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Stories of hope and transformation told only by those who are or were in prison.

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## Steve Gordon

FORT WORTH, TEXAS

Steve Gordon is a native of Oklahoma City and is the president of the Strategic Reentry Group, the first for profit consulting firm founded by an ex-offender in prisoner reentry solutions. He currently serves as the project manager for the Tarrant County Reentry Coalition in Fort Worth Texas, one of the largest reentry coalitions in the nation. Prior to receiving a felony conviction in 1999, Steve worked 23 years in the computer industry, eventually becoming a national-level consultant specializing in strategic solutions. Since his release in 2002, his passion for “solving reentry” has drove him to work in many capacities, including two years as the state director of the Oklahoma Partnership for Successful Reentry.

Steve is the creator of the Framework for Reentry Reformation and author of *Purposeful Neighboring: Creating Reentry-Ready Communities*. His areas of focus include: reentry success strategies in communities and corrections; collaboration approaches to reducing recidivism; program design for difficult populations; sex offender reentry, post-prison aftercare, and community supervision strategies; automation of the reentry process; and conference planning. Steve is also a federally certified grant writer and authority on fundraising controversial causes.

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**RJ:** Hello everyone. Welcome to this edition of Get Free and Stay Free, where we share stories of hope and transformation told only by those who have been in prison. Please take the time to download the transcripts from our podcast and send them to those currently in prison to empower them to create their own story of hope and transformation. I'm your host, RJ Sterling, and today I have the opportunity to speak with Steve Gordon from Fort Worth, Texas. How are you today, Steve?

**Steve:** I am doing fantastic. I'm excited about being on your show today.

**RJ:** Awesome. Thank you very much. Steve, before we dive into your story of hope and transformation, can you give our audience an idea of how many times you were incarcerated and for how long?

**Steve:** Okay, so I'm 61 now, and I live in Fort Worth, Texas, but I've only lived here for six years. I'm originally from Oklahoma City. I was incarcerated one time in the Oklahoma Department of Corrections where I received a seven-year sentence, which I was able to discharge fully in three and a half years. Back then, this was 20 years ago, we had good time credits, and I maxed those out. I didn't have any probation or parole. I fully discharged my three and a half years. It was very unusual to get to do that.

Everything hit well for me, as you can imagine. I did three and a half on a seven, and I was 42 when I got out, so I've been out 19 years. I've been at liberty for 19 years. I would like to share a bit of inspiration, just so people can get to know me a little bit better. I am a devout Christian, and it was my faith in the Lord and his grasp on me that got me through all that. I will talk more about that in a minute, but I want to share a couple of scriptures that really got me through.

Psalm 40 1-3 says, “I waited patiently for the Lord, and he inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me out of a horrible pit out of the miry clay and set my feet upon a rock and established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth. Praise to our God; many will see it and fear, many will trust the Lord.” That's how I went into a horrible pit for a little while, but then God brought me out and established me, as you're going to probably going to hear about today. It's because he loved me that he allowed that to happen to me.

Jesus says in John 15, “I'm the true vine, and my father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that bears fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit.” He pruned me all the way



down. I basically lost everything, except my relationship with my family, which we'll get back to. I got severely pruned so that I could bear more fruit.

Isaiah 42 1-9 talks about how He calls you, and called me, to come out of everything and be someone who sets the captive free and helps people get out of prison. He called me to be a minister of justice to the nations, which I'm still not sure what that means, because that was about five years ago. I'm involved in a number of ministries and things. Hopefully, they won't be just local or regional but will one day be national or international, because I want to see the captive set free. I want to see people coming out of dungeons. I want to see justice for the nations. That's my real calling in life, so that's my way of introducing who I am and how I approach things.

**RJ:** Great stuff, Steve. As the listeners may know, I'm a full-time employee in one of the largest, maximum-security prisons in the United States. I want to ask a follow-up question about how your Christian faith related to other prominent religious groups in the prisons, such as Muslims. Share some thoughts on that.

