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JEFF ABRAMOWITZ

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Jeff was a trial lawyer in Philadelphia before poor choices in life and his professional career resulted in acceptance of responsibility and a five-year sentence in the federal prison system. Entering the criminal justice system allowed Jeff the opportunity to see the world with a new pair of glasses and find his passion for education and workforce development.

GFSF: Today, I have the opportunity to speak with Jeff Abramowitz from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. How are you doing?

Jeff: I'm great, thank you.

GFSF: Thank you for taking the time to talk today. Go ahead and start with your story, if you will, Jeff.

Jeff: Sure. I grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, born, bred, and graduated from the Philadelphia school system. I then went to Ohio State for undergraduate school and Michigan State for law school. After that, I returned to Philly and followed my passion for becoming a lawyer. I've always wanted to be a lawyer and became a civil trial lawyer in Philly. I practiced there for a little over 20 years and realized that I was making some very bad life choices that led to a federal indictment at the end of my practice.

That federal indictment set a tone for my life going forward. That changed me forever. On March 12, 2012, I stood in front of a packed courtroom with a judge, family, friends, and colleagues. This time it wasn't as a lawyer, though; I stood there as a defendant. I was sentenced to five years in a federal penitentiary and started my journey in FDC, Philadelphia. I went right into the general population and then ended up at USP Canaan, upstate Pennsylvania, and served the rest of my time there.

I came home to Philadelphia and struggled to figure out what my next move was going to be. I'm a very proud man. I didn't want to rely on family or friends, and I needed to figure out this journey for myself. I lived in a halfway house for almost a year with very little money before coming home. I ended up finding a job, teaching GED math, and realized, at that point, what I needed to do next. Again, it had to do with the halfway house experience, which was very challenging for me.

The halfway house situation in Philadelphia was very broken. I had a hard time navigating the system, getting passes to get out, barely getting a good meal to eat, and those kinds of things. Drugs were rampant in the halfway house system, with people overdosing all the time and having very little support. I taught GED math for a bit and quickly became a Director at the Community Learning Center in Philadelphia. I was also the Director of Workforce Development and Student Services. From there, my new career took off. More importantly, I started some programs in Philadelphia that have helped men and women coming home from prison.



I started programs at the CareerLink Suburban Station. It wasn't just a reentry program. It was more like, how do I find that career opportunity? From there, I started an upskilling program, teaching math and reading support and giving that support to people who were trying to get back into careers. After that, I left the Community Learning Center.

In May 2019, I went out on my own and created a workforce development agency and then landed at JEVS Human Services, which is just an incredible agency here in Philadelphia. I was brought on as an Executive Director of Reentry Services. Since then, we've launched Looking Forward Philadelphia. Looking Forward helps men and women navigate through the challenges of reentry.

This includes everything from housing to basic needs, clothing, transportation, and, most importantly, a sustainable career pathway. That program was at Temple University, and we counseled about 25 to 30 men and women a week. They were provided with one-on-one coaching and related guidance. I'm in a position to do good work and have the staff to help me do it and have a voice. I sit on the Pennsylvania Reentry Council, where I chair the Employment Subcommittee.

I also accepted a seat on the Pennsylvania Workforce Development Board overseeing the employment Ad Hoc Committee on that board. Lastly, I sit on the board of directors of COABE, the coalition of basic adult education. Nationally, we have launched the Reentry Education Prison Literacy Commission. This initiative helps educators behind the wall better prepare those who are being released back into society.

For the first time in my life, I have found a passion for helping men and women to succeed upon their release from prison. Anyone who has done time knows that the little things in life become so important. For me, it was underwear that fit, a soft pretzel with mustard, and a good bed and pillow. Those little things gave me the direction and drive to do what I do every day.

GFSF: Excellent stuff, Jeff! Can you share what the Philadelphia Reentry Coalition is?

Jeff: Sure. The Philadelphia Reentry Coalition was started in 2015 and consists of over 100 members. Their members include local, state, and federal government agencies, in addition to community-based service providers. Returning citizens are becoming more involved and, of course, faith-based organizations. Once you become a returning citizen, I would look them up and take advantage of the many resources these organizations have to offer. More organizations like the Philadelphia Reentry Coalition are becoming available whose resources are focused directly on those released from prison.

GFSF: Returning Citizens are becoming more involved than ever with criminal justice reform. Do you see that trend as well?

