

Jason Holland: My name is Jason Holland. I'm 41 years old. When I was a teenager, I was living a reckless life, misguided youth. Or actually, I should say wayward youth because I have to take responsibility for my actions. But I was making some decisions that clearly weren't good in my life. And, eventually, they resulted in me taking someone's life. And at 19, I was sentenced to life without parole for felony murder. And I've been in prison ever since.

Tim Ferriss: Thank you.

Jason Holland: Yes, sir.

Ian Villatoro: Tim, welcome to prison.

Tim Ferriss: Thank you.

Ian Villatoro: My name is Ian Villatoro. I'm 37 years old. I've been incarcerated for the past 10 years. I am serving a sentence for two counts of armed robbery, firearm, deadly weapon. Unfortunately, I went through a really bad divorce in 2006. I think that was perhaps the significant event that kind of led me here. I didn't cope well. In fact, I made all the wrong decisions. And I made some very poor choices, obviously. I gravitated back to the crowd that I used to run with, when I was much, much younger. And I'm here now. And I'm trying to make the best of who I am now, basically.

Brandon Menard: My name is Brandon. When I was 21, I was incarcerated for murder. I'm serving life without parole. When I was younger, I had some real issues, socially, reacting, interacting with people. It caused me sort of compartmentalize my life among groups of people. And it took an enormous amount of emotional energy to uphold that. And as it started to fall apart, and I became desperate to latch onto these people, it led me to make some really, really bad choices. And, as a result, I've been incarcerated for the last 13 years in May.

Tim Ferriss: Thank you, guys. So, the question, really, in my mind, as I'm getting educated here, it's my first time, like I mentioned, kind of on the other side of the walls, is what were the moments or the conversations that led you guys to want to start building in a different direction? Because there are a lot of people here who don't choose to change the path. And there was just recently some violence here, and I understand the politics and sort of gang orders and so on here can be really complex. I don't even pretend to understand it. But like in your cases, you've chosen to try to build in a different direction. So, maybe we can just go – whoever wants to go first could just let me know what catalyzed that.

Jason Holland: Okay. That's a very good question. I had been incarcerated for about 19 years. I was validated in the SHU as a –

Tim Ferriss: SHU is the –

Jason Holland: That's the lock down unit, security housing unit. And I was validated as a prison gang associate, at that point. I was housed in a deep seg section.

Tim Ferriss: What gang were you part of?

Jason Holland: I was associated with [CENSORED]. And in prison, in this world, I had a lot of prestige. I had a lot of power. And after 19 years, I was sitting in the SHU, and I realized, even though I had this much prestige and this much power, I was living an empty life. It was meaningless.

Tim Ferriss: And that was isolation? Were you by yourself?

Jason Holland: Yes, I was by myself, at that point. And one day, a friend came to me, and he was telling me about changes that were happening in the law. And he said, "Look, if you ever want to get out of the SHU, you need to start making some decisions." And I didn't want to take ownership of my life, at the time. And so, I was arguing with him. I was blaming everyone else. And then, he said something that I couldn't argue with. He said, "Look, whether you realize it or not, through your own decisions or decisions that you've allowed people to make for you, you've put yourself in a box." And, at that point, I couldn't argue with that. and so, I had to come to terms with that. And I had to start making some real decisions. And that was a big moment for me.

Tim Ferriss: And that was a friend on the inside here?

Jason Holland: No, that was actually a friend from the outside. And he kind of hit me with the hard truth. And then, I started realizing what do I want from my life. Or I started asking myself those strong questions, and I had to start making some strong decisions. And from there, it's been a path of growth.

Tim Ferriss: What were some of the first or the first kind of decision that you made that was different from how you would have made decisions in the past?

Jason Holland: Well, first, I had to start taking responsibility. I had to start realizing that I was the one that was creating my circumstances. It was no one else. And then, if

I wanted to change things in my life, what were the decisions I had to make. And so, the first thing I needed to do was just get away from what I had been accepting for myself, and that's being involved with gangs and criminal activities. And so, once I disassociated and left, then, it was, from there, what do I do now. And it was just a matter of reconstructing my identity and finding new values.

Tim Ferriss: And, at that point, when you left the gang, you then moved from one section of – was it at this prison?

Jason Holland: No, it was a different prison. It was in Corcoran.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. And were you then – you were moved to a different location within the prison, or was it –

Jason Holland: Yes. To a different unit for people that were going through that process.

Tim Ferriss: Got it.

Jason Holland: Thank you.

Ian Villatoro: So, for me, God, I guess I can start in 2013. Back then, I was a member of a prison gang here. And for the most part, I've, throughout my prison career, as we call it, assimilated completely my environment. I –

Tim Ferriss: Which gang was that?

Ian Villatoro: I'd rather not say.

Tim Ferriss: That's fine, and I can take it out later, if you want.

Ian Villatoro: I was part of the problem here, clearly. And I remember I think the moment that everything changed for me was I was assigned to education.

Tim Ferriss: What does that mean?

Ian Villatoro: Education, just regular AB1, AB2, AB3, just regular adult basic education.

Tim Ferriss: I see, you were assigned.