**Steve:** Unfortunately, part of my testimony is that I was already a Christian when I committed my crime, and I brought shame on my faith and on my Lord. That was extra hard. Most guys find the Lord in prison, and then they go on and have a conversion experience. I had already been a Christian for a while, so that makes it worse in a sense, but God forgave me and brought me through. The prisons I were at were pretty tame prisons, if you will. They weren't super violent. One was a medium; that was an honor yard. Even though it had a lot of lifers, there wasn't a lot of violence. Lifers tend to keep things pretty stable. They like peace and quiet on their yard, so I was blessed to be there for five months.

Then I went to a minimum yard that was just minimum security. In Oklahoma, minimums don't even have fences, so they're much more peaceful. It was like a college campus. I found that you either had to be a very sincere Christian or not because if you were playing games and half in or half out, they would have you for lunch, because they were not playing. I found the Muslims there that I encountered, especially at the second yard, to be very organized, devout, disciplined and faithful. I was like, "Man, I wish I could get some Christians to be that devout." They were hardcore. They were really admirable in that way. Morally, Islam has some great moral truths. As a Christian, though, I believe that there's more to it than morality. It's about an encounter with the Holy Spirit, where you're actually born again, and you have to have that to get to heaven. So that's what Christians believe, and that distinguishes us greatly from Islam, but I have a lot of respect for people in that faith, and one of my best friends was a Muslim.

**RJ:** Darwin Hamilton alluded to what you just said. They are very organized, very responsible, and very focused on doing better with their lives.

**Steve:** The main yard I was on was very Christian. We had a very strong inmate-led church at that prison. They had a saying: Mexicans look after the Mexicans, the Indians look after the Indians, and the Muslims look after the Muslims, but if you're a Christian, you're on your own. They said that's not right. So, the Christians on that yard functioned like a close-knit community. They looked out for one another. If a weaker brother was picked on, he had to deal with all the bigger Christians. We had some big, tough guys in our church, so they stuck together. That was very inspiring to me. I had never seen that before, but it was a great approach, and it gave you a sense of a community and belonging that I think doesn't exist in most prisons.



**RJ:** Got it. Let's switch gears a little bit. Why don't you share with the audience what's up with your right now, such as your family life, work-life, those kinds of things?

**Steve:** Okay. I've been at liberty for 19 years, and because I was a convicted felon, I had to get out there and hustle. I've been self-employed, I've had my own businesses a couple of times. I did some I.T. work, some web design work, and I've worked in some ministry capacities. I am happily married now. My second wife and I just celebrated 16 years two weeks ago, and I'm very grateful for that. We go to a great church in a suburb of Fort Worth called Capstone Church, and we are in leadership there. She leads the women's Bible study. We're very grounded and have been at that church for six years.

I work as a grant writer specializing in non-profits and developing funding strategies, and, apparently, that makes me popular. Everybody wants a grant writer. I've got a bunch of clients right now. One client actually ended up hiring me for them as an employee for 10 hours a week, but most of the time, I'm a 1099 contractor, and I specialize in grant research. I find the money and then help him write the grants. That's been very rewarding for me. In 2005, I actually went to a class to learn how to write federal grants, and I've been doing it ever since. That's 16 years of experience, not full time, but I'm still a professional grant writer. It's great for somebody with a felony, but they're not asking about my background. They're asking me, if I can get and write grants.

That's the entrepreneurial self-employment path that we really recommend for people with felonies. Because in our reentry work, we say that drug dealers are just entrepreneurs denied opportunities. If you were out there hustling in the streets, you were really an entrepreneur, and you were just misapplying your skills. We want you to repurpose those because you know about manufacturing and distribution and customer support and quality. Repurpose that to become a businessperson.

I'm a grant writer for the entrepreneurial prison class that they have in the Oklahoma Department of Corrections. They hired me to help because they've got a "How to Start your own Business" school. We're all about that. The big formula I really believe in is going to college and starting your business. That's the path to becoming successful in the United States. That actually comes out of the great work of Booker T. Washington with Tuskegee Institute back in 1885, who used the philosophy to help people who were the first-generation out of slavery. In 1885 to 1905, Booker created more millionaires than Harvard, Yale, and Princeton did combined in that same period of time. Astonishing, right? First-generation out of slavery, more millionaires, because they were out there hustling. They were on the rebound from slavery, and they made everybody look bad. It was so astonishing, a great time in American history, which has been suppressed naturally. That's one of my favorite areas to inspire people. You can overcome anything, and you can go on and be successful. You really can, especially in the business world or in ministry.