Jeff: Yes. I believe that if you're not at the table, you're being served as the meal. We have to be at the table when we have these discussions. Often, you have people making decisions and policies, and they're not asking the hard questions. Those questions really can only be driven by people who have lived the experience. Because we've gone through it, we can tell them. Wearing a different set of glasses is what it's all about, and that's why being at the table is so important.

GFSF: Jeff, you have come a long way since your release from federal prison. You are also an influential and effective advocate for returning citizens. Can you tell us more about that?

Jeff: Sure, I am in a situation that I think of as three circles. They are reentry, education, and workforce development. I'm square in the middle of that bullseye where those three meet.

There are a lot of philosophies that have evolved from what I have developed over the last two years. Let me go through some of them. One is, I believe reentry starts the day you go into prison. It would benefit anyone who has their priorities set right to begin thinking about their next steps while incarcerated. Consider getting all the education you can while incarcerated. If you don't have a high school diploma, get your GED while you're inside.

Do those things and set yourself up, so you're preparing yourself for when you walk out the door. Have a resume or at least a draft of a resume prepared. Work on making sure that your birth certificate, social security card, and state ID are in place when you go to start looking for a job. Some of those things can happen while you're inside. The same thing with doing research, you should be reading the newspaper while you're away. You should be looking at opportunities and keeping abreast of the new technology and things happening in the world so that when you get out, you're up to date with things. There are a lot of resources in urban areas to help those who get out of prison.

When you get out, go on to the Reentry Coalition websites if you are able. Find those reentry resources around, dive into them, and start asking questions. Ask not only what they can do for you but ask what they have done for others? Some agencies do great work and get a lot of funding yet have little outcomes to show for it. So, ask questions. How many people have you placed in jobs, and how successful are they? How long have they stayed in that job?

I believe that when you come home, you should be transparent. That means you have to acknowledge you've made bad choices in your life, and it is not about the choices you've made in the past, but it has to be "What's my next step" and "What lessons did I learn from those choices"? Take the choices you made, whether they were good, bad, or indifferent, and make them your story. So often, I say to people when I speak to them, they're not going to remember a lot of what I said, but they're going to remember that I was a lawyer that made some bad choices, that I was in prison, came home and became successful. They're going to remember the story. So, think about your story. Think about what makes you unique and the value you bring to the table, and don't say "nothing" because everyone has a story and value. You have to find it. I believe everyone who comes home has an opportunity to have that second bite of the apple and to find that career that's been elusive.

You're given a second bite at the apple. Instead of coming home and saying I'll settle for that entry-level job in a supermarket. Let's say I always wanted to be a welder. I want to get a welding certification. I want to learn how to do that to have a career. When men and women visit me, the biggest challenge is getting them to understand that they can do new and challenging things. You just need to know what you want and have the passion and drive to do it.

Think about what your next step is. I have no problem with somebody working in a supermarket, but at the same time, they should be working on their certification. Maybe it's becoming a chef, learning how to operate a forklift, or driving a truck and getting a CDL. Everything you do when you come home has to have the next step. Otherwise, it doesn't lead anywhere.

The entry-level positions frustrate me when people come home. First, you have parole officers saying you need to get a job. I'm not denying that paying bills is important. You have to eat and feed your family, and those kinds of things. However, the worst thing that can happen is for someone to come home and settle for less and say, "I'm doing this just because I have to do it." Because when that happens, reality sets in. When they get done frying fries at a fast-food restaurant, they cannot pay for the new iPhone, apartment, child support, restitution, and all those other things. Then, to top it off, they are working a job that does not fulfill them.

Instead of settling for less, let's look at it another way. Okay, I'm going to start at this entry-level position and learn everything I can to become a supervisor. Then I can move up in this job, and maybe I'll end up at a different company with better pay.



Always having that next step in mind is what makes people successful, and it helps you learn not only your trade but it enables you to grow from the ground up. So I believe everyone has value, and I think over the next 5 to 10 years, society will be opening its doors wider and wider and wider to returning citizens.

The only way returning citizens will succeed is if they stay up to date with things. They need to get skilled development, training, and education while incarcerated and when they get out. Get that entry-level job, but then go to night school or a certification program on the weekend. Learn about things you could never have imagined, like drones and other cool technologies, or maybe solar panel installation. The opportunities are many.

GFSF: Great stuff, Jeff. To summarize what you just said, I think of it as taking ownership of your life and believing in yourself. A fundamental paradigm shift in how we think makes all the difference. The prison system is filled with many talented people with unlimited potential.

