

Narrator: [00:00:22](#) Experiencing trauma can change the way the world is viewed, and how we operate in that world. In the aftermath of trauma, we can change physically, emotionally and mentally. Left untreated, trauma multiplies in our communities and seeps down from one generation to the next. Unfortunately, most of us do not have access to the kinds of treatment that can heal the trauma we've experienced, and often, trauma is the catalyst that begins a recurring cycle of crime and violence as we lock away what we don't want to confront.

Troy Williams: [00:01:04](#) The closer I get to the prison, I can feel my heart pounding.

Troy Williams: [00:02:08](#) I think there's a lot of misconceptions about who people are in prison, and who those people are that are coming home from prison. There are some men that I definitely wouldn't want living next door to my family. There's another group, the majority of men that I left behind that I think would come home and be a great asset to the community.

Troy Williams: [00:02:36](#) There it is, right there. San Quentin State Prison. Wow.

Narrator: [00:03:01](#) Inside San Quentin prison, something rare and unique is taking place as groups of men are coming together to specifically address their trauma. Both the trauma they've caused and survived.

Narrator: [00:03:22](#) In 2003, Barry [Spillman 00:03:25] passed his loaded gun to a Norteño gang member to scare a rival gang chasing them down Highway 101. Three shots were fired, killing the other driver. Barry was sentenced to 20 years to life for second degree murder.

Barry S: [00:03:44](#) I was in county jail for four years fighting this, three different trials. Uh, was segregated, and then when I did get out all I tried to do was stab Norteños. That's... honest. I was with two northern, two Norteños when this crime went down so, that just, that just feel- fueled the anger and the violence that was in my already, and I embraced it.

Barry S: [00:04:09](#) Counselor called me down and she says uh, "You're going to San Quentin." I said, "What the fuck? I don't want to go to damn San Quentin!" And I just... I mean, because when I thought of San Quentin, I'm thinking it, the way it is back in the 70s and the 80s. I'm getting older, you know what I mean? I'm tired of the fighting, I'm tired of stabbing, I'm trying... I'm tired of watching behind my back. So I came here. And uh, hated it. The first year I hated it.

- Narrator: [00:04:35](#) One of the rare trauma healing programs at San Quentin is the Victim Offender Education Group, known as VOEG. Designed to unearth the root causes of one's crime and process its impact on survivors, the community and themselves.
- Sonya Shaw: [00:04:53](#) So VOEG sits at the nexus of restorative justice and trauma healing. Um, and it's based on the philosophy that hurt people hurt people.
- Narrator: [00:05:02](#) Sonya Shaw is an associate professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, and a facilitator of restorative processes in her community university and in prisons. She is also a survivor of childhood sexual abuse.
- Sonya Shaw: [00:05:19](#) We look back, whether it's parents, whether it's environment, school, racism, all the different ways that somebody might have experienced harm. And if you come from an environment in which um, you haven't had the opportunity to really heal from that harm, it goes unprocessed, then the likelihood is that that trauma turns inward and folks start to hurt themselves, or trauma can turn outwards and people can hurt other people.
- Sonya Shaw: [00:05:46](#) So there is this well established connection between trauma and violence. And so much of VOEG is about unpacking that process through a series of exercises that are then processed in the group.
- Narrator: [00:05:59](#) A key component of the restorative process is a timeline, where the men detail pivotal moments in their lives that caused them to change their outlooks and behaviors.
- Barry S: [00:06:12](#) When I was six years old, my dad took me swimming. And uh, he decided to uh, teach me by putting a rope around my chest. Uh... and my dad was the greatest thing in the world then, I mean, big guy, you know, little guy. Uh, but he told me, he says uh, "This rope isn't to help you. Uh, this rope's to pull your body off the bottom of the river."
- Speaker 6: [00:06:40](#) Mm.
- Barry S: [00:06:40](#) Uh, I didn't believe him at first, you know what I mean? That's my dad. Never- it's the first time something like that happened. And uh, he did. I mean uh, I started trying to [inaudible 00:06:53], went on the rope, he let go. It was the first, first day that I started hating my father. It's the first day that I had violence towards my father, I hit him with a rock.
- Barry S: [00:07:08](#) At nine, my mom left my dad. Uh, she knew about the beatings, she knew about everything. But she chose for

use to live with my dad, so. I didn't see her much after that. At 12 I hit my father with an ax handle, after one of his beatings. At 14 I had a fistfight with my father. Pain, sadness and lonely, but I've also felt empowered. I felt, I felt energized. I was angry, I was distrustful, but I became hardworking, I started working with animals. Uh, I grew up on 1800 acres in Louisiana, beef cattle, so.

Barry S: [00:07:51](#) At 14 I was part of a junior rodeo. And I red- rode bucking broncs. And I became the state champion when I was 14.

Sonya Shaw: [00:08:01](#) Wow.

Barry S: [00:08:02](#) I traveled all around the state on the weekends with my, my Old Pa, my grandfather.

Barry S: [00:08:06](#) When I was 15 my old, my Old Pa died. And I felt sadness, abandoned, alone, angry. I still feel those things a lot now, when I think about it. I quit the rodeo because it's something he and I did together. When I turned 17 I went to the Army recruiter. I did some incredible things in the military. I went all over the world. I served in Central America, Bosnia, Kuwait, Iraq and the tip of Afghanistan.

Barry S: [00:08:46](#) From 18 to 20 I assassinated six guys. Uh... at first it was uh... I puked, a lot. I cried a lot. And I'm a proud vet.

Sonya Shaw: [00:09:18](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Barry S: [00:09:19](#) I served 13 years in the Army. Second Battalion Citizen's Rangers. During that time I had two beautiful sons. Um, Brandon and Bradley. I'm a grandfather. I still uh... fight the PTSD. Um... all the things that I've done in my life, I've jumped out of planes 152 times. You know? (Laughs)

Barry S: [00:09:51](#) And this lady's made me more scared than anybody in the world.

Speaker 6: [00:09:53](#) (Laughter)

Barry S: [00:09:53](#) And uh... that's it.

Sonya Shaw: [00:10:01](#) Wow.

Barry S: [00:10:02](#) Thank you.

Sam Johnson: [00:10:03](#) Um- the father issue is mine with them, I connect with you. I mean, how did you feel when he let go of that rope.

Barry S: [00:10:16](#) I was scared. But I, I had to get to the edge of the water. And then once I got out of the water, I could, I could still

remember my hand, one in the sand and this one digging. And I can remember once I broke, broke air, that as soon as I did I was angry.

