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MARCUS BULLOCK

Washington, DC

When Marcus was 15 years old, he was arrested and sentenced to spend 8 years in adult maximum-security prisons for carjacking a man in a shopping mall parking lot. By the time he served the first 2 years, he became very dark and depressed, so his mom made a promise to him in a prison visiting room.

"Marcus, I'm going to write you a letter or send you a picture every day for the remaining 6 years of your sentence."

"Those letters saved my life!", claims Marcus. "I was able to see the world through my mother's lens and gave me a clear vision to what my life would look like after prison." Today, Flikshop works hard to keep every person in every cell connected to their family members and other community resources prior to their release...just like Marcus' mom did while he was in prison.

Flikshop's award-winning program has won the 2015 Innovator of the Year recognition as well as the 2016 Aspen Ideas Festival Award (Booz Allen Hamilton). Among other civic duties, Marcus sits on the board of directors of the Justice Policy Institute and the advisory board for the Aspen Institutes Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund.

GFSF: Today, I have the opportunity to speak with Marcus Bullock from Washington, DC. How are you today, Marcus?

Marcus: I'm good. Thank you for having me.

GFSF: Thank you. Marcus, would you take a few minutes to share what's going on in your life nowadays? And after that, we'll backtrack, and we'll see how your early years looked as well as other things that folks would love to hear.

Marcus: Yeah. Thank you for allowing me to be able to talk about the journey. It's been an exciting one, and it's landed me here today, where I feel like I'm living on a cloud. It's been incredible. I am the CEO and founder of a software company. We build affordable technology that helps keep families connected to people in prison cells. We're excited about being able to lead the conversation around technology and how we can reshape lives after prison. I, for one, am like one of the poster children for that. We believe there are many more that are coming behind me. We're excited to allow our technology to be one of the bridges to make that happen.

GFSF: A lot of folks may not know who you are, but you've been to the White House to help guide the conversation on criminal justice reform. You have an incredible story, and I'm excited for you to share it. So let's go ahead and start at the beginning and maybe speak about your journey from the early years, right up until you got out of incarceration.

Marcus: It's always interesting to hear someone else talk about the accolades or the success stories that my mom is proud to brag about. It's also interesting reading about myself in some of these major publications circulating the globe.

This has not always been my story. I remember vividly when I first went to prison as a 15-year-old kid, along with a friend of mine. He and I decided to walk up to someone and demand the key to his car at gunpoint in a shopping mall.



The man got out, and we jumped into the car and sped off into the night. This landed my friend and I, as 15 and 16-year-old kids, standing in front of a judge, hearing him sentence me to eight years in an adult maximum-security prison. My mom and sister were standing just a few feet behind me, and we all almost collapsed as we added up these numbers and thought about what this time was going to do to our family; how it would tear us apart. It was one of the most tragic things that had happened in our lives.

GFSF: I had the opportunity to listen to your TEDx presentation, and that happened in 1996?

Marcus: It happened in 1996. We got sentenced in March of 1997, and I got sentenced to eight years. Most of my teenage years, those early twenties, were all spent inside of cells that I shared with people like my 22-year-old best friend, who served life plus 43 years in prison. At that time, I thought that my life was over. Things were looking very bleak. I was a 16 or 17-year-old kid watching people get wheeled down the walkway in prison body bags. I watched riots between some of the areas, knowing that the people involved have 70, 80 years. They didn't care about the violence and running, or additional time they had to serve.

This was the place where I had to grow up, a place with slamming steel doors, so I had to grow up fast. And so, through that maturation process, I became angry. Then that anger turned into the desire to distance me from my family. I remember telling my mom, "Don't come and visit me anymore. I'm not going to call you any longer, and don't keep writing me these letters." Finally, my mom did something interesting. Two years into my sentence, in the prison visiting room, she made a promise to me that there was life after prison. She sent me a letter and a photo every day. She wanted to ensure that I saw things like cheeseburgers or mattresses. She attached a quick note that promised that I would enjoy a fat, juicy burger or sleep on a comfortable bed one day. She wanted to ensure that I knew that not only was their life after prison but there were people on the other side of that gate that were patiently waiting to wrap their arms around me. I was so grateful for what happened. I lived in an environment where most people just didn't feel that level of care or concern from their loved ones out in the community. Those letters and photos saved my life.