Ian Villatoro: I was assigned there, so that I can, eventually, earn my GED. And I was sitting in the back doing all of the things that I shouldn't be doing with the homies, and I just got tired of it. And I just didn't want to be there anymore. I had two ways of going about it to get out of education, at least that's what I thought, at the time. There were actually a third way. I decided just take the GED test, and that way, I would be able to get out of there. And that's exactly what I did. I took the GED test, and I passed it. I showed up about two months later. I got called up to receive my certificate. And while I was standing in line waiting to get my certificate, somebody who was ahead of me made a comment about now going to college because now, he had a GED. He was a high school graduate, and he was going to go to college.

But the way that he said it, he was being sarcastic. But he said it in a way where someone in the room turned around and looked at him with like this look of disgust, disbelief. And it just so happened that, at that precise moment, he turned and looked at me. And I caught the full force of that look, that disgust. And it angered me because, back then, my mentality was completely different. And I kind of set out to prove, from that point forward, that, you know what, look at me how you want to look at me, but I'm going to prove to you that even a gang member, even someone like me, can get a college education. Back then, the college programs were very, very scarce. It took a moment for me to – it took a little while for me to even find the college coordinator on the facility. And I wrote a couple of community colleges.

Eventually, they wrote back. I got into **Lastin** Community College up north. And I started taking correspondence courses. And so, here I am, I'm sitting in a housing unit filled with all of my homies because here, in this facility, they house all of the gang members together just to kind of control the violence on the yard. And after the first year, here I am knee deep in college work studying sociology, psychology, philosophy, and just really taking it on. And one day, I just kind of looked up, and I realized I don't belong here. I was completely out of place.

Tim Ferriss: Meaning in the gang environment.

Ian Villatoro: In the gang environment. And for the first time, I was able to kind of see the world through a clear lens. So, for me, it was definitely education. And that was five years now, and I've earned several college degrees. And I can honestly say that education truly transformed me. I was still stuck there, and it took someone in the administration to give me an opportunity to change, to really make that transition into who I wanted to be. Associate Warden Goss who, at the time, was the captain on our

facility. He gave me that opportunity. So, it wasn't just me wanting to. I needed that help. And, fortunately, I was able to find that here. And it's been a sprint since, and I haven't stopped.

Tim Ferriss: Thank you.

Brandon Menard: Well, so, I'm kind of the odd man out, in a lot of ways. So, I was never in a gang. I came in, and I was the guy who was going to be used up on the main line. I was the guy they were going to give the knife and say, hey, go get that guy.

Tim Ferriss: What is used up on the main line?

Brandon Menard: It pretty much means that I was expected to do the dirty work as it needed to be done. And then, when I was caught up and washed up and done and done in or whatever, nobody was going to really worry about it too much because I wasn't in the mix. I wasn't in that whole politics side. So, I did that exactly once.

Tim Ferriss: Can you just elaborate on what that means?

Brandon Menard: Yeah. So, a guy came up to me on the yard, and he, basically, said, "Hey, this guy, we need to jump on him because he owes money." And I tried to get out of it, but I really didn't have a lot of options because they said we're doing this in about two minutes.

Tim Ferriss: I got it. You were like a free agent.

Brandon Menard: And I was not a free agent.

Tim Ferriss: Well, you were a compelled agent.

Brandon Menard: I was associated no matter – yeah, I was a free agent who was told you're going to do this. So, I did it, and it was cowardly. I hate it, but I did it. And I ended up in doing a SHU term like Jason but much shorter and Ian here. I got out. I came to another main line yard, and they asked me to do it again. And I said no. We're not doing that. So, they jumped on me instead. So, that was fun. I came over here to SNY, that's when you're not associating with the main line politics. So, I just kind of figured I would fly under the radar. I was just going to do my own thing on my own by myself. And slowly but surely, I just started to get into a couple of things, talk to certain people. I wrote an article for a newsletter, things like that.

And it, eventually, led to me getting offered a job in the chapel, which, if you would have told me when I was say 21 that I'd be working in a chapel, the answer would have been zero because I was 21 and knew everything and was this militant atheist and blah, blah, blah. So, the idea was absolutely unheard of. But I was really desperate for something. I needed to have something to do. So, I took the job. And I remember having a conversation with my boss, Chaplain Krantz, so shout out to the chaplain. And he sits me down, and he, basically, says, "So, tell me about how you look at things." So, I gave him this really profound like 30 minute conversation about how I knew everything and everything was relative and this and that. And I might be paraphrasing this, but he, basically, sits back, and he goes, "Wow, that's really stupid."

And I reflected on that for a while. And he started to, systematically, over the next few months, just like break down every stupid little belief I had and slowly but surely started to turn me around. So, I give him a lot of credit for me kind of going positive, as it were.

Tim Ferriss: Can I pause for one second?

Brandon Menard: Sure.

Tim Ferriss: What were some of the new beliefs that ended up being most helpful to you?

