

David 0:01

I went through that as a kid, I know the pain that that caused me and my family, like, and I still made that same choice. Like when I had my daughter, I promised her like, I would never leave her side.

Christina 0:14

I had a dad growing up. So I know how crucial and important that is and I never would want my kid to be without that, with her already having experience going into jails and seeing how things work.

Willie 0:26

From the Greater Boston area, you are listening to MyTERN conversations brought to you by Tufts Education Reentry Network. These are stories of life during and after incarceration told by people who've lived it, and are working to overcome the odds. As a warning, this podcast series contains material about emotional and physical trauma that may be upsetting to some audiences.

Christina 0:57

In this episode, we will be discussing the relationship between parenting and incarceration. You'll hear about the emotional trauma and stories of perseverance experienced by both children and parents impacted by the criminal justice system.

David 1:11

My name is David. I recently came home. I've served seven and a half years in state prison. I have an 11 year old daughter, who I'm trying to be the best possible father in the world to.

Christina 1:23

Hi, my name is Christina. I'm a parent that has been impacted by the justice system. I have a six year old daughter and I'm currently on federal probation.

Willie 1:33

Hi, I'm Willie. I'm a father of two daughters that are 15 and seven, and I'm currently on federal probation.

David 1:40

Being a parent while incarcerated is extremely difficult, like it's the deepest emotional tie. And then you're so far removed from the person that you're emotionally tied to that it's like you feel like you're disconnected from the world in a sense. So when I went in, my daughter was three years old, I ended up coming home when she was almost 11. I served seven and a half years on a 10 and a half year sentence. I'm out on parole right now. Just seeing her like I remember first going in, and not really understanding the context of what I did and how it would negatively affect everybody around me. And then like my mother and my girlfriend, I would constantly be calling them and they're like, Oh, you want us to bring her? You want us to bring her? And I'm like, No, I don't ever want her to see me like this. Like, I wanted her to be so far removed from

any of this. Like, I didn't want her to know where I was like, I didn't even know how to deal with that. So then I remember like 10 months down the road, like, I'm realizing like, Hold up, I'm not going home, I gotta go to trial, like, I'm probably gonna go to state prison. Like, I want to see my daughter like it was about to be her birthday coming up. I'm like, yo, I'm losing it. Like, I have to see my kid. And that was like, the first time I had cried in so long was like just her being behind glass and me being behind glass and just not being able to touch her. And I remember just that year, she had grown like a foot. Her hair was longer. And I just remember saying, oh my god, you're so pretty. And she was like, Thank you Poppy. And I just cried like a baby, I just melted into a million pieces.

Willie 3:04

So what's the biggest difference you think, from parenting behind the wall to now being home, and she's calling you for rides, you guys are hanging out. And you guys are officially, you know, together now.

David 3:20

Um, I would say the biggest difference is like you literally have to be engaged and present in every little moment. Like the pickups, the drop offs, like you have to be ready at all times for parenting like, this is not a job that just ends. Like when we're incarcerated, we get that 20 minute phone call that hour long visit, you know, we might do a little something here and there. But that does not compare to the day in and day out grind of being a parent, like, and that taught me a lot.

Christina 3:47

So Willie, how old was your daughter, when you got locked up?

Willie 3:51

She was three years old.

David 3:53

My daughter had also just turned three years old when I got locked up.

Christina 3:56

So Stella was just turned one when her dad got locked up. So I think the difference is that she didn't get to build that relationship before him going in. And he didn't really get to learn how to be a dad either. So I think that's the difference.

David 4:12

I feel like bonds aren't like, I don't know, you don't just have that, like it has to be cultivated, it has to be built, it's the day in and day out.