- Barry S: [00:10:34](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Barry S: [00:10:36](#) And I've had that anger for... over the years. Every time I pulled that trigger, assassinate someone, I was hoping it was him at the end of that barrel.
- Sonya Shaw: [00:10:46](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Barry S: [00:10:49](#) I've never told anybody that. That's the first time that's ever come up. Thank you for honoring me with that question.
- Troy Williams: [00:11:05](#) You have to do your work, right? Uh... you have to take that deep dive inside into your emotional makeup to understand what happened. Um, because I made some choices. Yeah, I made some choices that uh... affected a lot of people.
- sujatha baliga: [00:11:31](#) Our justice system currently operates in a way that centers uh, people who have done harm, but not in any way that considers how to help them stop doing the harms that they've done, or to understand where those harms come from.
- Narrator: [00:11:47](#) As the director of the Restorative Justice Project at Impact Justice in Oakland, California, and Washington D.C., sujatha baliga helps communities across the nation implement restorative justice alternatives with equal commitment to crime survivors and people who have caused harm. She speaks publicly and inside prisons about her own experiences as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, and her path to forgiveness.
- sujatha baliga: [00:12:19](#) There's literally nothing that shows our incarceration system either meets our needs for safety as a society or meets the needs of people who've been harmed, and we do all of this at an astronomical cost. Like, billions and billions of dollars a year, uh, with really terrible outcomes uh, all around.
- Narrator: [00:12:40](#) Opportunities like VOEG provide rare moments, usually only once a week, away from the normal prison life they've experience through their incarcerations. Filled with isolation, prison politics, and potential dangers.
- Nate: [00:12:57](#) It's like, hey, you know, this is you make a knife, this is how you stab somebody, this is how you, you know, this is what you do after you stab somebody, this is how you

know, you know, it's about to be a stabbing going on. The-right? And, and it was all, all these rules you've got to pay attention to. If there's something going on racial, you- I have to come outside. I'm like, "Hey man, I ain't got nothing to do with that. All right, now- you know, that ain't my deal." But it's either I have to go outside or I have to suffer some kind of consequence.

Eddie Herena: [00:13:26](#) I get off the bus, the first thing they ask you, you're a Mexican so you're either one, two or three. You're either Southern or Northern, or you're a [foreign language 00:13:34]. When he was explaining to me man, "We don't want to put you, uh, in a building full of Southerners, they're going to kill you."

Michael Nelson: [00:13:41](#) I remember calling my dad on the pay phone and him breaking down the rules to me of prison, and one was to keep your nose clean, like stay out of people's business. He told me to not eat after blacks. And he told me to not to talk to the cops, and if I do I have to talk really loud or I have to have somebody with me.

Michael Nelson: [00:13:59](#) The first thing that came out of my mouth was, "You know I run as an other, right?" And my dad, when he goes to prison he runs as white. And so what I realize is, he's telling me white rules. And these weren't the rules that I followed as a human being, and they definitely weren't the rules that I was going to follow in prison. But I knew that I had to, like for my owns safety, take it in and somehow survive.

sujatha baliga: [00:14:25](#) You know, the current system of justice uh, asks what law was broken, who broke it, and how do we punish them? And restorative justice asks a very different set of questions. It asks, what happened and what needs to happen now, right? And to bring people together to actually answer those questions, uh, is an incredibly powerful experience. And you can do it directly with the people who've experienced harm, um, but we can be asking those questions in any context, including inside prisons.

sujatha baliga: [00:14:54](#) And none of that is to excuse in any way the fact that you may have taken someone's life, or raped someone. This is not to devalue that in- that, your actual personal agency in having made um, having done that act, having made the choice to do that act. Um, but it gives it context, and then from there we can start to talk about what needs to happen to make amends or to heal this. Um, and even to start to put the structures into place that um, can prevent this from happening again in the future.

- sujatha baliga: [00:15:24](#) I love how Sonya Shaw talks about getting to the cause of the cause of the cause. And while we can do that in our individual lives, we can also do that sort of historically, and really mapping uh, the transgenerational trauma that gave rise to the moment that we're in today.
- Sam Johnson: [00:15:47](#) When we was living and growing up in Charleston, South Carolina, we experienced a lot of racism. They would call us niggers and then they would call us boys. Burn crosses, sometimes in the middle of the yard at night and stuff. And I could remember my mom, we was getting on the back of the bus, and seeing people beat up and stuff like that, houses catch on fire.
- Sam Johnson: [00:16:12](#) I remember getting hit with rocks and bottles. Being six, seven, nine years old growing up, running home from school and stuff. But my mom was the one that held us together and told us that not all white peoples are bad, there's bad black folks too and everything. So that kind of educated me a little bit, but I couldn't understand why people hated me because of the color of my skin growing up.
- Narrator: [00:16:38](#) Sam Johnson and a friend were walking down a street when his friend decided to rob a group of people getting into their car. Sam tried to intervene, but shots were fired, and Sam shot a man in the heart. He was sentenced to 29 years to life for first degree murder.
- Narrator: [00:16:56](#) Another step towards trauma healing is writing a letter of forgiveness to someone who has harmed them, and empathizing with the trauma their abuser may have experience.
- Sam Johnson: [00:17:07](#) This piece is a letter of forgiveness. It mainly... it focuses at my dad. I wish he was alive because of who I am today. It was rough growing up in South Carolina. It was, it was, it was ugly. And he had a sixth grade education, and he grew up just, what all he had. But then he was alcoholic, and he was a violent alcoholic. But I love my dad a whole lot because he did a lot for us. And for that reason, I wrote a letter of forgiveness, so bear with me.
- Sam Johnson: [00:17:47](#) I was the protector, the man of the house. I was responsible for my baby brother, and responsible for defending him, even if he was in the wrong.
- Sam Johnson: [00:18:02](#) I was responsible for keeping my mother safe, even if it meant hurting my dad. Years of what was considered to be the norm, I now know to be physical abuse. Seeing my mother's blood as she held the blade of my dad's knife in her hand, stopping him from cutting her throat.

- Sam Johnson: [00:18:25](#) This was the day I gave my dad six to eight stitches in his head. I had become a threat to his manhood, I was the nigger he was called by whites. As I grew older I learned and understood that my dad loved us, but was carrying a lot of pain, the pain of not being accepted as equal. At that time, all we had was each other, and it was better to be beaten by my father than at the hands of the people who hated us and wanted us dead because of the color of our skin.
- Sam Johnson: [00:18:57](#) The pain and hurt my dad must have carried to show himself to be a man, he could not afford to cry openly. No, he had to wear the mask of toughness, where a man is not supposed to cry.
- Sam Johnson: [00:19:16](#) Dad, I truly love you. And I want you to know that God has blessed me with a loving wife. We have five beautiful grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren, and an adult child I have adopted in the Congo of Africa while being in prison. I've learned that in order for me to experience God's love more and more, I must begin the healing process by first loving me, in order to be able to forgive others.
- Sam Johnson: [00:19:48](#) I am truly happy and extremely grateful to God that you, my dad- you were my dad, and I have forgiven you with all my heart. I have a responsibility in educating myself in order to help educate my family, and seeing that life is beautiful and precious.
- Sam Johnson: [00:20:05](#) I miss my dad. I really do. Because I knew- I know now what he was carrying. And he just didn't know how to address issues and deal with... and then it was passed on from his dad, he was abused and if it wasn't for me coming to prison, I would have abused my son too.
- Nate: [00:20:52](#) What I want to know is like, uh, what else though, when it comes to the beatings and how he actually treated you.
- Sam Johnson: [00:20:58](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Nate: [00:21:00](#) What process, or what thoughts, or what did you- realization did you come to to allow you to start your opening up to forgiving?
- Sam Johnson: [00:21:08](#) Because I realize he's hurting too. And they had a saying, hurt people hurt people. It's true, they don't understand what they're doing. Because they can't process. I didn't believe my dad could process nothing with the education he had, and then I- I put myself, what I went through and him growing up, born in 1919, I believe, it was really ugly for him. And that's all he knew.

