

“There’s No Us Without You Guys, There’s No You Guys Without Us”

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Featuring Shakir Abdullah, Rahim Gray, and Joseph Irizarry

Rahim: 00:10

From the greater Boston area, you are listening to the MyTERN podcast, brought to you by the Tufts University Education Reentry Network. These are stories of life during and after incarceration told by people who are living it and working to overcome the odds.

Joseph: 00:39

You know, there's one thing that I've learned while incarcerated. Prior to, you know, doing any type of college programming, I spent some time in DDU. My time in DDU solitary confinement was a pivotal moment in the sense that that's the time I actually took reading serious. I also found that the more I read, the more I got upset, because I found the less I knew. And I thought I knew a lot already; as a young person, we grow up believing that the world is ours, that we're infallible, you know, that nothing can touch us. That's how it was with me when I first started to read in solitary confinement. And there were so many days that I literally threw a book at a wall because I got upset. I got upset about what I was learning and how it was just waking up so many different parts of my brain that I hungered for more knowledge. And I can at least take charge at this moment and become the best of myself. I'm growing from trauma, you know, I'm becoming what I need to be.

Joseph: 01:53

My name is Joseph. I served about 20 years of incarceration...on a murder conviction.

Rahim: 02:08

How're you doing, my name's Rahim. My first time getting arrested was with a couple of friends. We were doing stupid stuff. My buddies had robbed a guy, and I was there. But when I say I was there, I was the guy like standing on, you could call me the lookout. I literally was like, “yo, y'all are crazy. Like, what are y'all doing?”

Shakir: 02:27

My name is Shakir Abdullah. My story is a very, very long story. I spent 30 years in prison for a crime I didn't commit. However, I don't complain about it that much, because it transformed my life.

Rahim: 02:54

The fact that I didn't stop it, I regret, you know, but I was like, 15, I was young. And we all get caught. And that was the beginning of dealing with the courts and all that. It was crazy.

Joseph: 03:13

It is really nerve racking for individuals after they complete their first 15 years to be eligible for parole, in the sense that anything can happen after that.

Rahim: 03:24

Back and forth for misdemeanors left and right. Get arrested back when weed was illegal. I've been to jail for weed, you know- for a little bit. I had a warrant, I get pulled over in Brookline, I go to jail in Brooklyn, I stay the night there. They transfer me to Nashua Street, and I stay the whole day and night there. And that was like a whole nother thing because by the time I actually do get to Dorchester Court, that was just enough to have me just not want to ever deal with that again.

Joseph: 04:05

I met a lot of guys, a lot of tough guys, and to hear some of the stories some of the guys will go through because they did a lot of bad things when they first came into prison. And all those things are catching up to them, you know, and I just sit back and reflect like, I'm glad I was never tested that way.

Shakir: 04:34

My journey is a whole journey of just transformation and a lot of obstacles and misfortunate situations. And to come out better than it was before I went into education is...I'm very fortunate.

Rahim: 05:06

I mean, I grew up in Dorchester, so I went to school in Mecho, which bused inner city kids to suburb schools. So that's a whole nother side of the playing field. A whole different atmosphere. I was out there all the way up until I got kicked out and did my senior year at Dorchester high, which was Boston Public, which was like, straight out of the movies like, when we went to class, I swear, people playing cards over there and there's like three textbooks. It was a dramatic difference from, you know, a suburban school. And I felt like I was just mad at myself for all the opportunities that I squandered. But, you know, after I went to school there, I still didn't even graduate. When I got done with that I was just like a joke. And I went right after that and got my GED.

Shakir: 06:01

When I think about all the things that my mom was going through, and we were going through as a family and education I was getting from school at the time, that education really wasn't addressing what I was going through. So anyway, I end up dropping out of high school, I think in the ninth grade. The very next year, at the age of 16, I went to the University of Alabama got a GED. And even after I got the GED, I still didn't utilize it in terms of expanding my education, because there's social orders in America.

Rahim: 06:41

Early on I knew, if I wanted to go to college, I have to figure out some way to get money, or some grants, or some type of...you know, I'm great at basketball...or some type of something that'd help me get through this process that, for other people, it was super easy. It was...before they were born, it was taken care of. So, I just knew from the beginning, the odds were stacked against me for school. But as far as like, wanting education, it's like, everybody wants education, but how much do you want it if you go somewhere that they don't want you to want it? You know what I mean? So that's what I had to deal with.