**RJ:** Great story about Booker T. Washington. It sounds like your life is really good right now, post-incarceration. Let's look at your upbringing. How did that go? Were mom and dad around?

**Steve:** I grew up in a family that looked like a middle-class or upper-middle-class, white suburban family. Looked normal on the outside, but inside, there were some addictions. There were some deep hurts and wounds in my parents, so my two younger sisters and I all grew up on drugs and promiscuity and rock and roll and sex. When we were growing up in the seventies, I was terribly addicted to drugs from the ages of 14 to 17 and a half.

I almost lost my life. One day, I woke up and I was the only person in my crowd that hadn't gone to jail. I thought, "I'm next. I'm doing all the same things they are doing." I had a scared straight moment when I was 17, so I tried to clean up my act on my own. But my parents were on the verge of divorce, so forth and so on. In October of 1980,



when I was 20, my mom gave her life to the Lord and became a born-again Christian. She really got turned around. It turned out my grandmother and my girlfriend were praying for me. In February of 1981, I got saved, and then my dad, and then both of my sisters, all within the space of a year. My whole family turned around because of my grandmother's faithfulness. From the age of 21 on, so for the last 40 years, I've been Christian.

We brought a lot of hurt and trauma into that. It's been a healing and reconciling time ever since, so I was very blessed. The seeds of my destruction, my addictive behavior, and my patterns were all sewed when I was a child. I had struggled with pornography, drugs, promiscuity, all that stuff, when I was young, and that's just not a good foundation for your life. There's going to be some bad fruit from there, but we went on.

My parents became key players in my whole story. They started their own marriage ministry called Heart Menders, where they ministered to couples in the church with hurting marriages. They specialized in pastors with troubled marriages and had a small, but effective, ministry. So, when I got in trouble and my marriage fell apart, I ended up spinning out of control. Instead of backing away from me, my parents stood with me. They walked through the whole thing with me, the charges, arrest, jail, court, trial, prison, everything. Through it all, my family stood with me, and that's what most people don't get. They really don't. It was one of my first times to ever be in trouble, so it wasn't like I'd been through this five times. I hadn't worn out my welcome, so to speak.

People still believed in me, they prayed for me and helped me. One of the great takeaways of all of this, for me, is that the support of a family makes such a huge difference. A lot of people don't get that. Some do, and when they do, it makes all the difference. The power of family can really reduce the stress and trauma of incarceration. I want to encourage anybody out there who has any family still standing with them to be really appreciative and grateful that they still believe in you and still want the best for you. Don't burn any bridges. That's unconditional love. I had to have unconditional love. If you looked at my behavior, I didn't deserve any good. Only God can give that; humans don't really have the capacity for unconditional love. We have very limited amounts.

It's easy to love people that are doing well. It's easy to love people that like you. It's when people are screwing up and doing what I call a "big piece of stupid". That's when you find out where the love is, right? We have to turn to God and say, "You got to help me love this person because there's no way I could do this on my own strength." My parents, my sister and my kids, everyone stood by me and showed me unconditional love. We went through that whole thing intact, which is very rare, and I'm very grateful to this day. I'm the beneficiary of a lot of love and a lot of grace. Otherwise, right now, I'd probably be homeless, dead or still incarcerated.

**RJ:** Are mom and dad still alive?

**Steve:** My dad passed four months after I got out of prison. He was very faithful to visit me, but he was very sick. He was in a wheelchair for the last four years of his life, and the Lord kept him until I got out. My dad passed on Christmas Eve 2002. I miss him terribly. My mom's still going 85 years old, still going strong, and still has the ministry. She's still trying to do Heart Menders, so that's pretty amazing. She's an amazing woman. The power of a praying mother is a big takeaway from this also. She's a powerhouse, she's tiny, but she's dangerous. That's what we like to say.