Recently a regional president of Coca-Cola shared that higher-paying entry-level employment awaits those with good math aptitude. With just a high school diploma or at the most an associate degree, those who can think analytically can start at \$45,000.00 to \$50,000.00 per year. Does that sound right to you?

Jeff: Yes, educational support and skill development go hand in hand. If you want a good job, you have to be qualified to do it. I know we have an upskilling program with an academic instructor on staff that all he does is work to get math and reading scores up so that they can qualify to get into the union or different trades. Just remember, it's hard for you to be a carpenter if you don't know fractions, and you can't add and subtract fractions and those kinds of things. So there are some great programs, and college is not always the answer. There are some great alternatives. We have an HVAC program with the Energy Coordinating Agency in Philadelphia that provides OSHA and HVAC certifications.

We've partnered with Johnson Controls and have returning citizens learning the most current technology and systems that Johnson Controls utilize. As a result, our people beat those applying from the industry because Johnson wants their new hires to know the current technology.

There are tremendous opportunities for people who want to work in a designated field, which doesn't mean going to college. Don't get me wrong, I think college has its place, and it's essential, but for some returning citizens, there are basic things you need to get back in your life as a priority. For me, it was as simple as finding comfortable clothing. Also, it was to get re-acclimated so that I could start back into the workforce. Also, very important was rebuilding my relationships with my family. So those are some of the challenges, and a lot of times, having a job and having that money to do it is really important. However, at the same time, they're not mutually exclusive.

If you want a trade, you might want to be thinking, where can I take a night class? Or maybe it's during the weekend that I can sit and take an online computer class. There are many opportunities and easy things that you can do that don't require any money to do it conveniently. Look at The Philadelphia Reentry Coalition and other resources around the country to find employment, education, and support. Those are the things that you need to target.

GFSF: Billionaire Robert Smith gives away a lot of money. In 2019, he donated \$34 million to the historically black men's Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. During their commencement speech, Mr. Smith shared with the students the value of working hard and having the grit to build character and to succeed in life.



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Jeff: Yes, for sure, it is persistence and determination, and knowing you need to keep taking steps forward and not backward. Once you start doing that, you'll see it gets easier because all the work you did in the weeds when you took that entry-level job starts paying off.

GFSF: Speaking about determination and education, can you educate us about what happened to the GED? Didn't something change that made the GED a lot harder to pass?

Jeff: Yes, I'll explain what happened. The GED is just the name of a company like Aramark or Comcast. It's the name of a company that has been licensed and authorized to provide educational support services to give someone a high school equivalency. What happened several years ago, actually when I came home, they changed the test. This came about because the consensus was the test needed to be more aligned for those who would attend college. So they made it much harder to pass. One of the most bizarre things is when I hear a judge or someone mandate that someone gets their GED within a short time. I have sent them a sample GED, so they'll see how truly challenging it is, especially for people who may have never taken that exam before.

There are now alternatives to the GED in many parts of the United States. Unfortunately, the GED does not measure skills that people have. You could have a welder who is amazing with his hands and can do the perfect weld but may not be able to read or write that fast or may not know all the things about math that maybe he should know, but he has a skill.

A company called Penn Foster does online programming for a high school diploma, which is different. The bottom line is that education plays a key role in someone's reintegration. When I came home, I got an iPhone and took selfies for a good three or four weeks before I even realized I had to push the button to turn the camera lens around on the phone. It sounds silly, but the reality is I had never used an iPhone before. I had no idea. I gave a speech not long ago where a person raised his hand, and he said, Mr. A, tell me something...Where's the backpack that you carry with your phone? He had been down so long at Graterford that the last time he had actually seen a phone, it had one of those battery packs attached to it. Talk about challenges coming home; some men haven't seen an ATM. We have juvenile lifers coming home from Phoenix and Graterford that are really challenged because the technology that exists today is so far advanced from when they first stepped into the system. Those are all hurdles that exist, which we have to start acknowledging and then figuring out how we can help people understand them and teach them. Sometimes that is hard.

GFSF: How are things going with the juvenile lifers coming out? I hear many positive things, but I don't want to sugar-coat it either. How are things looking?