Joseph: 07:37

When TUPIT Inside Out got to Concord it was: yeah, this is where I belong. This is what I need. I started taking college courses when I was transferred to Louisiana, and they presented a college course on business management. So that's when I first started taking college. I thought it was fun. I thought it was exciting. I thought it was a challenge. You know, I got good grades. And then I was brought back to Massachusetts, and I was tryin to get put to Norfolk cause that's the only place that they had college, inside prison. So that was my objective: let me get to Norfolk as much as I can try, Imma always try. I got my lawyer involved and everything. It just wasn't...there was no budge. Then, Hillary came for the first cohort Inside Out class, and initially, I didn't think I was gonna get in, you know. And then I did get in.

Shakir: 08:39

When the college courses were offered, I wasn't initially accepted into the first cohort. I received a letter and he told me I hadn't been accepted. So the following week, I got another letter that I didn't receive. I went to law library, and one of the officers asked me, he said, "Did they call you for school?" I said, No. He said, "What's your name?" And I told my name and he went into the hallway and came back and said, "Yeah, they called you for this class." And so I went down there and it was the college class. And so that's how I initially ended up gettin in the class.

Joseph: 09:16

For me, it was a little bit different. So then I got in and me and another guy we was in the law library, we was writin somethin up. And the principal came to me and say, "Hey, you wanna do the interview?" And I was like, "Yo, I'm in shorts. And I got my dog." He's like, "Bring your dog, it doesn't matter about the shorts. Just go on in there." And I went in there. Hilary was sittin there and another staff member and we got to talkin. I got accepted a couple of weeks later. And, I mean, that experience alone, the Inside Out class, just

was great. You know, it was somethin I was really looking forward to because I already had a little bit of prison college experience. But this was very much different because the last one was just guys from inside. You know, we're learning from inside. And we was learning from a professor that's never thought of herself as ever coming into a prison, so she came in with her own hang-ups. And then when I got the Tufts, it was just very different, you know what I mean. It was Inside Out, we had Medford students in there and it was a great co-lab, the best that could possibly be made inside prison.

Shakir: 10:25

I don't believe that anything has been haphazard. I think that was all designed to be that way, even though I didn't have no input in it. So this is how I ended up getting involved with the college program on the inside.

Joseph: 10:43

You know, in prison, a guy coming in, or a woman coming in, and knowin that they could get good-time credit, or a deduction off their sentence, if they do a certain amount of programs a year, that's a hustle. They're hustling their way through the system, doin everything possible just to get home, so that they could get back into the mess that they probably was in before. The difference with what TUPIT is providing is the opportunity of MyTERN. Because it's a program that exists within prison, but there's an extension to that program upon release. You know, no other prison program is providing that. And that's the big difference. So you have an opportunity to educate yourself while there, and then be a part of a community when you get out. And knowing that that exists, that right there changes their whole hustle. We met a lot of good people, and it was certainly somethin that we expected every week, like I can't wait till next week when class comes again. So it also helps the time go by faster because if you just sittin with the same monotony every day, time seems to drag. But if you have somethin to look forward to, you know, if it's not a visit, then at least it's college class. Allows a lot of time to go by a lot faster.

Rahim: 12:26

I came into MyTERN by just tryin to exhaust all the different avenues of like finding a meaningful career. I'm an artist and a chef. For me, education was one of those things that I knew when I was in high school and I got kicked out of high school- you know: pipeline to prison. It was, it was crazy that the first thought that came to my mind when I got kicked out of school was that like, I'll never go to college, you know, I'll never be able to afford that. Just get a job, join society, and so on. So, school, like, I just never really had that, I'll go to school, because I can't afford to pay. So I had a couple programs that I was doing that open doors to then have people reach out and say, "Hey, would you be interested in a program called MyTERN," and I took that opportunity, which has been awesome for me to further my education.

Shakir: 13:31

I didn't have a correct understanding education in terms of it benefitin your life and, helpin you out with those issues and situations that you was goin through and stuff like that. Where MyTERN is different because you meet so many people on your journey, like students, professors. And it has a tendency to transform the way you think, the way you live, your consideration about things are more about those

people than it is you just goin out doin the act. You know what I'm sayin? And how would they feel if somethin like this happened? So it transforms your life in many ways that we don't even understand or recognize. I'm probably able to explain this only because I've experienced it. Had this experience not presented itself, that explanation wouldn't have been even spoken about.

Rahim: 14:33

Yeah, I agree. And I feel like, for me, it was a little different. Like I've been out for a while longer than y'all, so the fact that I look at you all and I'm like, dang, y'all accomplished so much in such a short time. It gives me no excuse for what the hell have I been doing with all of my time? And I think it makes me want to work harder to be like, I don't have an excuse. And I think the biggest part was I wasn't ready to take that step and to be like, alright, I'm done messing around. When I got presented the opportunity to do this program, I didn't want to do it. And I would say, the first month was hard. It was real hard. Like, do I fit in here? It was a lot of listenin. And I was like, you know what, this is definitely gonna help, this is definitely gonna help the direction I'm tryin to go. Like, I'd be crazy to pass up this opportunity.