**RJ:** You had mom and grandmother rooting for you, and all that fruit paid off.

**Steve:** It really did. The other thing that I would just like to mention is one of the main influences of my success was a very Godly chaplain at the first prison that I was at. He was amazing, Chaplain Ron Grant. He's still my friend 20 years later and is retired now. That prison we were at that had such a good inmate church because of him. He invested in



them. He disciplined and mentored them, and they still have a Ron Grant Memorial picnic every year in Oklahoma, for the guys who get out of prison and are doing well. They honor him every year with a picnic, even 20 years later, that's how influential he was. I really would encourage people on the yard right now: if your chaplain is not really doing great, there may be a team of chaplains. Pray for them. A mentoring chaplain is one of the best things that can happen at a prison. I've seen many of those guys turn their lives around. Some are CEOs of their own companies, some of them are full-time business ministry people. A good chaplain, who cares and lays his life down for the men, can influence that. I've seen the power of a mentoring chaplain who has a heart for the inmates.

**RJ:** Great stuff, Steve. Let's drill a bit into what your incarcerated years looked like during your three and a half years.

**Steve:** During my trial, I was a bonded individual. I got arrested and bonded right out, and for 14 months, I was pursuing adjudication. I was at liberty that whole time. I went to trial, and I lost, and the judge revoked my bond that day. Suddenly, I'm a flight risk and was put in jail in Oklahoma. I was supposed to come back in six weeks for sentencing, but it turned to six months. I was in Oklahoma County Jail for six months, and long story short, I was overwhelmed. I was in a pod of a hundred men, a terrifying place. I'm a 40-year-old white computer programmer guy, but I began to minister in that pod. I had a tremendous time in there. We got Bibles coming in, and we had all kinds of things happen in the county jail. I thought, "Wow, okay, this could be good." It was hard, but it was very good.

I went back six months later and asked the judge for probation. She denied that request. My seven years was prison time, not any clemency on that. I thought, "Here we go, if you've got seven years, I'm going to do seven years." I didn't know about good time and all that stuff when I first started out because I wasn't in contact with the criminal justice system before, and lo and behold, I got credit for those six months in jail. They gave me time served, so that knocked off some of my sentence.

Then, I went into a medium-level prison in Oklahoma called Joseph Harp Correctional Center. This was an honor yard, which I didn't know at the time. Excellent prison, very well run. It was like a college campus with razor wire around it. It was astonishing. I thought, "This is amazing!", and I didn't realize how blessed I was to go there. I'd never been to prison before, so I thought, "We have great chapel services every night with a great chaplain and great jobs. Prison is awesome!" I was very sheltered through the whole thing. I flourished there.

It turns out the chaplain, Ron Grant, lived a block and a half from my parents on the same street. They didn't even know each other until they got connected through me. The chaplain loved me personally because he met my parents and loved them. I had a lot of favor on that yard, but five months into that, some people came and said, "You're really minimum eligible, you shouldn't be at a medium; you're going to a minimum." I'm like, "Really, now? I have a great job!", but they're not asking your opinion in the department of corrections. You have no vote.

The next day, I was at John Lilley Correctional Center, which was a minimum. In light of history, it's located at Boley, Oklahoma, which was one of the original black communities of Oklahoma. Booker T. Washington said in 1909, Boley was the best, most prosperous black town in America. It was a great experiment. They had tremendous influence. I have this great heart for Booker T. Washington's thing about people coming out of slavery and into prosperity. It was a black Wall Street, Boley, Oklahoma, but now it's a tiny rural town. All it's got now is a prison and a rodeo, because Pretty Boy Floyd came through and robbed the bank back in the 1930s, killed the banker who also happened to be the mayor, wiping out the town's whole prosperity. Boley collapsed as a city. It had 4,000 or 5,000 people living there at one point, now it's just a few hundred. But that's where the prison was.

I get to Boley. There's 650 men, minimum security, and nothing going on. No real good chaplain, just nothing. As I said, it didn't have a fence around; it's boring, no life, no programs. I began to pray, and my best friend from jail was there on that yard. One of my friends from the other prison came with me on the bus, and the three of us began to pray and begin to reach out on that yard. I discharged my sentence from there.

I was there two and a half years at John Lilley, and we had a tremendous time. I was a natural leader in a sense, and we did everything we knew how to do. We found out you could have a Christian club. In the Oklahoma Department of Corrections, you could have a Spanish club, a veteran's club, your father's club. We made the first Christian club in the history of the Oklahoma Department of Corrections. As long as you had a staff sponsor, officers, voted, and had rules of order, you could have any kind of club you wanted. We ended up with 65 guys coming every Saturday, raised money for orphans, and created a newspaper, had Bible studies. We established an inmate-led church and got much done on that yard in two and a half years.