Willie 4:19

I remember the first time calling home to my daughter. And it was crazy because she was having to fit on the phone. So my BM picks up the phone, is like you need to, like, talk to her. I

can't calm her down. And she got on the phone and I calmed right down like it was just, it was just crazy to me because I was just like, this sucks. Because usually I'm there, I could FaceTime or, you know, now this time when I was, you know, I'm sitting in Plymouth, like all I could do is just talk through the phone. And you know she's only three four years old but I've been in her life, I cut the umbilical cord, like I've been in her life, so much. To be removed, it was, it was tough for me, you know, so I couldn't imagine going away for that long period of time, because of the connection me and her had since birth. You know, I never thought I would put myself in that situation. And I did.

David 5:24

I completely agree with that, like that daddy daughter connection, like I've had with my daughter has been not even the carceral state could break that. Like, that's how deep it was, like, I don't know, there was moments just like you said, like, my mother couldn't control her. And my brother couldn't control her, her mother couldn't control her. And everybody's like, the only person she'll listen to was you. I don't know if it's like the aura of my image because I'm incarcerated. So maybe she looks at me a certain way that she don't look at, she don't fear them. Maybe she fears me for whatever reason. But I can always calm her down. Like I always had that connection with her. And it's just, I don't know, like, I feel like maybe it's because we have fewer words. We're locked up so they don't hear from us as often, so they kind of hold, like, hold more weight to the words that we give, kind of listen a little more, because you're like, Hold up, I don't get to talk to him often, maybe he got something to say. So it's like, I don't know, maybe there's a dynamic and especially as a kid, like I was the same way. When my father was incarcerated, and I was a kid and my mom couldn't control me, when that jail call came in, trust me she was yelling "you got to talk to your son right now." And like, it's just, I don't know what it is about that dynamic, but some somehow we work sometimes.

Willie 6:29

Dynamic is definitely like a special thing and I'm just glad I still have that with her. And I'm glad that you coming home and continuing to be a father, you know, and I know being a father behind the wall is tough and making those phone calls and missing those birthdays. Like when I missed her first birthday, all I could do is cry. You know, I wrote a poem, I wrote her letter, you know, just in bed, I was, this shit fucked me up, I was depressed. Because I told her I'd never miss a birthday, I missed her fourth birthday. And that was tough for me. So, you know, that's what's just giving me the motivation now to do what I do. Like she has her first dance competition this Saturday, and, you know, I'll be there, you know, I'll pick her up, I pick her up from school. I do whatever it takes, her mother asked me to do one thing like, I'm there, you know, I'll drop everything for that little girl. And it's just like, I'm trying to change that narrative of fathers, you know, because, like, Christina, I see here, like, women always do it all. The mothers are always there for their children, and I want to be the same. I want to, you know, just as much because I feel like kids need their mother and father just as much, equally. You know, like, I see Christina on her grind, like picking her up from school, taking her to private school, bringing her to class like, you know, I'm like, damn, she's a supermom, you know what I mean? And, and, and she motivates me to be a super dad

Christina 8:10

I think that her dad tried, I think he tried to be a good dad, he just didn't have enough time to really build it as strong as it could be or that it should be. And obviously being incarcerated made that a lot harder for the both of them. So I remember the first time I brought her into a visit through glass. She's banging on the glass screaming, crying because she's too young to understand, like, why she can't touch him. Why can I see him and I can't hug him?

Willie 8:49

That would have killed me if I were, if I were put in that situation. I couldn't feel or touch my daughter, too, so, and how did you deal with that, Christina, like watching her cry over her father?

Christina 9:04

It broke my heart and I didn't bring her back for a while. But I realized that that wasn't a good, neither option is a good option. It's either she doesn't see him or she sees him and gets upset. But I realized that I'd rather her be able to see him than nothing at all. So after a little while, when she got a little bit older, I brought her back and just explained like someday you'll be able to and he awaited trial for four and a half years, got sentenced to the max, but he's somewhere that he still can't get contact visits. So she's six now, we've been promising this stuff for five years and she still has not been able to hug him. So David, your dad was locked up when you were younger. How do you think going to visit him, like, affected you as a child?

