminated the Pell program during the tough on crime days. They figured being tough on criminals is the same thing as being tough on crime. They took away much of the educational programming from prisoners. If they want to be tough on crime, they should increase funding for educational programs because that decreases recidivism. They did the opposite. About 350 college prison programs dropped to single digits. When I rolled around in the early 2000's, nothing was there. President Obama brought back the Second Chance Pell pilot program. Advocates have been trying to bring Pell back so all Americans can have access to education. United States Senator Schatz has introduced legislation to restore educational opportunities for those incarcerated and to improve public safety.

Editor's Note: More information about Pell Grants can be found in Appendix A and B.

GFSF: Not everybody is college material or wants to go to college, which is okay because a lot of attention is beginning to be focused on the need to fill the skilled trades of America. Do you have any thoughts on the vocational side of the educational house?

Dirk: Yes, absolutely. We figured maybe 15 to 20 % of people are probably postsecondary ready or aspire to do college work. Vocational is a huge area for growth and some states have great programs. It comes down to what the states offer. Washington has flagger courses, HVAC, framing, construction and dry wall. They have all sorts of great programs. I believe there are some automotive programs. Many of Washington's programs were discontinued during budget cuts but some of them came back. Every state has different budget allotments and priorities regarding vocational programming. However, you are right: college is not for everybody and it is somewhat abstract. Learning direct vocational skill sets can lead directly to many jobs. Many unions are less concerned about a criminal record and



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care more about can you get to the job site, stay sober and not be afraid to work.

GFSF:

A good work ethic and people skills go a long way.

Dirk:

I agree. You just have to show up and be willing to work. I was at the American Enterprise Institute for Summit a couple of weeks ago and the speaker said work twice as hard as everybody else and be four times as nice. I think it's easy to out-work people, but it's tough to be four times as nice because people do people things. If you work twice as hard as everybody else and be four times as nice, you're going to kick ass.

People skills are a very valuable commodity. When I was in California, I was in a serious prison. I think at that time, they had about 160 prisons and only 5 level 4's. They were the most violent hardcore prisons there are. There were some serious dudes in that yard. To be a first-timer and get dropped in that yard that was a shocker.

My people skills helped me to navigate those days and I think having a good crime helped too because all these hardcore prisoners with their shaved heads and goatees are like, 'what are you doing here?' I would tell them I broke into a police armory and stole their guns. Otherwise, there are many different personalities in prison and a lot of mental health and substance abuse issues. Good people skills are valuable for any aspect in life whether it is finding and keeping a job or just being a decent person. Most lifers I've known have awesome people skills. Even under their circumstances, they are either trying to improve their lives or those of their children and grandchildren, fellow inmates, etc. It all comes down to not being a jerk and trying to meet people where they are.

GFSF:

It is often reported that up to 2/3rd of those released from prison end up back in prison within 3 years. Even if those numbers are true, much negativity seems to be focused on the 2/3rd that returned but why not take a closer look at the 1/3rd who have succeeded by not returning to prison? There is a relatively untapped reservoir of talent and potential inside of jails and prisons throughout the United States. The vast majority of these men and women, in their heart of hearts, do not want to return. Unfortunately, many were raised in a culture that many others cannot comprehend or understand.

The good news is that the way society looks at the formerly incarcerated is getting better. The past several decades of the counterproductive 'get tough on crime and lock 'em up' and 'throw away the key' mentality are being replaced with new ways of thinking. Jeff Abramowitz, whom we



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interviewed recently, says the next five or ten years will present more opportunities than ever because the conversation and the narrative is slowly but surely beginning to change for the better regarding the formerly incarcerated. Would you agree that good things are happening related to criminal justice reform?

Dirk:

Absolutely. I remember when I was in prison in the early 2000's thinking what I wanted to do when I got out and was excited about running the Prison Scholar Fund as a full time occupation because I was like, 'I don't want to take this prison crap any more.' I didn't want it. I just wanted to leave it all behind me and just be somebody brand new. Even though I was passionate about prisoner education, I didn't want to step into a world where I figured everyone hated ex-prisoners. If I run this thing, probably nine out of ten people are going to think I am a still a con. Then in the last 10 years before I got out, the criminal justice reform movement took wave. I came out right in the middle of it and was trying to surf the wave of second chances, criminal justice reform and prisoner education.

When I was released, I was running the Prison Scholar Fund and even though it was tough to do, I got a lot of positive feedback. Maybe five people out of a hundred were negative, but most people really supported what we do. I think as a society we finally realize we over-incarcerated, our sentences are extreme, we have a mass incarceration problem and not all people are terrible. These points were what Professor Phil Zimbardo's Stanford prison study concluded.

GFSF:

It is our hope at Get Free and Stay Free that our readers are inspired to take advantage of any educational opportunity their particular institution may have to offer. Before we end our interview, Dirk, please share any last comments or thoughts.

Dirk:

I think it just comes down to figuring out what interests or excites you. You know that old saying "You'll never work a day in your life if you find a job you love". Try to match your passions with some kind of employable opportunity. Maybe its building houses or becoming a truck driver or welder. Then start to chart your path, working twice as hard as everybody else does and being four times as nice and see what happens. Make best use of your time in there. I almost hate to say this but sometimes I miss my time in prison because I had time to read. I cannot even read a book anymore because I am so busy. Maximize good use of your time in prison while you can.



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You are probably thinking, 'oh my God, this is terrible and boring'. It can actually be a luxury to have time where you can just think about what you want to do in life.

GFSF: Great advice, Dirk. Thank you very much for sharing you experiences and for what you are doing to help incarcerated men and women throughout the United States.

Dirk: Thank you so much for inviting me to share my story. I really appreciate it.