The day I was discharged, the Friday before Labor Day, 2002, 11 guys took off work to come and stand with me at the gate. I was leaving that yard to go home. My parents were outside in the car. The guards were checking me out at the last point, looks out the big picture window, and sees 11 guys down. The men are saying, "Bye brother Steve! Bye, praying for you!"

The guard says, "Now, who are you? The most we've ever seen were two. You've got 11 guys standing out there!"

I'm like, "Yes, I do. That's how we roll."

You had to be a Christian every day on that yard. It wasn't just Sunday morning or Wednesday night you lived it. It was like living in a monastery. It was all these brothers together, living out their faith every day. It was a tremendous experience for me. I loved those men, and it really impacted me. I walked out of the gate. I had a Jeep Grand Cherokee. I was the vice-president of my dad's company, and I had a place to live. Nobody gets that. It broke me. It broke me in such a deep level. I was so grateful that 19 years later, I'm still going full tilt. I've been giving back ever since I put my foot on the accelerator and never let off for 19 years.

I'm like that mythical freak unicorn that's not supposed to exist. I'm totally obsessed with helping people, giving back, and it changed me. It changed me at a very deep level. Before, I was what I would call a useless Christian. If you would have come to me and said, "My wife left me," or "My child just died", I'd be like, "Bless your heart." Now, I have empathy through that whole thing. Now, I just want to walk with people, help people get down into their mess, and help them walk out of a valley and get up on higher ground. I got that from my dad. He used to say, "Hey, if you run with us, you better buckle up because we're going to higher ground." So, I pick that up that same mantle, and I try to help men get to higher ground. That's just what I do by the grace of God. I have a great life. It was an awful thing to go through, but it was also very wonderful at the same time, because of God.

**RJ:** That's a great segue into the next topic that I want to talk about related to reentry. We're going to look at the big picture in the United States. Of the 10,000 prisoners that are released every week into our neighborhoods, according to the United States Department of Justice, the reports tell us that up to two-thirds will go back to prison within 3 years. Many people want to focus on the negative, the two-thirds. Get Free and Stay Free is focus on the one-third. What did they do that so that they didn't go back to prison?

**Steve:** I'm not sure we have enough time to cover all that, cause that's my passion, I can talk for hours about that. But I will say that I go back to the words of Booker T. Washington, who said "The road from poverty is to go to college and



start your own business.” The data shows that the Department of Justice's recidivism rate, traditionally, hasn't changed over the last 10 or 15 years. It's 66%. Two-thirds of everybody who gets out of prison in America is going to go back within 3 years. It's a terrible failing system. If you had a business like that, you'd be out of business. But, if you get your associate degree, in prison or after prison, the recidivism rate drops to 14%. If you get your bachelor's degree in prison or after prison, it drops to 7%. What the heck!

How come we've known this for years, and yet we're still not emphasizing education? Apparently, we don't want to break the recidivism rate because we've known this information for a couple of decades. Does it mean we implemented that? No. Education is so transformational. Pell Grants were taken away from prisoners in 1996. College participation in the U.S. Prison system dropped to almost nil. Pell grants have been coming back. We've recently got that reinstated at the end of the Trump Administration. If you're incarcerated, you need to check because Pell grants will pay for your college. It's a grant. You don't have to repay it because it's not a student loan.

We call that the recovering the lost art of the hustle. Get out there and just hustle. You got to make it happen. If you have to work two or three part-time jobs before you can get your own things started, make that happen. In our reentry program in Fort Worth, we call that cowboy up. Make it happen. We're not going to treat you as a child. I will say traditional reentry in America is based on a very poor model called parent-child. We're just going to have to help you because you've been in prison, and we feel sorry for you. No, you're an adult, I'm an adult, let's be adults.

We don't call people in reentry returning citizens, we call them neighbors. You're our neighbor, we're your neighbor, and you're going to be living in our neighborhood. What started me on this was I heard a prison volunteer say, “If we want people to be good neighbors when they get out of prison, maybe we should be neighborly first.” What does it look like to be “neighborly first”?