Sam Johnson: [00:21:32](#) And when he got angry, because he couldn't process it, he drank and tried to drown. And he took it out on me and my mom. I mean, he hurt her so bad. And I wanted to kill my dad, the man who I loved the man who set out at night with a shotgun to protect our house. That's what the dad I loved, the ugliness was the ugliness that I believe he developed to protect himself. To protect the family, to be able to say he's a man. But he was so hurt, and he carried it all. So I couldn't, I can't hate him, because that's all he could process. But I have to forgive.

Sam Johnson: [00:22:11](#) People who do you wrong, who hurt you, they call you names and stuff, they are hurting because they can't process. And that's the way I forgive my dad, so I do my best. I've still got work to do.

Sonya Shaw: [00:22:37](#) When we heal, particular intergenerational or historical trauma, and by intergenerational or historical trauma, I mean events that have happened that have traumatized whole communities like the genocide of native people, the Vietnam War, the legacies of slavery, that level of trauma happening to your whole community is a huge weight and can be passed from ancestor to ancestor, from father to son, father to son.

Sonya Shaw: [00:23:16](#) So when you break that cycle, or when you heal that trauma, you know, you are connecting, you're making sense that I've been, "Slavery has been traumatic for me and my lineage and my ancestry." You are not passing that on to your child, so you're healing the generations to come and you're actually healing the generations that have experienced that trauma.

sujatha baliga: [00:23:49](#) Whether I'm inside a prison giving a talk, or being in circle with guys inside a prison, or I'm giving a talk at Yale Law School, when I'm done talking about my own survivor history, there is a line of people always, waiting to talk to me. The same thing over, "That happened to me too. Me too. Me too." Like, the first time I really heard the words me too, was actually inside a prison.

sujatha baliga: [00:24:13](#) Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I was sexually abused by my father, and I think over the years learning more about restorative justice, it seemed like this could have been a way which my family could have healed, and so that's a huge part of why I do the work I do today. I think another reason I'm just deeply drawn to restorative justice is that it really gives us an opportunity to step beyond this binary notion of us and them.

sujatha baliga: [00:24:40](#) My father clearly had a unresolved childhood trauma of his own. Uh, and um, and so does my mother, I mean and



just in... her inability to protect me was directly related uh, to her own uh, childhood traumas and, and adult traumas. And when I look at any one of us as individuals, including myself, I can't put myself neatly in this bucket of like, good guy, and my father's in the bucket of bad guy.

sujatha baliga: [00:25:08](#) I'm often posited as this like, survivor leader person and, and while that's true, I think I also need to take responsibility for the fact that uh, I've done a lot of things for which I could have been incarcerated if I had been caught, right? And I think that's true of many of us. While I was at Harvard, I was smoking an astronomical amount of marijuana, uh, and I would often be carrying an amount of, of, of marijuana that I would often split up amongst my friends that if that was me living uh, in East Oakland as an African American child, like, that would've been distribution, right? That is the kind of thing that you get locked up for. But since that weed was tucked nicely in the pocket of my Harvard sweatshirt, nobody was going to stop the Indian girl at Harvard.

sujatha baliga: [00:25:52](#) Or uh, there are times in my life when I've used violence, right? I once hit someone I was dating with a closed fist. Does that mean that I get sort of... that I lose my status as a survivor? That the ten years of sexual abuse I endured and the multiple rapes that I've experienced are erased? So you know, you can look at me and say no, but then why don't we do the same for all the people sitting inside? Why don't we do the same thing? Uh, they are no different from me. Um, except they are because they live with so many more types of oppression, um, than I've had to live with.

Troy Williams: [00:26:38](#) Because of my first run in with law enforcement, at the age of seven, but the time I was thirteen and I was getting chased by some gang members, instead of me running to the police station, I tried to make it to the other side of the park, where I knew that this particular gang's rival gang hung out at, because I was more afraid of the police than I was of the gangs in my- in, in my neighborhood. I did not recognize the onslaught that was happening against my spirit.

Troy Williams: [00:27:14](#) I had locked myself in a prison before I ever went to prison. I built these walls up to shield me from this psychological trauma that was coming at me from every direction, and then we fall into the trap of the, the, the real physical prison for decades. And we look at how trauma is playing out in individual communities, and African American, black and brown (laughs), and, and poor communities.

- Troy Williams: [00:27:43](#) You take people that have already experienced huge uh, amounts of, of trauma. You place them into an environment that further exacerbates that trauma, and then you hold them there, and then you turn around and you release them. And the somehow society expects that there's going to be some kind of different result. And that trauma, that mentality then continues to get transferred right back into the community.
- Troy Williams: [00:28:15](#) I- I- I just wanted like... I really hope people can get how connected that is.
- Narrator: [00:28:31](#) Troy Williams was released in 2014 after serving 18 years of a life sentence at San Quentin for kidnapping and robbery. While incarcerated, he participated in numerous self-help programs, including VOEG, became a certified paralegal, created a video production program, and the first prison based audio storytelling program in the US. Since paroling he has become a national speaker working with other formerly incarcerated men and women to break the school to prison pipeline.
- Troy Williams: [00:29:08](#) One of the programs that I participated in had a survivor's panel. And what a survivor's panel is, is that they bring in what they call a surrogate victim, somebody who has experienced the trauma of the crime that you committed.
- Troy Williams: [00:29:30](#) I've got to admit, I had a very difficult time initially, trying to understand what the victims in my case went through. I knew they were scared, but I've been living in fear all my life. So that really didn't have a real sense of meaning that could give me empathy. And when I had my victim's panel, one of the ladies came in who had been robbed. I got a glimpse into her world. For her, that fear caused her to shrink and shrivel, and hide and sort of coward in. For me, the fear that I had experienced caused me to cower outwardly, and become aggressive. And by seeing how it altered her life, um... hoo, I was able to get a peak into how my own life had been altered. Wow. I didn't expect this.
- Troy Williams: [00:30:48](#) I hope that we are able to take the time to learn and know another person's story before we judge them and throw them away. I think that if we did that, we'll find that we have a lot more that will bind us together than tear us apart.
- Sonya Shaw: [00:31:13](#) VOED is a curriculum, um, that comes alive during a group process. What happens when we sit together for 50, 60, 70, 80 weeks, is a deep level of repair. The process of like, truth telling about one's self also relates

to the process of truth telling about the impact you have on other people.