David 9:47

A lot of my family members have gone to prison. My father was there for so long that it just became like a routine thing. I felt like honestly like I wanted to go there one day just to see, like, prove that I was tough enough to be in in the same space as my dad, or live up to the name that he created and normalized me being around police and seeing them as the enemy, like fight, like seeing him, like held against, like, I don't know, made me angry. It made me angry every time I saw a cop, it made me angry every time I saw a correctional officer, it made me angry at my mom, because I felt like she wasn't, you know, bringing me more, or she didn't do more to help have him in my life. Like I didn't, as a kid, you don't understand the dynamics of that place. So I was just, I don't know, confused, lost, like, I'm still figuring that out, honestly.

So my father was first incarcerated in the state of Massachusetts, he did like seven years first. So they would pick me up, my family picked me up, whatever, and I'd have to have the right clothes on, we'd have to get there early, sign in, money on the card for food, so we could buy my dad food, we could take pictures, all this stuff. Then it was just like, I don't know, it's just a stressful, it's the more dehumanizing process of like, people telling you what to do, you don't know how to like respond a certain way to these people, when they're telling you, you know, take your clothes off, pat, stand here, stand there, like it's, everything is so guarded, and there's so much tension in the air when you're walking in there, like, it's not a happy feeling at all. So then my father gets out, we end up getting to know each other a little bit better, probably like a year and a half, two years later, he ends up catching a federal case, ends up getting sentenced to 15 years in the Feds. So now, the Feds just bring him to New York, he gets classified, he

ends up going to, like, Pennsylvania. My uncle and his family are picking me up, taking me for a whole weekend, driving me to Pennsylvania, we're staying in a hotel, I have to get clothes to make sure that I can enter this facility now. Food or whatever for the three days that I'm there, to buy him food, buy me food, like it's becoming like a whole trip. Then as he gets transferred, like, I'm literally following him in every institution that he goes to, just to be able to have contact. And it's like, this is a big thing, like a lot of people can't afford this, you know, to travel across the whole state to go see, you know, the United States of America to go see your father. And then it's like, I don't want to make him feel like, I don't want to go see you. But then a lot of times, like, I'm a kid, I've got a basketball game, I got things that I want to do. But I can't tell my father I don't want to go see him because I only get to see him once every couple months. I know he cherishes that, like that makes his day to see his son, I'm named after my father. So it's like, I know that's the biggest moment for him. It's a big moment for me. But I don't want to go through the obstacles. Like you're just sitting there just crying because people try and tell you that, because you're not wearing the right thing, you can't go see your family member. On top of it, it's so discretionary. Like one officer will tell you that you're fine, and you'll wear that same outfit the next day with a different officer, and they'll tell you that you can't get in. Like how, how long is this gonna keep going on?

Willie 12:45

I would go visit my uncles, and just that stressfulness of, we got to be on time, we have to like, be there, you know, like, dressed a certain way, it was crazy. And as a kid, I'm like, damn, like, you know, wake up early, I remember going to Shirley to go see my uncle, and I'm riding in the station wagon in the back, and me and my stepbrother at the time are, you know, counting cars and just playing around on the whole ride up. And it's just, it's stressful as a kid, you know, to have to go see someone that's incarcerated. And that's why it's like, how David said, like, I, we know how traumatizing it was to us. Yet, we still fell in those traps that they've set up for us, and had to make our kids kind of go through those same types of things.

Christina 13:40

I dealt with that at one of the jails that Stella's dad was in. There was, like, certain officers that were very, not lenient, but like human, that were just like, oh okay, you know, maybe next time don't wear this or like, this is what you should have on, but we're still gonna let you go because you came all the way out here. And it's in Boston, so no parking. So took the train, whatever, found my way there, and at one point, I had lost Stella's birth certificate. And they told me that if I brought something with me and her names both on it that they would let us through, which they did. And then I went back the next week with that same exact paper and they were like, nope, absolutely not. So now I'm dealing with a not even two year old screaming, crying inside of a jail, which, like you said, as soon as you walk in, there's tension in the air. Just in the waiting room alone, seeing all the officers, seeing the metal detectors, and they got the wands in their pocket, like it's just not a good place to be and then to get turned down on top of it is like, I don't even want to be here to begin with but I'm trying to do the right thing and show this person support and go visit and they make it very difficult to do that.