GFSF: You were fortunate to have a strong family situation with your mother. It seems like whatever happened during that journey, you were able to pick yourself up and get your life together in your early twenties. In contrast, unfortunately, a lot of times, the men come back and forth. Let's continue talking about your time in prison and how your transformation to a better life happened. When did things begin to change for you?

Marcus: I wish I could say that it was an easy story; that I said, "Hey, I made a change. I made a decision," and then everything started to look up for me. That there was a big, bright light at the end of the tunnel that I was able to climb towards. That wasn't the story. It was me literally taking every day of my frustration at a time and just praying through them and asking God to simply keep me. What ended up happening was Monday turned into Friday. Then Friday turned into June, and June turned into December, and December turned into a few weeks before I came home. When I finally got released, I knew that my life would be back on track after all that time. I knew I was going to have my life. I was 23 years old. I served eight years. I went in when I was 16. Things would start looking up for me.

But then I realized, just like so many others coming home from prison, that a new battle begins when probation begins. There were many things to navigate: from the need for employment to eating plans to cell phone bills and Metro fare payments, which led to immense frustration. That was tough. It was hard, so I navigated through it just like I did in prison. I put one foot in front of the other. I would begin to go on late-night walks out of my home. It was late-night, being seven or eight o'clock in the evening because, in prison, my life was cut off at 4:00 or 5:00 PM. And then you're locked down inside of your cell for the rest of the night. So, walking outside at seven or eight in the evening was a late-night walk from me. I would walk around my neighborhood, and the zooming cars were driving past me. I felt the pressure of needing to succeed and succeeding further than I probably even dreamt about during those years while I sat in those cells. But, the reality was that I was actually free.

Just knowing that I was actually free, I wasn't standing up for count any longer, and I wasn't compelled to do something because I would receive an institutional infraction, potentially putting my release date back, if I did not do it. So having all of that inside of my mind, when I was going for those walks. It forced me to say, "Marcus, dude... Forget all the other issues that you have, all the other elements. A free day out here is better than any of your days when you were inside. So how are you going to be able to leverage that experience? What did you learn in that experience so that it'll propel you forward?"

It wasn't me starting a tech company that propelled me. It was me applying for many jobs and getting told no at every one of them. 41 out of 42 job applications were rejected. But the 42nd job application wasn't. Forty-two job applications later, someone told me, yes, and it was at a minimum wage job. I would be mixing paint for customers who came in who wanted to paint their kitchen. After a while of me working there, customers would begin asking me, "Marcus, how much does it cost for you to come in and paint my kitchen? Because I don't want to paint anymore." I'm like, "What are you talking about? We don't paint kitchens. We sell you the paint so that you can paint your own kitchen." Then I would also meet the painters that will come into the paint store, and they'd be like, "Marcus, how's business going for you? It's tough on us, I'm going to get laid off from my painting company. The real estate boom is starting to burst, and we're nervous". And I'm like, "What are you talking about? There are tons of Ms. Johnson's that come into the paint store every day, and they're asking for us to paint their kitchens". A light bulb went off, I saw this as an opportunity, and I started a painting business that became the conduit between the Ms. Johnson's of the world and the painters of the world. It allowed me to start a business that shaped the rest of my life.

GFSF: How old were you?

Marcus: Probably like 24, 25. Starting that painting company was incredible for me. It allowed me the opportunity to be able to learn what business was, and it allowed me to be able to experiment and fail. I could fail and do it in a way that was grateful because the reality was ---I'm going to just keep it honest---most people expected me to fail anyway. Most of my friends and family knew that not only was business hard but that I had spent years in prison. So, if this painting company didn't work out for me, that would be okay. People expected me to fail anyway, and it allowed me to have the courage to jump out the window without a parachute and build one on the way down. Thankfully, I was able to capture that parachute. I sailed into what became a construction business that allowed me to hire many other returning citizens, just like me, erasing that barrier that so many of us stood in front of when we had to come home. That was pivotal because I went from being the job applier to the job giver, which was very empowering.

GFSF: So, then you built your own construction company. Why and when did you switch to technology, and what are you doing now?