And so, I built a whole consulting firm five years around teaching communities to be proactive on reentry. Let's be neighborly. We tell people, “We can't make you be successful when you get out of prison, but we take away every excuse of you not being successful.”

You have to move around, get a truck or a car, find housing, etc. We should be doing everything we can to facilitate that so the people who want to change their lives have no barriers. The community is traditionally putting up barriers at every turn and then they wonder why people aren't successful. That's just immoral, right? It's evil. We need to be pulling down barriers. I have a book that I wrote called *Purposeful Neighboring: Creating Reentry-Ready Communities*. Let's stop acting surprised that people come home from prison. 10,000 people a week are coming home from prison in America, it's not an anomaly.

**RJ:** It's basically changing the narrative with folks like ourselves and the audience listening and reading the transcripts. A few weeks before they get out, men often come to the library wanting to get some resources. Unfortunately, we usually don't pay attention to them, we instead focus on the one's going in. Still, men who exit are very solid. They come out and are focused on where they're going, but they want to pay back their community. The bigger cities have reentry coalitions, whereas the smaller counties have little or nothing out there. In your case, you went to Just Leadership USA, but there's plenty of other organizations and opportunities that let you give back to the community.

**Steve:** Yeah, but first you need to get stable. You can look amazing in prison, “Oh, I went to college, I earned my degree”, but there's a whole different set of rules when you get out. Get yourself stable. Do not try to change the community the first week that you're out of prison because they will be looking at you funny. You need to get established. I'd get a job. I'd have a good housing record. I'd joined a good church. I'd be faithful. They need to see a year or two of faithfulness



out of you, post-incarceration, before you really can be a community activist or have community impact. Other than that, there's a whole bunch of people that zoom out of prison, run out there, and crash. That's not helping. So, make sure you are successfully stable in your life for a year or two, then give back. You're not ready to give back until then.

Even if there's no prisoner reentry coalition in urban settings, there's typically a homeless coalition or an anti-poverty coalition in your city. Just piggyback on that because poverty and incarceration go hand in hand, right? Most of the people they're dealing with also have felonies, so it's easy to tag that on.

A rural area is a little different, I'm one of the few people in America who has done a lot of work on rural reentry. We found out that it's harder to do reentry in a small town or in a rural community. Do not go back to the small town you came from unless you have a supportive pro-social family waiting for you, and a job and a place to live. If you go back to the same old mess that sent you to prison, if it's methamphetamine, alcoholism, whatever, that messy dysfunctional society will not help your journey. Don't go back to it. That's a recipe for failure, unless you have a good family, a tangible job and a place to live waiting for you.

Employment is much harder in a small town, as there are just not as many jobs. There are more temptations in large cities, which can be hard if you have a problem with drugs, alcohol, women or whatever, but there's much more opportunity. Much more resources, help, social services, employment. I recommend that if your hometown created you as a criminal, don't go back there. Make a clean start somewhere else, preferably in a city with lots of good resources. I highly recommend Fort Worth, Texas, because we really help people come home from prison here. It's amazing here because it's an abundant, friendly, helpful city. It's been fantastic for me to do reentry work here.

If you are in a small rural area and want to help with 80% of the reentry solution, get the resources of your community organized. You need a good list of where the food pantries are, the clothing closets, the job programs, the homeless shelters, the halfway houses, the sober living houses, etc. If they don't exist in your committee, take note and say, "Okay, there's no food pantry here, but there's one 35 miles away." You got to do all that research to fill in those pieces of the puzzle. Form a little group to be in charge of knowing where all the resources are. So, when somebody comes out of prison, you could quickly help them find that. Most people don't need case management when they get out; they can self-manage if they know where the resources are. That's a good theory that we proved out.

We won the Texas Governor's Award in 2017 with that theory. We need to help people who are disabled, geriatric, addicted; they need mental help, we get that, and they need case management. But, if you're a whole, employable, healthy adult between 18 and 55 and you're employable, ready to go, we want you to self-manage. We want you to be an adult when you get out. We believe that the formula is knowing where the resources are, help people access them by giving them a little bit of coaching and support, and then let them go on themselves to be successful. You can approximate that in a small town. It's just harder.

**RJ:** The concept reminds me of what I tell the men a lot of times. Society has to step up to the plate, but the man or the woman has to step up to the plate too. They both have to step up to the plate. One can't be out there, and the other one has the entitlements mentality.