David 14:54

See, this is why I believe that the visiting procedures need to be reformed, like this is traumatizing. It's inhumane to the kids, it's inhumane to the mothers, it's inhumane to the men that are incarcerated, or whoever's incarcerated. Like, to put somebody behind glass, especially pretrial when you're supposedly innocent until proven guilty, why is a man not able to touch his family? Like how is that helping society and the criminal justice system in any way, shape or form? When a mother has to watch her daughter cry, because she can't hug her father, and a father is probably about to cry himself because he can't hug his daughter like, that's, we're just doing more destroying than we are helping in that sense. Like, I really don't get it. So like, hopefully, as parents, we could push this narrative, people will hear this and get active and hopefully change will come about because this is serious.

Willie 15:42

I was young when I went to go see my dad for the first time. Like I said, I didn't really know nothing else but I remember going through security and being checked, and we had to be in a room and all, everybody that was behind the wall, like, they all had to wear the same thing. And it was just weird, I didn't know, and then, like, David said, I just got used to it. You know, I just, that's what it was to see my dad, I had to jump through these hoops and wait in line, check IDs, and it was just normalized. It does suck like, and I wouldn't want my daughter to do those things. That's why I'm kind of glad that I went through what I went through when she was young. So I can correct it early enough where now like, she doesn't even like ask, well, that's like that's the past. Daddy's doing good, Daddy's here. I'll be there for you anything you need. We FaceTime, it's our regular routine, we do what we need to do. I'm glad I didn't have to deal with this when she's seven, eight years old and she's asking me a million questions because she's, you know, seven years old right now. If I went behind the wall right now, and had to call home and her not see me every weekend like she does. I don't know what I would do.

Unknown Speaker 17:05

So Christina, how did you end up breaking the news to your daughter?

Christina 17:08

So she knew something happened because she was in the house with me when it got raided. Police came in guns out, flashlights in our face, 6 am literally ripped the blanket off of us and pulled us out. Well, pulled me out of the bed and let me pick her up. And later on that day, like, they let us leave and I got a call from a DCF worker saying, you know, we just we heard something happened. We want to come and make sure you guys are okay. And I'm young and dumb and naive. And I'm like, Okay, well, I'm not at that house anymore. I'm at my aunt's house, but you guys can come here. They come and talked for about five minutes and then the DCF worker got a call. She said I'm gonna go step outside, and she came back in and was like, I'm taking your kid. So she was taken by DCF. Luckily, she was able to go into not like foster care, but my aunt took guardianship of her for the meantime. And for an entire month, I only saw her two times because of COVID. And my aunt was like super scared of getting her taken away, so she wouldn't let us talk on the phone, no FaceTime, like, basically no contact at all. And then I got arrested. And I all I wanted to do was talk to her because I didn't know if I was coming home, didn't know when I would see her again. I already wasn't seeing her. So I tried to do a

FaceTime visit. And she literally said, are you in jail? Because she knows what it looks like because she's been on video visits with her dad. And I was like, oh, no, I'm just somewhere right now because I needed to figure out what was going on before I told her anything, which I ended up coming home on house arrest, continued the visits, six months later, I got full custody back, DCF case closed because I did everything that I needed to do. But I gave her a heads up, like listen, you know how the police came? I did go to jail. But I as you see I'm home, but there is a possibility I could go back. So every time court's coming up, I give her a heads up, like, I don't want to scare her that it's gonna happen but I want her to know that it's a possibility so it doesn't blindsides her.