Marcus: I remembered when my mom sent me those pictures when I was in prison, my friends were calling home. Now that I'm running the construction business, I'm traveling, and my friends would still call home. They're like, "Bro, don't you remember when your mother would send you those pictures, and she would write you those letters? Well, I want to see what the Bahamas look like. I want to see what your new girlfriend, that's now becoming your wife. Dude, you're married. I want pictures of it." I went on vacation; they wanted those pictures. I got married; they wanted those pictures. When I had a new kid, they wanted those pictures.

The reality is this: it's just too hard to write a letter. You have to make a store run, buy a box of envelopes, go to the post office to buy postage, and then try to figure out a way to print a photo from our phones. I knew that I wanted to connect back with my boys, but I couldn't. They are the same guys I grew up with. But I couldn't take the time to write them a letter. I knew I had to solve that problem. So, I came into the office one day, and I asked my friend, "When was the last time you wrote Spider? When was the last time you wrote Andy?" They had the same problem. The friends and families of people in prison surely had the same problem. So, I'm like, "We have got to solve this."



There's a way for me to get my coffee quicker. Surely there must be a way to develop technology that allows me to communicate with my friends in these cells. I would write them more if I could just text them. If I could text them, my life would be so much easier. So, how can we build a technology that allows us to communicate quickly and affordably from our cell phones? So, we set out to figure out how to launch this tech company. I took some of the revenue that we had that we generated out of the construction business. We launched a software platform that is now beginning to change lives all around the country, and I'm super stoked.

GFSF: So, the folks on the outside take a picture of themselves, put a little text in there, hit the button, and bingo, it translates itself into a postcard with the picture, with the text on it, and gets mailed right into the prisons systems, to their loved ones. Is that right?

Marcus: You've got it exactly right. The free mobile app in the Google play stores and the Apple iTunes store allows our youth to do just that. They can share very quick messages, the same way they would share them on Facebook or Instagram. But, instead, they share them via our mobile app. We mail those pictures and those quick messages on real, tangible postcards directly to any person in any cell anywhere in the country.

GFSF: So, these folks would have their loved ones visit iTunes on the Apple Store and download the app. What an incredible journey that you've been on. You did not come from money. You did not come from a privileged background. Your experience is very similar to many people in prisons. If you can do it, then thousands of other men and women can do it too.

With that, Marcus, I know we don't have a lot of time, and hopefully, you'll come back for another edition sometime, but I would like to give you the last few minutes to share your mind, your heart, and anything that you'd like to let folks know as they get out to have a better-quality life.

Marcus: Absolutely. Thank you again for having me on the show. We are very serious about every person in every prison cell, every jail cell, every juvenile detention center room. We want each one of these people behind bars to be able to receive a Flikshop postcard every day; we believe that through this, we're able to keep families connected.

If we can help notify people about re-entry programs that are waiting for them when they come home from prison, if we're able to get a mother reconnected back to her son, or a son reconnected back to his father, or a nephew reconnected back to his uncle, then we're doing something incredible in the world. We want to ensure that every person, each of the 95% of us who will come home from prison one day, has a solid path to success after prison. And the only way that we're going to be able to do that is to build and foster the connections well before they come home; our technology does that.

We also want to say that after you come home, it's going to take a bunch of tenacity. It's going to take a bunch of concentration and hard work. There's going to be a lot of testosterone and estrogen that you have to fight up against day in and day out—trying to figure out how to navigate through all the anguish you're experiencing—trying to figure out how to answer a parole board or do an update sheet or inmate action review committee. All that energy you had to use to learn to navigate through those deals are the tools that will be necessary to keep pushing through when you come home.

The one thing that separated me from everyone I knew that came home from prison, especially when they wanted to start a business, was simply that I just didn't believe in giving up. We just don't give up. It wasn't that we had something more brilliant than others. People have incredible ingenious ideas all the time, but the execution and the actual gumption, the gall, the audacity to go through life every day and never give up on what you're passionate about is what separates me from others. I'm super grateful to share that experience with listeners. But that's the one thing that I always enjoy hammering home; the only thing that separated us from anyone else was that we just didn't give up. I want to inspire all the listeners to work hard and not give up when they leave those cells.



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GFSF: Very well put, Marcus. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with our listeners today, and have a great day.

Marcus: Thank you so much for having me. I'm super excited. I can't wait to get back.

GFSF: Awesome. Take care.