- Male Reporter: [00:31:44](#) It was Monday night just after 11:00, San Leandro police officer Nels Niemi, known as Dan on the force responded to a routine call on Doolittle Drive.
- Dionne Wilson: [00:31:55](#) Well it was the middle of the night. So... I hear banging on my door. And I see three of my closes friends still in their uniforms.
- Male Reporter: [00:32:20](#) Police say Officer Niemi was just having a conversation with a group of young men when Ramirez opened fire for no apparent reason. Officer Niemi was rushed to Eden Medical Center in Castro Valley, but died less than a half an hour later.
- Dionne Wilson: [00:32:42](#) Now we have to go see him, at the hospital. The nurse tries to prepare me. "Now I'm just going to pull back part of the sheet and you can't touch him." And he's just... covered in blood.
- Male Reporter: [00:33:07](#) The 42 year old police officer leaves a wife, a thirteen year old son and his six year old daughter, and a legacy of helping others.
- Dionne Wilson: [00:33:17](#) By now, it's morning and I have to go home and tell my children. Gabby's in her room, Josh was still sleeping. I wake Josh, and I actually can't remember what I said. I don't remember what I say to him, but I tell him. And we just cling to each other, sobbing.
- Dionne Wilson: [00:33:58](#) I go into her room and I sit down on the floor in front of her, and I said, "Daddy had a very bad accident." At that she looks up at me, eyes wide, and says, "Is he okay?" And little I could say is, "No, he's... he's not okay. They couldn't save him. And he died." And she just starts screaming.
- Dionne Wilson: [00:35:09](#) He was running their names and seeing if they had any wants or warrants. One of the guys knew that he would be subject to uh, a search, he had guns and drugs on him. While Dan was turned and talking into his microphone, he shot Dan in the head. And then when Dan fell, he shot him six more times, while he was on the ground.
- Female Reporter: [00:35:41](#) The man accused of killing Officer Niemi is set to appear in a Hayward courtroom this morning. 23 year old Irving Ramirez of Newark not only faces the murder charge, but also three special circumstance clauses that make him eligible for the death penalty.

- Dionne Wilson: [00:35:56](#) I want vengeance, and I'm staring at him. I'm in the same room with him, I hated him. I hated him, I wanted to just jump over that barrier and strangle him with my bare hands. I've never felt that violent in my life, toward anything or anybody for any reason. I just wanted him to die. Horribly.
- Dionne Wilson: [00:36:26](#) I really worked hard to get him put on death row. I wrote op-eds for the paper. Every time a camera was in my face, I told the reporters exactly why he should be killed. I get up on that stand and I go through the whole painful story, sobbing the whole time. It doesn't take the jury very long to come back and give us what we've been waiting for. Then we have a giant party. "Yay! We got the death penalty, he's going to die, that bastard."
- Dionne Wilson: [00:37:12](#) And then... something really unexpected happened to me. I have this expectation that because I got what I wanted, I got the death penalty, this giant weight is going to be lifted off of me. That bastard is going to pay. And I am now going to have this lifting of this burden on my heart. And I wait, and I wait, and I wait and it, it never comes. I just became really depressed and then that's how I, I stayed for the next couple of years. I was just stuck.
- Jamie C: [00:38:10](#) The walls of prisons are there not only to keep people in, but also to keep people out. I think it's part of a justification why our society is choosing to not be invested in rehabilitation. If you believe that somebody is fundamentally different from you, and they should be discarded, they should be contained and warehoused, then you don't have to anything.
- Jamie C: [00:38:39](#) One reason that I think drive that ignorance quite a bit, is a sense of us and them, that I'm not capable of that and who is is somebody other than me. But I see in these men something that uh- used to exist inside of me, which is profound suffering.
- Narrator: [00:39:06](#) Jamie [Carrol 00:39:07] was a college communications teacher when she was asked to attend a circle to talk about the impact of the crimes she experienced as a child. At nine years old, Jamie and two other girls were abducted, tortured and raped.
- Jamie C: [00:39:26](#) It was this scenario of hurt or be hurt, so I often was given the choice of either being assaulted or thinking up something that could be done to one of the other children. Whoever had the worst idea, which was deemed the best idea by the perpetrators, is the thing that we get acted out. And um, the child would then pick which

child would be harmed and it felt like we were driving the violence.

Jamie C: [00:39:53](#) In an effort to feel as little pain as possible, I was manipulated and broken down in ways that um, were very, very painful. My crime was in 1963, and I've lived intimately with my perpetrators ever since then, and I believe that on the day that I die there will be times when I'm still thinking about what happened to me.

Jamie C: [00:40:27](#) I ended up in this group with ten men, and three survivors. There was this guy to my right, when I was talking he was just visibly shaken. And when I got done talking about the impact of the crime, pretty quickly he raised his hand and he said, "I wonder if I could tell you something." And I kind of braced myself, and I wasn't sure what I was going to hear. And I was pretty anxious. And he said, "Well I... I think that they took you because you were there."

Jamie C: [00:41:03](#) I just started sobbing. Because that for me had been one of the most profound and significant and chronic questions about my assault that I had been asking, why me? And when he said it, I knew it was true. And when he got to his crime, he had committed an abduction. To meet somebody that had committed the same crime that I had been haunted by in so many ways, and to feel this profound connection and to experience his humanity, um, the ground just shifted beneath me. I didn't know exactly what I was experiencing and what this work was, but I knew that I was going to do it.

Sonya Shaw: [00:41:57](#) We have been told that the State punishing people, literally harming people to show people that harming people is wrong is the only option for accountability. Prison is criminogenic. Prison produces crime. It's like, completely counterintuitive, um, that we send anyone to a thing that makes it more likely that they are going to commit more crimes.

Sonya Shaw: [00:42:25](#) And I'm not even talking about places like San Quentin where there's actually programming, but the vast majority of prisons across this country have nothing, have nothing to help people figure out how to turn their lives around. It's why I have so much trouble with the story that uh, that's coddling the guys inside to ask them about their trauma histories, it's giving them an opportunity to make excuses uh, for what they did. Uh, these aren't excuses, these are explanations, and that if we don't have explanations, we can't possibly figure out how to make sure that this doesn't happen again.

