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## JEFF GRANT

Greenwich, Connecticut

After an addiction to prescription opioids and serving almost fourteen months in a Federal prison for a white-collar crime he committed when he was a lawyer, Jeff started his own reentry – earning a Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York with a focus in Christian Social Ethics. He is Co-Founder of Progressive Prison Ministries, Inc., the world's first ministry serving the white collar justice/economy exiled community

**GFSF:** Good morning, Jeff.

**Jeff:** Good morning, and thanks for allowing me to share my story.

**GFSF:** Thank you as well. To connect with our audience, Jeff, primarily those in prison, would you share who you are?

**Jeff:** Sure. My name is Jeff Grant. I am an ordained minister. Some people call me reverend, some pastor, some not at all, I guess. I am the co-founder of Progressive Prison Ministries, founded in Greenwich, Connecticut, which has been around for about seven years. I was formerly incarcerated in Federal Corrections Institution (FCI) Allenwood in White Deer, Pennsylvania. I served 13 months in prison, then a halfway house, and then home detention. After that, three years of federal probation, all for a white-collar crime I committed when I was a lawyer in 2001.

After serving my time, I came out of prison and decided to apply to seminary because I could no longer be a lawyer, and I wanted to serve. I had found a faith connection in my transformation process while I was in prison. I attended a theological seminary for three years and started working in the inner city in Bridgeport, Connecticut, as an Assistant Pastor and Director of Prison Ministries. After that, my wife Lynn Springer and I founded Progressive Prison Ministries. We are the first ministry in the world created to support individuals, families, and organizations with white-collar and other nonviolent incarceration issues.

**GFSF:** Thank you, Jeff. There are two primary subject matters that many incarcerated men and women face: addiction and mental health issues. Could you speak about those topics as part of your story?

**Jeff:** Absolutely. I was a normal kid, I think. I grew up on Long Island, New York, and, as a kid, would much rather hang out in the parking lot than go to classes. Part of that probably was because I found drinking and drugs at an early age, at about 13, which became a controller of my life. I wouldn't say I was full-scale addicted at that age but enough that I underperformed in school.



I think I was relatively smart, but my grades were not good enough to get me into a college of my choice. However, I did make it to college but didn't stop partying while I was there. However, I did well enough there to go to law school.

While I was in law school, I was having issues focusing and studying. What was happening was that I was self-medicating. What I didn't know at the time was that I had a bad case of bipolar disorder. I would have very 'up' and manic episodes. I had some depression as well, but I was mostly manic, and my drug use was self-medicating. I was calming down my brain.

I started a law firm in Manhattan and then moved it up to Westchester County in New York. In 1992, I had a sports injury. I was playing basketball and ruptured my Achilles tendon. Immediately after that, I needed, and I wanted painkillers at first because I was in pain. Unfortunately, my addiction soon became full-blown, and I had doctor friends who were willing to write me prescriptions as often as two or three times a week. For the next ten years, I was addicted to opiates: first Demoral and then in the last couple of those years, before I hit my bottom in 2002, I was addicted to Oxycontin or pretty much anything I could find.

I had a limitless supply because there were not as many checks and balances on doctors back then. There were certainly many street drugs, but I didn't do any of them while I was a lawyer. I didn't need to. I had the prescriptions, and I was paying a copay. They were cheap, and they were plentiful. However, it screwed me down into the ground to the point where I couldn't show up for work anymore. I was a big fat, sweaty opioid addict mess, and I stopped showing up to work.

The day came when we ran out of cash at the law firm, and it had grown to be a sizable law firm, and I was making a lot of money. We ran out of cash, and I dipped into the client escrow fund. Once I did that, it was like making a deal with the devil, and there was no turning back, and my drug abuse increased. It became clear I was going to lose my law license. In fact, in December 2002, when it became obvious that I was not going to clear an investigation that had started into my law firm's financial affairs, I tried to kill myself. That was the end of my law career and the end of my first life, as I knew it.

**GFSF:**

Many folks struggle with addiction, bipolar, and mental health, and yet they are productive and able to become somehow successful, even to build a law firm like yourself, for example. What percentage of people would you say struggle with mental health problems, depression, addiction, and yet still show up for work every day and have outwardly successful lives until perhaps it all crashes down someday?

I don't have insight into a percentage nationwide, but I can tell you that I work with people in the criminal justice system every day doing inner-city-type crimes. I was the Executive Director of a large criminal justice organization in Connecticut from 2016 to earlier this year. As Executive Director during that time, I worked with 3,000 to 4,000 people or families per year. There were white-collar and nonviolent offenders or people prosecuted for that in our ministry. We've worked with well over 300 folks, and I would say 90% of them had mental health and/or substance abuse issues. That is a considerable number, and there are underlying reasons why people are drawn to crime. Most of those reasons are societal things that were hoisted on people through conditions, not of their choosing.



Some people grow up in difficult neighborhoods and circumstances like poverty, racial injustice, poor education, and inadequate healthcare. There's no question in my mind; that's the primary component of criminal logical factors. Whether or not that leads to mental health or substance abuse issues or somehow it is independent is a separate question, but I think that most people who commit criminal acts have one or more of those issues. That said, looking at people from privileged or affluent neighborhoods, they are suffering from their own brand of mental illness or substance abuse.