Shakir: 15:28

Yeah, I wanted to say somethin about the Medford students. There's a reciprocity between us and them that shows that human beings need other human beings. Everyone, they start out in life the same way. So when I'm sittin beside one of these Medford students, I don't look at them no different. Because I didn't start out the way that they started out and they didn't start the way I started out. However, we are learnin and growin from one another. And that's the beauty of that. That's actually the paradigm of how the world should work, that we should help one another. You know what I mean? So just on a microcosm, we have it here. So when I look at them, I don't see it no different. I see them as help-mates. And as reciprocal, because I could teach them things about the street life that they would be oblivious to, that would save their life. And they could teach me things about college that I'm oblivious to that might...

16: 32: Joseph

Help your grade!

16:24: Shakir

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So I think that that experience itself, for me is unique.

Rahim: 16:45

Yeah, I think I'm still here because the support has been tremendous. To get support that I never asked for, or even thought I could get, as far as, just people believing in me and not wanting to let down my classmates, you know. It's like a lifeline for me. I just don't want to waste this opportunity.

Joseph: 17:08

And that's very important, too. Because, again, it goes back to our own experiences. We all come from diverse backgrounds. We know what we know, you know? I think that there's a great exchange here. Because whereas I might not know how to...even though I know Venn diagrams, but let's just say I don't know Venn diagrams, and I'm askin a Medford student, "hey, help me out with this." You know, when it comes to talkin about what they wanna know about prison, I got all the details on that. I know the nuances, you know, all those little things that some people will never even try to understand or think that there was a great difference. But there is, you know.

Rahim: 17:51

I like that sittin next to these Medford students, like in five years, 10 years, 20 years, they're gonna be people that have positions of power that learn from this environment that we're all in. That's gonna change the perception that society makes normal, that society upholds with all the stuff you see. A lot of people believe what is on TV and social media, like that's how they live their lives. It explains... you know, you drivin behind somebody and they're drivin super slow, and you're like, "Yo, what are they doing, they're not paying attention?" They're on their phone, they're not payin attention, they're lost. And I feel like with this class, it's awesome to be able to be a part of somethin that like, I hope you guys get to a place where you see somebody that'll remind you of me, and you give em a chance to prove you wrong, you know what I mean? Instead of just acting on that: aw this person's probably no good, and you treat them accordingly. This class is cool, cause everybody...I didn't feel judged at all in this class. I really felt welcomed. And I know that that changes, like a manager: when you gotta hire somebody, like you all will have a different look on people that look like me.

Shakir: 19:13

There's no us without you guys, there's no you guys without us.

Joseph: 19:27

We could reflect at the history: the fact that they took away Pell grants from prison, the fact that they took away colleges in prison. You know, a lot of states still fought to keep them there, and they found ways where they could still go in and teach, but for the most part, the funding was taken away. You know what I mean? The damage was already done. A person spends one month in prison, they need to rehabilitate, but if you're still that same person that you were before you got locked up, what is there to rehabilitate? You was okay before you got to prison. The thing is that prison traumatizes you so much that you need to rehabilitate, not because there was something wrong with you prior to incarceration, no, there's something wrong with you because of incarceration.

Rahim: 20:15

Yeah I wanna make it the norm: if you go to prison, then you have to go do some programming, learn something. You here for four years? Then you can get a degree. Here's how we can help you.

Joseph: 20:24

Although so many men and women can be successful on their own, there are so many blockades by probation, parole, you cannot interact with other persons that have been incarcerated and those other persons may be the ones that help you out. And it might not just be through a job or a program, it could just be in other ways that are very supportive that the parole and probation do not see that as something that is beneficial.

Rahim: 20:54

That's the thing. You know, the biggest part was that I was ready to do somethin different and come here.

Shakir: 21:00

And I agree with you.

Rahim: 21:01

Like I don't know why society, why we just accepted that that's society norms, to just make it hard for people to get to where they have to go.

Joseph: 21:10

Yeah, no doubt, but like you said, we should make this a norm. You know what I mean? And not so much as the idea of an exception, because that's sad, all in itself, that's truly sad.

Shakir: 21:33

There is human resilience in every human being, and they only just need to be given an opportunity.

Rahim: 21:43

Both of you all are getting out with your feet running, like accomplishing things. And I look at, well, what was I doing two years ago?