- Jamie C: [00:42:58](#) What drew me to this work is just recognizing that there is a way out, and the way out is through. And when I say the way out is through, what I mean is in order to be healed and to be released, what, whatever they are suffering from must be named and processed and understood. A lot of group members consistently report it's the first time they're really, really telling the truth about their crime. If you don't talk about it, it just is inside of you and I think if it's crime, it's inside of you in very heavy and difficult ways.
- Nate: [00:43:46](#) I guess my crime started really long, you know, before uh, June 29th, 1999 when I uh, selfishly, carelessly, you know, took the life of [inaudible 00:43:57], a 20 year old young female who was... had her whole life ahead of her.
- Nate: [00:44:07](#) I was going to school, I would get bullied and stuff at school and like I, you know, go tell my older brother because my older brother was like, uh, I looked up to him, he was like a, you know in the streets he was the man, so I- I'd go get my brother and then he'll turn around and help them beat me up and you know, do stuff like that. And then I go tell my pops, and uh, you know, he'd be like, "Man, get your soft ass out of my face." Or, "Man, you aint my son." To them I was weird, like, you know, I liked to draw, play the clarinet. You know, and that's... like to them, that was, that was stupid.
- Nate: [00:44:36](#) So I stopped doing that and then when my um, older brother went to jail for murder, that kind of gave me the opportunity to basically try to fill my older brother's shoes. And so that's when, you know, I started stealing cars and committing all these kind of low crimes, which basically led to Juvenile Hall and... CYA and all that, boy's camps and stuff like that. Um, but I kind of notice now, especially looking back that the whole time I kind of became numb to like, my own feelings and everybody else's.
- Narrator: [00:45:12](#) After juvenile detention, Nate went to prison for gun possession. He was released at 21 and returned to his hometown of Richmond, California, where he was shot on five different occasions. On June 19th, 1999, he confronted a man from a rival gang that was threatening him.
- Nate: [00:45:33](#) I stopped and actually having a, you know, just a regular conversation, I'm like, "Hey look man, you know, we don't got no problems, I don't know why you, you know, making these threats." But then, you know I kind of noticed, it's like, well some of his friends started coming outside. So I had my gun the whole time, under my leg, so I kind of

just put it on my lap. And he don't know that but- so he kind of like, made a gesture to his shirt. So I just raised my gun and just started, just shot like, all in that area, and drove off.

Narrator: [00:46:00](#) The man Nate shot at was not harmed, but a bullet entered an apartment window, killing a young woman. At 22, Nate was sentenced to 60 years to life for second degree murder.

Nate: [00:46:16](#) And then I found out who it was and then I, I knew her bro- I went to school with her brother. I don't know what happened inside me, but I ended up turning myself in July 2nd. And when I got sentenced, you know, the um, her mother you know, was like, "Here's a picture and this and that." And I was just like, you know, I looked at the picture and gave it back. And she asked me why I was driving around with a gun, and I was like, "Man, people was trying to kill me. What do you think why I was driving around with a gun? I mean you, you live in Richmond, you know what goes on in your neighborhood where you stay. Man, I got shot five times."

Nate: [00:46:48](#) But I didn't, you know, I'm, I, I didn't, I didn't have the emotion or intelligence to realizing that I just took they daughter away from them. When he go to sentence me, he gave me 60 years to life, you know I kind of looked at him like, "Man, what am I getting all this time for, man? I mean, it was pretty much an accident." And that's kind of like, the story that I told myself all the way up until about, um, three years ago, it was never my fault.

Sonya Shaw: [00:47:18](#) People who are incarcerated are told, "You are your action and you're not worth anything." And what we do with VOG, what we do with restorative justice is to separate the person from the action, and say, "You are not your crime. You might have cur- committed a terrible act, but that is not who you are in the core of your being."

Sonya Shaw: [00:47:39](#) So once you can separate the act from the person, you can be deeply accountable and responsible for the act, and you can develop your core self, your sense of who you are, what you have to contribute, you know, to the world and like, the beauty of who you are. But you need that community around you to be able to mirror you and see you, and other men to tell you you're great. And the validation, and people who come from the outside and say you're doing something amazing. It's not something we can do in isolation.

Narrator: [00:48:10](#) Nate was convinced to try VOEG and other programs by men he knew from Richmond who are already benefiting from them, like James Houston.

Nate: [00:48:19](#) Houston really it's like, you know, I give a lot of credit to him man, because if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be... I wouldn't be here.

Nate: [00:48:30](#) I wouldn't be sitting here, you know, and so because of that is why I continue to try to like, put myself in the position to connect with people.

Michael Nelson: [00:48:40](#) Houston, uh, James right?

Nate: [00:48:41](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michael Nelson: [00:48:42](#) So my curiosity is around, how did you get to a point where you could connect with Houston?

Nate: [00:48:49](#) Because I knew him from the streets. He was the same person as I was.

Michael Nelson: [00:48:52](#) Mm.

Nate: [00:48:53](#) And that kind of changed my whole perspective about my involvement, and it was just real simple. I was like, "Hey man, you know, they trying to tell me to be accountable and responsible, man. It ain't my fault man. If they wouldn't have did what they did." The one thing he said that changed everything, was, "Well why you just didn't drive off?"

Nate: [00:49:12](#) Uh, I didn't have no comeback for that. So like I say, even now, you know, I try to do, you know, everything I can to uh, take account for the, you know, the actions that I cause. You know, it's kind of hard, I don't really like to show no emotions because of when I was a kid it wasn't cool to do that. Like I would always get, you know, put down or whatnot for that. And um...

Sam Johnson: [00:49:46](#) You were young, I mean, you were a kid. Your thinking wasn't there, you couldn't process what was going on. If this system we going through here was out there in every school, to sit kids down and to get their feelings and their pain and their suffering, it could help a whole lot of kids. But now they'll get educated after the crime. Before the crime would've been good, but it's after the fact. And you carry so much. And I know it's heavy on you, but I commend you for the growth you're doing now.

Michael Nelson: [00:50:20](#) I just think it's amazing that what you see in Houston, I think other people see in you.