**Steve:** Here's how we say it in psychological language. If the community will remove all the extrinsic barriers in the society, what's left is intrinsic motivation. In other words, the answer is inside of you. If there are no barriers in front of you, you got to take hold and find that intrinsic motivation. You've got to say, "Okay, now I can go. The path is clear before me." You've got to choose to walk down that path, choose to put the energy into it. You got to motivate yourself, pick yourself up, and go.





**RJ:** It's real basic. One of the best things' mankind can do is take the simplest things and complicate them.

**Steve:** People in prison are told, "You're never going to make it." and, "Oh, it's terrible and it's hard. There are no jobs. Nobody will hire you, and you'll never make it." They'll just brainwash you. Why would they do that? Why is the whole culture of a prison built around failure? The circumstances are bad enough, but to put a whole layer of brainwashing on top of that, to convince you that you're never going to make it, we've got to change some of that too. That's just ridiculous. If we really want people to be successful, I sometimes question if we really want people to be successful, we've got to change the way we talk about it. The way we act, all of it.

**RJ:** Steve, you have given some great information. You brought much wisdom, knowledge, and excitement to the conversation. I am grateful that you're taking the time to share your story of hope and transformation for the men and women across the United States. As we close out, if you could take the next few minutes to talk directly to the men and women, that would be great.

**Steve:** The truth is that sheer will, trying harder, "white-knuckling" it, religion, none of it that really brings lasting change. What does bring change, consistently and reliably, is what's called the 'Aha' moment. That's typically what happens on a county jail bunk. You've been running wild, you finally got caught for the first time or the ninth time or whatever, and your whole life is crushed. They've got serious charges pending, and you suddenly have to sit still, and you're sitting there thinking, "Oh crap."

Then, something happens. Something triggers your 'Aha' moment. It could be a conversation. It could be a magazine article, or a Bible verse. It could be a sermon, could be something on T.V., or older person talking with you. We don't know. Several things tend to pop up as causes or triggers. But you have this 'Aha' moment, and you go, "Oh my gosh, it's not drugs. It's not the system. It's not my schooling or lack thereof. It's not the guy who molested me. It's me. I'm the problem."

"I'm the common denominator, all this tragedy, all this trauma, and all this mess that I've been dragging behind me is me." And they suddenly make a quality decision and say, "I've been acting like a juvenile." They can be 45 years old when they have this moment, but they decide "I'm going to be an adult. I'm going to own this thing. I'm going to take responsibility. I am going to take the consequences of my bad choices. I'm going to absorb them to get past them."

When that 'Aha' moment comes, addiction desists, crime desists, crazy behaviors desist, and people go on and become functioning adults, and they become successful. Dr. Duane Cummins of the Missouri Department of Corrections did a qualitative study of a thousand people who went to prison and never came back. He said most prison psychologists study repeat offenders. He said that's like looking at a broken car to see how a car is supposed to work. He studied a thousand people who never went back to prison and were willing to be successful because he wanted to see the common denominator. It was the 'Aha' moment. That was what drove it for a thousand success stories that he found. Fantastic data that he has. I just want to leave you with that.

For people on the yard, I don't care if you're 60 years old, you can go past incarceration when you get out and become an entrepreneur and become successful in the business world. The number one career that's made more millionaires in America than any other is real estate. We know formerly incarcerated people right now that are doing that, like Glenn Martin, he's a real estate millionaire. What we found out in reentry is that jobs were a lot easier to acquire than housing. Housing is hard. You can hardly find housing if you have an eviction, much less a felony. What we found is that the number one need in reentry was sympathetic landlords. You can have a truck driving job right out of prison for \$17 an hour but they couldn't find a place to live. Crazy. We teach formerly incarcerated people that, once you get

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successful, have somebody invest in real estate so they can rent houses to people in reentry. Many people desperately need someone who understands their reentry journey.

**RJ:** Your story and insight don't get any better than this, Steve. We're going to close this episode out, everybody. I thank you for taking the time to listen to this podcast. I'm going to talk a little bit more to Steve off the air. Steve, thank you so much, and I hope you'll come back.

**Steve:** It's my great pleasure. Thank you for your kind words.

**RJ:** Thank you.