In my case, there's an expression I learned about 15 years ago after I first attended Alcoholics Anonymous. That expression is maleducado which is Italian. I love this expression because maleducado translated means poor and uneducated. But what it means in a connotation is "poorly bred," and I was someone who was poorly bred. I was not raised with the kind of character, training, and parental guidance that led me to honor the right things and move away from the wrong things in life. I don't blame my parents. I don't blame anybody. It's not about blame, but it's certainly not something that I want to replicate in my children's or grandchildren's lives. I want to learn from my mistakes. Children need to be taught by their parents, teachers, or whoever else can mentor them to honor the right things in life. The righteous things- good intent, good action, right mind, proper thought, and unfortunately, there's a real shortage in our country, which has led us to many problems.

**GFSF:** Unfortunately, it seems like society is addicted to blaming. I am not minimizing what people go through because humankind goes through a lot of stuff. It is truly inspiring to have people who go through the horrible stuff and rarely complain and come out on the other side transformed and have much joy and contentment. Then, of course, there is the opposite side of that scenario.

Another characteristic learned while working with families of incarcerated individuals is their advice to their loved ones "Just to finish something!" For example, if an incarcerated person is doing time and starts to work on his GED or other class or training, they might best be served to finish that particular race. So often, as kids, we start and quit many things for different reasons. Whereas, if we were raised and not permitted to quit an activity, program, or sport until that session or season was over, it most likely instilled a much stronger character in us.

**Jeff:** I don't think it's inconsistent with being kind, compassionate, empathetic, and empowering, but I believe that people need structure and security. They need a path that honors the right things and lets you know what a good way of life will be. I didn't have that. A lot of people who go to prison didn't have that. I wouldn't want to replicate it. I want to do the best I can to share values that I think God intends us to have and values that work for us as people. It is about society. We should want things to get better, not worse. Especially in a day where so much rampant bad character exists in our country, and people are getting called out on it every day. They are either being called out on it or are getting away with something.

We need to honor basic life strategies such as love, compassion, and caring. For me, it's easier now, of course, because I was brought to my knees. Once that happens, at least once I hit bottom, it was much easier to ask for help. However, before I hit my bottom,



I thought I knew everything. In my mind, I was a master of the universe. I felt that I could do anything and not have to be held accountable to anybody and that I would never pay the price for it. That was absolutely delusional.

I know many people in prison are going through some form of transformation. But, unfortunately, as a society, we barely give people the resources they need to take advantage of the transformation they're going through. We don't have to get into a conversation about what that says about us as a society, but certainly what people in prison can learn, at least from my experience, is that if the resources and rehabilitation aren't available, then make your own. Do what you must do to work together with other inmates. Drive whatever must be driven so that you can have the life you want to have, and that's what happened with me.

**GFSF:** Perfect timing to ask you, Jeff, to speak about your transformation during your time of incarceration.

**Jeff:** Thank you for the opportunity to talk about that. Even before I went to prison, I had gotten sober almost four years before going to prison. I had started on the path of rehabilitation and recovery long before I went to prison. By the time I went to prison, I had already attended over 3000 AA meetings. I was already within a habit of making prison part of my recovery, and I did not view it as a punishment. I chose to see my incarceration as part of my recovery and rehabilitation. I read a lot before I went into prison. I read about the nature of captivity, and I looked at people who I respected who had gone to jail for one thing or another, and that included Nelson Mandela and Victor Frankl. The point is to make the time in prison rehabilitative.

If the resources are not there, as in my case, I made them myself. There were two things that I had learned by studying those who were in prison. The first thing is you can control your attitude, and the second thing is that you can control your willingness and ability to help others. So I walked into prison with that in mind, having read about it from people I respected, and I would form my own rehabilitation. That meant that once I got inside, I was going to have some overarching goals for mind, body, and spirit. One each for the mind, for the body, and the spirit.

I had an overarching goal to accomplish something in 13 or 14 months, which is how long I knew I would be in prison. So every day, I did something that moved toward my goals, each of mind, body, and spirit, so that the little sections of each day would add up to something at the end of the year.

For my body, I took a job out in recreation. My job was cleaning out trashcans or something analogous to that. What that gave me was a lot of time out at rec. I decided that I would walk the distance from New York to Los Angeles, California, which was 3,500 miles. I had to walk 10 miles a day to achieve this goal. It was a quarter-mile track, so I had to do it 40 times around the track. That took me about three to four hours a day, and I walked in 10-mile segments per day. Every day I walked that track, I chose to walk and not run because I did not want to get hurt in prison. I had plenty of time. I listened to whatever was available. NPR, National Public Radio, came out of the local college somewhere in the area, and I had my headphones on.



Ultimately, I got to talk to other inmates and got to know them while I was walking the track every day. That was for my body.