- Sonya Shaw: [00:50:24](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Sonya Shaw: [00:50:33](#) A lot of men will say, that have participated in transformative groups, how accountability can be really liberating itself. Like deeply, deeply, like walking in the truth of what you've done can be a really liberating feeling.
- Sonya Shaw: [00:50:47](#) At the same time, they're still incarcerated, their bodies are incarcerated and there's a complexity, that's hard. So there's longing and desire and there's scarcity, and that's really tough. What's so powerful about the, sitting in a circle for 72 weeks with a bunch of people um, is that you're going through like, the layers of suffering and regret and remorse, and yet there is something beautiful that happens, you know, in being in human relationship to each other and trying to repair, um, what was broken.
- Jamie C: [00:51:21](#) Ideas about how to respond differently have to be developed and practiced. And in that journey, someone will heal and transform. And their story will change, and they will change.
- Michael Nelson: [00:51:41](#) Going through the VOEG program with Jamie, I mean, she called me out on my shit. She allowed me this opportunity to not sit in the role as a victim. Like, I felt like in that circle, in that space, I finally found my voice.
- Sonya Shaw: [00:51:58](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Michael Nelson: [00:51:59](#) And part of my voice was saying, "Hey, look at myself." Like yeah, a lot of shit was going on in my home, and how did I contribute to that?
- Sonya Shaw: [00:52:07](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Michael Nelson: [00:52:07](#) It just, it felt so freeing.
- Jamie C: [00:52:11](#) About a couple weeks after the training, I actually got really sick and within uh, four to six weeks of that training I was actually diagnosed with cancer. So I found this work that I really wanted to do, right, as I also got this diagnosis that supposedly is supposed to be terminal. My doctors sometimes tell me that they do think I will die from my cancer, prematurely. Um, so I- there- a part of my life is those conversations but a much bigger part of my life is just the miracle of this human transformation.
- Michael Nelson: [00:52:56](#) What was offered to me through Jamie and the VOEG program, I wanted to offer wherever I could. And then from there I felt like the transformation, we call it, or the shift, like started taking place.

- Jamie C: [00:53:07](#) I just feel so alive, in my work and in the beauty of it and the grace of it. It's like going out on the wings of angels in a certain kind of way. I have been this really lucky person that got to see so much of this.
- Dionne Wilson: [00:53:31](#) So, this is Daddy Bear. And my mom made this out of uh, Dan's uniform shirt. Gabby used to put little keepsakes and knickknacks in there and she clung to this bear, this was a... a really, really special thing that my mom did for us.
- Dionne Wilson: [00:54:01](#) Dan and I met at a gun store. I was actually working there, behind the gun counter. It- he is really cute, and I flirted (laughs). And I actually, it was funny because I showed him how to chamber a round in a 45 auto with one hand. And I'm sure he already knew that, but he was just having fun watching me do this ridiculous thing, but it totally works, so whatever (laughs).
- Dionne Wilson: [00:54:39](#) I was a hardliner. I labeled myself a conservative, gun rights, barbecue queen. And then when he became a police officer, it was even more cemented in my thinking. After my, my big let down, uh, I'm just feeling lost, like Dan's death was meaningless. It's just a complete waste of, of his wonderful life. And this amazing man that, that he was. And that was not okay with me. But something positive had to happen, but I had no idea how to do that.
- Narrator: [00:55:26](#) After nine years of reflection and soul searching, Dionne finds some relief from the pain of Dan's death, even shades of forgiveness for the man who killed him. She tries to have a facilitated victim offender dialogue with Irving, but is prevented due to his appeal process.
- Narrator: [00:55:50](#) Her quest for healing leads her to the VOG program at San Quentin, and the possibility of becoming a surrogate victim inside the prison. The first step is an interview to see if she is ready.
- Dionne Wilson: [00:56:04](#) What I really want to do now is make something positive come out of my husband's death. And me being a part of what you're doing uh, I really feel like it would help me get there.
- Jamie C: [00:56:18](#) I'd like to be able to explore with you the fact, is it Irwin? The offender?
- Dionne Wilson: [00:56:23](#) Irving.
- Jamie C: [00:56:24](#) Irving.
- Dionne Wilson: [00:56:25](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jamie C: [00:56:26](#) You, you know the fact that he's on death row and where your feelings are about that.

Dionne Wilson: [00:56:29](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jamie C: [00:56:29](#) And um-

Dionne Wilson: [00:56:30](#) Uh, what I did- I did write Irving a letter, and I brought it. His attorney, she read it to him.

Jamie C: [00:56:39](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dionne Wilson: [00:56:40](#) But she couldn't tell me what he said. Um, but-

Jamie C: [00:56:42](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative), and would you be willing to share the letter with me?

Dionne Wilson: [00:56:46](#) Yeah. Yeah, absolutely, I have it.

Dionne Wilson: [00:56:49](#) Dear Irving, I've tried many times to write this letter and never managed to get past the first line. First, this is not a therapy session for myself, some selfish attempt to bring closure to a tragic episode in my life. Second, I want... Second, I want to say that I forgive you. I'm pretty confident that you didn't envision your life turning out this way and I'm sorry that it has. Finally, I want to say that I'm sorry. I deeply regret my part in making people see you as less than human... As a waste of space, deserving every ounce of misery that one can endure. I no longer feel that way about you, and now realize that we all make decisions that result in terrible suffering for ourselves. You and I are not different in that regard. I have found my peace. I'm writing this in the hope that you will find yours. Sincerely, me.

Jamie C: [00:58:31](#) I want to talk about when you got really flooded with emotion. Because for us in this work-

Dionne Wilson: [00:58:36](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jamie C: [00:58:38](#) That... uh, that's where we see the real, um, transformation taking place.

Dionne Wilson: [00:58:45](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jamie C: [00:58:45](#) Is in the depth of that feeling.

Dionne Wilson: [00:58:46](#) Yeah.

Jamie C: [00:58:50](#) And um... so I'm... I'm wondering if also some of those tears were connected to um, some kind of profound

remorse around having played a part in putting him on death row.

Dionne Wilson: [00:59:10](#) Yes. That's it.

Dionne Wilson: [00:59:22](#) I don't think I realize how bad I feel about that.

Jamie C: [00:59:28](#) Yeah.

Dionne Wilson: [00:59:34](#) That's exactly what it is.

Jamie C: [00:59:35](#) Yeah.

Dionne Wilson: [00:59:39](#) I put so much effort-

Jamie C: [00:59:42](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dionne Wilson: [00:59:43](#) ... in every possible way that I could participate in him dying at the hands of the State.

Jamie C: [00:59:50](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dionne Wilson: [00:59:51](#) I did it.

Jamie C: [00:59:52](#) And here's, here's the odd thing, that hurt people hurt people. And this is the place where your two lives intersect.

Dionne Wilson: [01:00:02](#) Yeah.

Jamie C: [01:00:02](#) Because what you did on that penalty phase, and everything you did-

Dionne Wilson: [01:00:07](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jamie C: [01:00:08](#) ... to help support a death sentence, it came out of all of your own suffering.

Dionne Wilson: [01:00:15](#) Right.

Jamie C: [01:00:15](#) You know, having lost Dan.

Dionne Wilson: [01:00:15](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jamie C: [01:00:18](#) And what he did to Dan came out of his own suffering.

Dionne Wilson: [01:00:22](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jamie C: [01:00:23](#) Unprocessed and unresolved and un- maybe even unknown to him. But just like the moment that he took Dan's life-

Dionne Wilson: [01:00:32](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jamie C: [01:00:32](#) It's not the summation of what his life is and who he is, the same is true for you.

Dionne Wilson: [01:00:38](#) Right.

Jamie C: [01:00:39](#) That it's just a step you took on a journey.