Jeff: I do a lot of work with juvenile lifers. People who were released were juvenile lifers and are coming home now are having challenges. Their challenges are different than those that have done shorter times. I recently looked at some statistics on juvenile lifers that have shown recidivism is so small. It's so minuscule in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and that is incredible. They've been down for so long and refuse to let the system beat them. They cherish every step they take of freedom. There's a renewed respect for not only life but also the opportunity that they've been given to come home.

Many of these men and women never thought they would see the light of day. They want to be successful, and they have an incredible work ethic. I am grateful to be working with many of them. I am getting a lot of feedback from them, but I'm also finding out that some real challenges are different. The challenges of integrating back into the community and family are complex when you have been down for so long.

Many of the people they knew, family and friends, have either died or have moved on. So it's starting all over with family, friends, and of course financially.



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GFSF: Many returning citizens' resilient and positive attitude is very encouraging. I recently spoke with a fellow who has been out for about five years after doing 25 years. He is a mechanical kind of guy and had saved about \$700 for Christmas. He put his money into a pocket of his mechanic overalls because he would go to the bank to deposit the money. He didn't realize it wasn't a pocket after all but just a slot to his regular clothing. He explained that as he got to the bank, he realized the money was gone. It was truly inspiring how well he handled the adverse situation and just went on with his life. He summed up the conversation by saying, "His worse days on the street are far better than his best days incarcerated."

Jeff: That's great.

GFSF: Are there any legislative things going on in general regarding criminal justice reform?

Jeff: A bunch of things is happening on the Pennsylvania state level. They're looking again at licensing restrictions across the Commonwealth. One of the most significant barriers to men and women getting jobs is that they're often restricted because they can't get licensing for the different trades. For example, barbers can't get licensing renewals if you have a felony on your record, which is ridiculous.

A lot of licensing requirements are being looked at by the state, and we're hoping that they will be tweaked for the better as we go forward. That's one thing. The second is that there's a big push now to look at probation and parole. I call it the Meek Mill syndrome. That's when people have been out, and they're on probation for so long that it's just setting people up for failure. So that's being looked at again to say, well, maybe we need to do a better job when people come home to shorten their sentences.

Many technical violations exist at the state level, and we have to give men and women a little bit more room to be successful so they can figure out how to navigate their return. That means check-ins 24/7 restrictions on jobs and employment opportunities have to make more sense, and right now they don't. That's why things like what happened to Meek Mill happen because they get people on technical violations where there's no question that they're just being set up for failure.

GFSF: Are there any legislation for lifers you know of on a national and/or Pennsylvania level?

Jeff: Not on a national level because the state-level mostly guides it. I know that Senator Sharif Street had some legislation pending for lifers. It allows them to get their sentence revisited at some point so that life terms can be looked at and say, well, is this an appropriate sentence, and is there a time when that person has served enough time to satisfy their penalty?

I think some restrictions are being looked at legislatively. I often think our legislation is what stops reform from happening. I believe that you eat an elephant one bite at a time and that little victories are the things that change the system to become the norm. So, the more we can chip away at the little victories, the little things that we can win, the better the system will be. It takes time.

GFSF: Exactly. In other words, the mass incarceration scenario that America got itself into took 30, 40, 45 years and didn't happen overnight. Likewise, criminal Justice Reform isn't going to happen overnight. I believe mass incarceration on a national level plateaued in 2008 and slowly declined. Pennsylvania state prison populations are coming down. What are your thoughts on mass incarceration, Jeff?



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Jeff: I think the root of mass incarceration started during the crack-cocaine drug epidemic that struck the United States. We thought we could lock everyone away, which would solve the problem. But unfortunately, with many men and women currently incarcerated, if they had committed their crime today, they probably would not have even seen a day behind the walls. That's because many of those drug offenses have been tailored so that they don't exist anymore, especially in some states where marijuana is legal.

So the idea today is that, yes, we're changing the system and letting more men and women out. I was in Washington a few weeks ago and met with the Assistant Secretary of Education, Scott Stump. We spoke about the concern of not just letting people out of prison as the answer. We have to support them as they come home on their journey. That means giving them skill development and education and giving them a way to support themselves so that they can navigate their return home. If we send people home without doing more, it's not rocket science what will happen. People will find their way back behind bars because they're not going to be able to survive. That's a big failure. So we need to start thinking about how we prepare people behind the walls and as they come home.

GFSF: I agree 100%. Thank you very much, Jeff, for taking the time to talk with **Get Free and Stay Free**, and congratulations on your successful reintegration into society and your new career. It was great talking with you.

Jeff: You got it. It was nice talking to you too.