For my mind, I had been playing guitar since I was a young boy, but never very well. When I got to rec, I saw a music department, which was operated by inmates who were professional musicians. In prison, as anyone knows, there are all kinds of people. Three professional musicians were running the music department. I walked in and said I would like to know how to play the guitar well. Even though I had been playing since I was a kid, I was still just a three-chord player. They loved that I was interested because they wanted people to teach. While in prison, I took 200 guitar lessons, and now I can riff. I played guitar with the church band; I played every chance I could. As my mastery of guitar increased, so did my joy. I learned about music theory and all kinds of things that I only suspected were out there. Before this opportunity presented itself, I never honored myself and my desire to play the guitar well. While I had the time in prison, I could do it.

Here's what people don't understand about being in prison or are enlightened about being in prison. Prison is like a family. It's a community in there, and everybody has a role somewhere within the community. People are cleaning, reading books, and having bodegas under their bunks. There are all kinds of things going on, and some of it is a hustle, but also, it is a complex network of people relying upon each other because we had to. We had no choice.

I heard a story about someone who went to prison in Pennsylvania. When they got there, it just so happened that a two or three-star Michelin chef who had gone to jail for tax evasion was in that prison. So, of course, when this world-famous chef did his intake, they knew who he was. He was a famous chef, and of course, he worked in the kitchen. For the year and a half or so that this person was in that prison, not only was the food excellent, but everybody ate like a king. It was not prison food anymore; it was food that a chef of his caliber was turning out. A two or three-star Michelin Chef trained anybody who worked in that kitchen during that time.

So that's what happened to me because real touring, professional musicians trained me. That is something you can keep your eye on when you are in prison. Not only is every prison different, but the resources available in each prison are highly dependent upon who's in that particular prison, which changes all the time. The goal would be to get something out of the prison system that works best for you. What you want to do is focus on who's in there with you. You can learn and grow from almost anyone and ultimately impart that information or wisdom to other people. That's something that anybody can do in prison. I was very fortunate. It was something as evident as music because it's something I loved and was there for me. However, I think those opportunities are available there every day.

I turned to faith and God in ways I never had before for spirit. That translated to me eventually going to seminary and becoming a reverend and ordained, but I didn't know that while in prison. All I knew was that it made me feel better. So I was dedicated to some form of transformation to be different at the end of my bid than at the beginning, which worked out too.



**GFSF:** That is excellent advice. You have given us a good overview of how you made it through your incarceration by focusing on your body, mind, and spirit. Now you're getting ready to come out of prison. What kind of challenges did you face when you were released? Can you share that experience with us?

**Jeff:** I can't stress enough that the most significant accomplishment and gift I've ever been given in my life is that of sobriety. I stayed sober in prison with 1500 men. Of those 1500 men on the compound, I would say most of them had substance abuse related to their crime, or at least on their jacket. When I got to prison, I went to AA meetings right away. About 30 men were attending at the time. We went around the room that was in a circle in the chapel. Everyone gave his name and day count. It became clear that people had been in prison longer than their sobriety, so they were getting high or drinking in prison.

When I first got there, I knew nothing about that. When I raised my hand and said I had almost four years of sobriety and had been to 3000 meetings on the street, not one person in that room other than me had one day clean on the street. The barter we made in that room would teach me how to stay clean in prison. I, in turn, would give them my experience, strength, and hope about how to keep clean in the street. The topic of sobriety was a source of high anxiety for everybody. It's kind of easier in a controlled environment, but what happens when the environment is not controlled?

That's what happened to me. I was released, and I went directly to an AA meeting on the streets. I was in a halfway house and then home confinement. I had to work it out so that I went to at least one meeting every single day, and slowly things came back into my life by staying sober. Love came into my life, career came into my life, and my children came back. So if there is one thing I could highly recommend to anyone in prison who is short, see that you do not give up your sobriety.

There are a lot of temptations on the outside. Those temptations could be women; it could be trying to take shortcuts, trying to make a quick buck, and all kinds of stuff out there. If you're sober, you got a chance. For me, I stayed sober, and this summer, I'll be celebrating 17 years of continuous sobriety. It's one day at a time. We're taping this conversation at 10 a.m., and I've already been to my morning AA meeting from 7:30 to 8:30. I then came back to my office to speak to you. I get up early in the morning and go through my regimen of meditation and prayer. I then read my emails and have started my day off in a spiritually correct manner

I've already received the message. I didn't wait the entire day to have my head spinning out of control and thinking all kinds of alcoholic and drug addict kinds of thoughts. I get the message early, and it gives me a way of setting my day. Life presents a lot of good and a lot of bad. I've pretty much given up on judging whether a day is good or bad because I don't know what's best for me anyway.



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The things I thought were best for me turned out to be the worst, and the things that I thought were bad for me were the best. So, I don't know, but I can tell you that if I remain sober, I've got a fighting chance of my life being a good one. God's great, and on August 10th, 2019, it'll be 17 years.

**GFSF:** This has been a great conversation, Jeff, and thank you for taking the time to share your story.

**Jeff:** I am grateful to have done so. If anyone wants to learn more about what we do in our ministry and has access to the Internet, please visit [www.prisonist.org](http://www.prisonist.org). Thank you and blessings to you and to all who are reading this. I'll be praying for us all.

**GFSF:** Thank you, Jeff.