Dionne Wilson: [01:00:42](#) Right.

Jamie C: [01:00:43](#) To come to terms with Dan's murder.

Dionne Wilson: [01:00:49](#) So... the, you know, the freedom I have... is um, is to make that right.

Jamie C: [01:00:57](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dionne Wilson: [01:00:58](#) Is to restore that injustice that, that I participated in. And I plan on taking advantage of that.

Jamie C: [01:01:06](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

sujatha baliga: [01:01:12](#) Some survivors are led to believe that the criminal legal system as it currently operates will give them justice, because we have been told that punishment, that the State punishing people is the only option for accountability. If you're made to believe that that's the only way you're going to get justice, and then that's what you're going to go for.

Narrator: [01:01:35](#) Six months after her interview with Jamie, Dionne attends a VOEG circle inside San Quentin. Dionne's VOEG meeting is just 50 yards from San Quentin's death row. Irving Ramirez, the man who murdered her husband is there, awaiting his execution.

Jamie C: [01:02:03](#) I really just appreciate everybody showing up. And I'm wondering if we should just maybe start with a brief check in.

Sam Johnson: [01:02:10](#) Uh, hi, I'm Sam.

Michael Nelson: [01:02:14](#) Mike, checking in, good morning everybody.

Nate: [01:02:19](#) Nate. Doing pretty good. Happy to be here.

Dionne Wilson: [01:02:24](#) Dionne. I'm just looking forward to what unfolds today.

Narrator: [01:02:30](#) Along with sharing a timeline and a letter of forgiveness, the Crime Impact Statement is another tool to help acknowledge the harm one has caused. At 20, [Sane

01:02:42] shot a 17 year old, killing him and injuring three bystanders. He was sentenced to 35 years to life for first degree murder. Sane also became a survivor, when his sister was killed while he was in prison.

Sane: [01:02:58](#) My nephew that attended a high school, he told me he's been bullied and been punked by some, some gang members. He asked me to come and, you know, pick him up. A car pulls up right behind us, about six Hispanic gang members got out the car and rushed us. He came to me for backup. We ended up both getting assaulted.

Sane: [01:03:27](#) It was two days later that I went on a rampage looking for these guys. I knew it was wrong, what we were out to do. Going out there being a... almost like a hunter and a prey. But I did it anyways. Just as we got close enough, I told him to slow down, slow down. I lean out the passenger side window, and I fired, probably six rounds. It didn't hit me at the time, but I actually saw one of- caught one of the guys' eyes, and that was one of his last moments that... of life that he had.

Sane: [01:04:24](#) And my nephew. I feel as though I got him on the wrong path. He ended up also doing life in prison, for Richard and his family. He was um, survived by a mom, a dad and a sister. I took any opportunity that- that he would've had to be a father, a husband, I don't know if this will ever make anything right, me doing the work, me helping others. But it's still something that hangs over me, that I feel that I can never make right. There's a life that's been lost because of me.

Jamie C: [01:05:20](#) Dionne, do you want... a question?

Dionne Wilson: [01:05:25](#) I just have a, kind of a... in a different- in a different way, a similar type of um, loss and shame and regret. Um, so it kind of hit me. Thank you.

Sane: [01:05:52](#) I don't know how else to repay them back, you back, society back. I don't. But I just want them and everyone else to know that this is eating me up inside.

Jamie C: [01:06:08](#) Dionne?

Dionne Wilson: [01:06:09](#) Since you've, it- have been on both ends of... of, of a killing, you're, you committed the crime and then your sister was murdered. Do you... do you feel like that affects your ability to identify as a family survivor?

Sane: [01:06:34](#) I feel that, how can I be a victim when I'm the one who caused this great suffering through everybody? And yes, it

does help. It helped me understand the impact, the pain, the loss, the sadness that other people had to endure.

Dionne Wilson: [01:06:57](#) And how do you feel towards the, the person who took your sister's life? Has- has this affected how you feel about him?

Sane: [01:07:09](#) If he was to ever cross my path, I probably would've hurt him. But that was then, I can't say that now. I don't know what I would do now but I, I wouldn't touch him. I know that he has a story too.

Sam Johnson: [01:07:34](#) You, you, you made this statement about how can you make it right? And I took it upon myself to kill somebody, and hurt somebody. Now, I owe that to society, I owed it to me. To understand what I did, to own up to what I did. That's the only way we can give back, we can never... never bring that person back. I don't deserve nothing, [inaudible 01:07:59] will never come back to life. The programs that I learn in here, in VOEG, I sit with my kids to- in the visiting room, and I teach them it. I ask them what they feel and explain to me what happened that day, and I try to use the work to have- help them, guide them. That's my, my debt to society.

Sam Johnson: [01:08:19](#) And it hurts, because it took coming to prison for us to wake up. It's not prison did it, but something clicked, it was that aha moment that woke us up. And to realize what we did. So I appreciate your truth, and I appreciate your growth. Continue to do it.

Sane: [01:08:36](#) Thank you.

Sam Johnson: [01:08:36](#) You're welcome.

Dionne Wilson: [01:08:44](#) I just want to see these programs expand into every prison. From what I understand there's a three year waiting list of men who want to get into these programs and do this amazing self-discovery. And there shouldn't be a three day waiting period.

Troy Williams: [01:09:06](#) I've been on prison yards where there was maybe an anger management class that can facilitate 25 people in a yard that held a thousand people.

sujatha baliga: [01:09:16](#) Why is it that people are more likely to be paroled when they've done a bunch of programming? What- It means that we should have programming.

Sonya Shaw: [01:09:23](#) If there are people in prison that are really coming into deep transformation and having such levels of remorse and regret, and empathy and compassion, and then giving

back and really doing that work, so that their lives don't go to waste, and maybe hopefully in honor of the life that was lost, also. It's a shame that we over-incarcerate in the way that we do.

- Narrator: [01:09:51](#) Dionne begins reaching out through advocacy and education. She joins a bipartisan coalition to promote criminal justice reform. She shares her experiences at TEDX San Quentin, represents survivors at a congressional briefing in Washington, D.C., and adds her voice to senators, the deputy attorney general, and leaders in the criminal justice reform movement at a bipartisan coalition for public safety event.
- Dionne Wilson: [01:10:22](#) In looking back now, I think the thing most responsible for separating me from love and compassion, understanding and forgiveness was seeking my healing in the misery and death of another human being. It's really sad that these programs are so rare outside of San Quentin.
- Dionne Wilson: [01:10:50](#) What if there was a drug or alcohol treatment program available when he was going in and out of the system? How might my life be different? I hate that I have to be here, I hate that I'm in this position. But I can't just sit here and do nothing and hope that our current system will somehow miraculously heal the trauma that is going on over and over and over again in our state.
- Dionne Wilson: [01:11:22](#) I ask that you set aside what you think you know about incarcerated people. I'm asking you to be open to the possibility that people can and do change. I did.
- Dionne Wilson: [01:11:35](#) We need to embrace who victims are no matter what they look like. No matter what they come from. No matter how little money they have, how little education they have. If you look, they're usually the ones filling up our prisons.
- Dionne Wilson: [01:11:54](#) Heal communities stop punishing people. If our model worked how come my husband's dead? It doesn't make any sense. The promise of public safety has not been delivered.
- Politician: [01:12:13](#) I'm just going to go out of turn for a second, um, does anybody here think that she didn't just have the biggest impact of this entire day? If Dionne and everything that she's gone through can arrive to where she's arrived at, I don't think the rest of us have any excuses. Um, you look on Twitter, people saying, "How can you guys work with conservatives?" Well uh, you know, here- here's one.