Shakir: 21:54

I sit beside a person, say he's a murderer, he's been in prison for 30 years. But that's not something that I detect. I sit beside a person that's been in prison for 20 years, that's been locked up and everything that you would think a maniac, but I sit beside him. And it doesn't appear that way to me. I'm sittin beside a person that's been locked up just a few years. You know, he doesn't seem like a maniac to me. So what difference is between me and them? It's that resilience.

Rahim: 22:28

Seein people that have gone through, like...y'all did mad time. You know what I'm sayin? Trust me, every day, I'm just like, damn. Y'all don't know that. You're stronger than me. You know what I'm sayin? That I look up to you all. You know, when I make art, I do think of you all. I'm like, I wonder what they would think? I wonder how they would look at it? And I value all you guys' stories and stuff you've gone through. Because I don't need to put that shoe on to understand...y'all speak it so well. So, thank y'all. I guess it's like pure motivation to be like, damn, I gotta, step my game up. You know?

Joseph: 23:12

Yeah, that's cool. That's definitely cool. You gotta step your game up. We all do. You're an inspiration as well. You know, to see you doin the things that you do: the art, your ambition. And at the same time, sayin, you know what, I'm not gonna settle for less because I believe in myself to be worthy of much more. So that is even inspiring. That motivates me: to say, you know what, this young man has been out here, he's been doing it, he's making somethin of himself. And I need to do that myself. You know what I mean? So don't think that it's just one sided. And that's just the reality with the whole community in itself. We all are learning from one another, we all are being inspired by one another. It takes time, but when we finally see it, we're like, wow. And I'm very conscious of it. You know what I mean? The moment I hear one of you guys speak, I'm like, wow, that's amazing what they just said, you know what I mean? And it just clicks. And it's just like, wow, there's a beautiful mind there. And I admire it all the time.

The reality is that, well, it may look like we hit the ground runnin, but we just make it look good. There's a lot of internal struggles that go on, behind the scenes struggles. But I just realized, you know what...I'm free and I'm enjoyin life. Whatever happens will happen. You know everything in its due time. And I think that's something that for myself and Shakir—you know I think Shakir is way more patient than I. To sit behind the wall after 30 years and say hey, I'm innocent of this. And nobody really cares, until decades later. And then people really try to help you pick up the pieces so that you can really come back out? Man, that's some serious patience.

Joseph: 25:21

While incarcerated, you hear a lot of stories of a lot of guys that come home after doing an excessive amount of time, they're afraid to socialize with others, or they're so used to being isolated, they love being in their own room in the house, away from everybody for days. And then you find that you can only function if you go back. But you don't register that, that's just a seed in the thought that just sits there until you go back to prison. And then you're flourishing all over again, behind the prison walls. So having MyTERN as a dual college and re-entry program will be able to build this type of community, it is very supportive for us.

Shakir: 26:07

Going to prison was very important to me because it added another dimension to my education, which redefined my whole life.

Joseph: 26:17

Like seriously, take advantage of this. Think about your future. Get to Boston when you get out. Even if you live in Springfield, Holyoke, get to Boston. If you got to go to another state, think about the possibilities of staying here. Just to take advantage of this opportunity that truly is once in a lifetime.

Rahim: 26:37

Everything just came together and made this beautiful dish— being chef minded. Just everything works. So it's like, I'm so happy and I'm so proud to be in class with you guys. With my fellow students who've gone through stuff that's like, damn, that's life. And then to learn from it.

Joseph: 26:58

Especially for individuals that have our background: of growin up in poverty, seein violence all our lives, being traumatized. You know, we don't have many opportunities where we could advance ourselves personally. And not only advance ourselves personally, but also find in it the tools to be supportive to others. And I think that's very important. I think that's where we are today: from comin inside prison to MyTERN.

Rahim: 27:29

Everybody's different. And I think me as an individual, it took that process and that path to get to the point where I was just like, Yo, I got to do somethin different. And it's crazy how when you start thinkin that, when you say that...like how my bed is I wrote on the side where the dresser is stuff that I can say, because when you say it, you believe it and when you believe it, it happens. It's like puttin it in the universe: I am strong, I am smart. I am beautiful, like I can do it.

Joseph: 28:07

Thank you for listening to the MyTERN Podcast. The MyTERN program is a Tufts University-accredited program, providing education, mentorship, and career development support to — and by — those who have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system. MyTERN's objective is to provide an opportunity for each participant to rediscover and reframe their skills, interests, responsibilities, and commitments. This podcast is created and produced in partnership with Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life and the Bridging Differences Grant Program. Music brought to you by Bernell Jones II. Cover art brought to you by Rahim Gray (Instagram: @rahimgrayart). Learn more or support MyTERN at TUPIT.org.