Brandon Menard: The biggest thing, the biggest teaching that he gave me was the theory of teleology, telos. So, all people have an inherent dignity. Everybody has a potential. And if everybody has this dignity and this potential, then, everybody is valuable. Every human life is valuable. We should treat them so. So, this was the basis of morality that I never had. Everything I thought was relative, if it's good for me, it's good for me. If it's good for you, it's good for you. And that's a bunch of crap. That doesn't work. That leads to a very bad place. So, this whole concept now, and really driving it home, and it's been 16 month in the making so far. But that, for me, has been the pivotal thing is just understanding concepts of morality.

Going from an atheist to a guy who is somewhat of an odd agnostic who acknowledges there's a higher power but doesn't know what it is yet. So, for me, that's a huge shift. And so, I credit that to me getting into the things that I recognize as enforcing morality or enforcing human dignity and the idea that everybody is valuable.

Tim Ferriss: Thank you. So, I'd love to hear from you, Jason, basically the same question. How has the way you looked at the world changed? Or what beliefs or habits have really helped you keep you on a better path or to help you to feel like you're building towards something?

Jason Holland: Okay. Very good question. So, when I first left the SHU, and I was going through this process of, basically, reconstructing my identity because I had this persona before and now, it's gone.

Tim Ferriss: Right. And you had status, too, it sounds like.

Jason Holland: Right. Yeah, I did. And so, I come over here, and I didn't really know what to do. I started re-investing in my education because I didn't know really what to do. I started getting into these groups. And then, what happened was I was really lucky. I came to this yard, and I met these guys. And I started working around them. And then, I started getting introduced to some of the same ideas, human dignity.

Tim Ferriss: How did you get –

Jason Holland: Well, it was just kind of on the yard, but they knew I was coming.

Brandon Menard: I remember he was coming.

Jason Holland: My brother and I were coming here. And so, we kind of make as splash where we go, and we got introduced, one way or another. And, eventually, I started working with them. And I saw what they were doing, what they were doing here with the program and the pioneer and all of these different things, these interesting things. And, at this point, I started changing my whole perspective around it. And mostly, the biggest thing for me was I knew what I didn't want. And I knew I had to get rid of criminality out of my mindset. And I knew I had to stop cutting corners. And then, like I said, when I started working with them and started getting introduced to the idea of human dignity. So, human dignity, doing things in the right way, not doing them in a criminal way.

And from there, my whole perception started changing on how I approach people, how I approach situations, how I identify options to solving challenges and problems, finding tools, seeking out mentors, things like that. So, that's, basically – and it's still an ongoing process.

Tim Ferriss: So, it sounds like the three of you spending time together has – I’m taking it just kind of one degree further than what I’m hearing, but it seems like that’s been important.

Jason Holland: Crucial.

Ian Villatoro: Absolutely. We’re a team here. We’ve kind of – through all of the things we’ve been able to accomplish on this facility, we’ve been able to kind of form a community of sorts. And it’s really a team effort up front. I know that, for me, even the whole change process, it was a process. But I had to first come to that realization that I can do better, that I could be better. I had to accept it, and I had to believe it. And that’s what we try to get guys to do on the facility on the yard is believe it. Believe in yourself. Believe that you can be better, you can do better.

Tim Ferriss: How do you convince them of that? When you approach somebody for the first time, A) how do you choose the person you approach, and then, what do you say? Anybody can hop in.

Brandon Menard: One of the things is being in the right place at the right time. We have self-taught and picked up and questioned other people about everything from effective communication techniques to ways of getting people over twisted values. I mean –

Tim Ferriss: Why do you guys do it?

Brandon Menard: Because, speaking for myself, just because I’m a masochist, and it needs to be done. When I look out at some people here or anywhere else, for that matter, you watch the news, you watch TV, any of it, it just sometimes feels like people are skin and bones. They need to be flushed out a little. And me, too. I’m just as bad. But I think that it’s a communal thing. Everybody needs to be pitching in because no man is an island. So, we just need to be there. We need to be available. We need to be intentional. We need to really try to help everybody elevate themselves because, if we humanize everyone, we humanize ourselves. And if we cut people down, we’re just cutting ourselves down, too. And it applies here on steroids.

Tim Ferriss: Well, it seems like everything is magnified here.

Brandon Menard: Things are a lot more intensified. It’s a lot more potent here, at least in my opinion, because everybody here is a little extreme, in some ways.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah.

Jason Holland: And you never know who it's going to be, where the light bulb is going to click, where it's going to go on. One day, we could be working on a guy for a year just trying to have the right exchanges and interactions with him, and one day, he just gets it. Whereas another day, we could think he's making progress, and then, something happens. And we have to come in and try to help him and see what happened.

Tim Ferriss: What are some of the approaches or expressions or concepts that you've seen help redirect people? When you see people click, and any of you can jump in on this one.

Ian Villatoro: I think the biggest thing, for me, it's I've been there. So, I know what it feels like to not have hope and not have purpose. There are a lot of guys in here who are lacking those two things. And I know what it feels like.

Tim Ferriss: Hope and purpose.

Ian Villatoro: Hope and purpose. And it's very, very powerful. And that's what we try to give them. We try to give them a dose of purpose, whether it's through some sort of program or whether it's just some one on one interaction, we try