Politician: [01:12:40](#) Uh, we're, we're going to have to open our hearts up a lot bigger on both sides of the aisle if we're going to get across this finish line.

Jamie C: [01:12:51](#) I have yet to meet somebody in prison that wasn't first a victim for most of their life if not all of their life. There was so much trauma, chaos, loss, so much impact from all of that and it just built up inside of that person until eventually they were filled with rage, and at some point they started acting that out and directing it towards others. And I think the possibility of that equation exists for all people, but I think that most people in society naively believe that only certain people are capable of that kind of violence.

Sam Johnson: [01:13:35](#) Hello Jamie! You know your [inaudible 01:13:35]

Inmate: [01:13:35](#) Hey how you doing? Jamie?

Jamie C: [01:13:35](#) Hey. Hi.

Inmate: [01:13:35](#) Hello. [inaudible 01:13:35]

Jamie C: [01:13:35](#) All right.

Narrator: [01:13:50](#) With Jamie's health continuing to fade, the men inside San Quentin organize one last circle to honor her, bringing her friends and family together with those she meant so much to inside the prison.

Jamie C: [01:14:07](#) So um, I'm Jamie.

Inmate: [01:14:10](#) Really?

Jamie C: [01:14:13](#) And uh, particularly to the men in blue that ha- are talking about how emotional they feel, that really... I, I love hearing that because that's a big part of what the journey is, is tapping back into feelings, and integrating thought and feeling, and action, which is consciousness.

Jamie C: [01:14:40](#) There's something that I often said to people in my group. There's two things. One is, the way out is through so the work is not about walking away from what's painful, but walking into it. The other is that whether I'm physically here or not, um, we can always reconnect through the work and what we learned together. And so that connection never really has to be broken.

Narrator: [01:15:15](#) Jamie passed away three weeks later. In lieu of flowers, she requested donations be sent to prison rehabilitative programs.

- Troy Williams: [01:15:28](#) We can't go back and rewind the clock for ourselves, but we can surely remove some of the obstacles that's in the way for other people, right. So let's get that, that wisdom. Let's get that lived experience, right? Because I don't care... and I say this as humbly as I can, I don't care how many years a person has went to school to study um, prisons and, and, and um, criminology, right? You don't know more than somebody who has spent 20, 30 or 40 years inside that system. I think that if society opened up its arms and offered us a real seat at the table, that we could assist in the real change that needs to happen in this country.
- Troy Williams: [01:16:15](#) Like, we're, we're at this point now where, like, like, we want society um, to help us help our community. And we can't do it alone. We can't do it alone.
- Narrator: [01:16:35](#) After 26 years in prison, Sam Johnson is released on parole.
- Sam Johnson: [01:16:41](#) Sorry I've been away from you for all these years, but you turned out beautiful. I love you. Love you.
- Sam's Family: [01:17:26](#) Oh! Oh you made it [inaudible 01:17:26]
- Troy Williams: [01:17:39](#) I used to ask this question to people that, which one do you want coming home? Do you want [Bone 01:17:46], the big badass gang-banger, right, coming home? Or do you Troy, um, the aspiring entrepreneur um, and filmmaker? Because one of us coming home, right? So which, which one do you want?
- Troy Williams: [01:18:04](#) Um, and if you want the person who's going to come home and be um, a law abiding, tax paying, um, asset to his community, then more has to be done to not only just provide opportunities um, for people in prison, but opportunities for them when they come home. And um, opportunities for our young people so that they don't wind up in prison in the first place. I really hope people can really understand how that influence comes back to the community.
- Sam Johnson: [01:18:44](#) I would like to just try to help as many people as I, I possibly can. Especially the youth, to keep them from going where I went through, and prison.
- Sam Johnson: [01:18:54](#) And like, you walking with a sign on your head, "I'm a prisoner" and stuff, but people won't know it until you tell them. I walk with people, talk with people, go to church, you know, they know my story but certain people don't know it until you tell them, and then they say,

"What? He's such a nice person." You say... there was a lot of work. There was a lot of work to change, a lot of work.

Sam Johnson: [01:19:19](#) There you go.

Troy Williams: [01:19:23](#) I thought you wasn't going to show up!

Sam Johnson: [01:19:24](#) How you doing brother?

Troy Williams: [01:19:24](#) What's up man?

Sam Johnson: [01:19:24](#) Good to see you again?

Troy Williams: [01:19:26](#) What's that, are you ready?

Sam Johnson: [01:19:26](#) Yeah, I'm ready.

Troy Williams: [01:19:27](#) All right.

Narrator: [01:19:29](#) Soon after his release, Sam honors his commitment to give back to the youth in his community.

Troy Williams: [01:19:36](#) Hey Sam, I want you to come up here for a second.

Narrator: [01:19:38](#) And joins up with Troy Williams.

Troy Williams: [01:19:41](#) Oh you can sit right here.

Girl: [01:19:47](#) Growing up, I did not have my dad, you know, he was in jail and I grew up with like, that anger and that sadness.

Sam Johnson: [01:19:55](#) Okay, when I first came home, my daughter 18 years old uh, had a whole lot of rage. When she would get angry, she'd speak it out and you can hear the rage and the anger in the voice. So we sat down and we processed that.

Sam Johnson: [01:20:08](#) Her anger and her rage go deeper than what's on the surface. That day is not that day. It's... by me not being in her life, by me not being a father to her. I have four girls and one boy, and my daughters have been teaching me about love, they're teaching me about pain, Dad, and what because you weren't there, that I missed. Now I have my grandson, and I'm older and I'm [inaudible 01:20:32], I tell that little boy every day I love him.

Troy Williams: [01:20:44](#) The true lessons that resonate, um, with me, have come from, um, actually... l-living the experience. Those moments with, um, with other men and you know, watching them laugh, watching them cry, um, watch them wrestle with the dynamics of they life, um, and to watch someone model what uh, transformation looks like.

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Troy Williams: [01:21:23](#) I found a mechanism that allowed me to not only just dig deep, but it actually gave words to what my spirit knew.