David 19:17

I feel like that's a dilemma that a lot of people who are in the criminal justice system and parents and even like inner city parents who are parents young. How do you tell your kid the untellable? How do you tell them the most traumatic thing in the world like you could possibly lose your mother and father any day now. And it's possibly coming because I got a court date coming up. Like this is a harsh reality that most kids cannot handle. Kids are already on the brink of mental health. You deal this, like, you deliver this blow to that kid, we don't know how they how they're going to take that, how their young mind is gonna take that. So as a parent we got to, we got to have a soft approach to an impossible task. How do I softly crush you into a million pieces?

Willie 20:13

Facts.

Christina 20:14

So the raid happened in March, I got arrested in April. So she was basically gone from March until September, I got her back a day before her fifth birthday. She just turned six and she already has, like I said, she already has a picture in her mind of what having an incarcerated parent looks like. She thinks that she's never going to talk to me, she's never going to see me because that's the experience that she's had with her dad. So I've just had to reassure her that, I'm not going to lie to her and tell her I'm gonna call every day because maybe I won't be able to, but I tell her, I'm gonna call as much as I can. Whenever you, like, whenever somebody can bring you to come see me, you can come see me because it's a federal case so I don't know how close I'll be and if it will be possible financially or just realistically for her to be able to come that often, but when she can. And just trying to reassure her that it won't, I'll be as present as I can be, but also not trying to even like imprint that in her head, because I hope that I don't have to serve time, but I don't want to tell her everything's gonna be fine because I know there's a big possibility that it won't be.

Willie 21:26

You know, we've all been through this traumatizing thing. And we're dealing with our kids in all this, but I just want to ask y'all how you guys are dealing with not going back and making this right and us talking about all this past trauma? What are you guys doing better now and different than before, so we can stay in our kids' lives.

David 21:57

I will say, I changed the equation. I wanted different results, I wanted to be there for my daughter, so I no longer sold drugs. I no longer picked up a gun. I was no longer violent. I no longer had outburst, I learned how to kind of master self. I mean, I learned how to be myself, learned how to be engaging with her, learned how to engage my family, like just try to be as positive in every interaction I have. Like there's no real recipe to getting it right. Like, I don't know, I just, I feel out everything as I go and I just try to make my best decision. I don't know, there's a saying, it's like, a man thinks about the consequences of his actions. A boy just acts for me. So, like, I felt like I was a boy because I wasn't thinking about the consequences of my mother, my daughter, my family, how this was going to perpetuate further. Now, like, I have foresight. So I try to just use my foresight, and you know, look into the consequences, how's it gonna affect my family, affect my daughter, in every decision? It's tough but I do my best.

Speaker 2 22:54

Yeah, I agree. I think I was acting in the moment a lot of the times and not really thinking about the future so much. And now I am because I literally lost everything at once. My home, my car, my kid, my freedom all at once and reality hit me that that is not, I don't want to live like that. And I don't want to put myself or my daughter in a place that that could happen again. So I'm going to school, working, I took parenting classes, I engage with a lot of programs, I'm in therapy, family therapy, she's in therapy, like, I'm just trying all these different routes to get to a better future.

Willie 23:34

I totally agree. I mean, same thing I've been doing, like, you know, just trying to stay positive. Education, and just really thinking about shit before we do it. You know, and, like David said, I don't sell drugs no more. I don't use no more because not only I used to sell drugs, I used to do drugs, you know what I'm saying? And like I've said before, I thought I had it all figured out. I was selling drugs, doing drugs. I was driving a Porsche. I had a Benz. I had like four cars. My daughter was good, you know, and I'm looking back at pictures, looking at how skinny I was and I was, you know, I had jewelry, a whole bunch of gold, and, like, now that I'm done with that and finished my case and I'm out, like, I can gain my weight back and just really realize what's important now. All that materialistic shit didn't mean nothing once I was behind the wall. Everybody I fucked with was gone when I went behind the wall. When I picked up that casing, it was nobody. The only people I talked to was my mother, my father, my daughter, and my BM. Like, that's it, you know? But when I was out there doing my thing, everybody was blowing up my phone, you know, wondering what I had. You know, I was and, you know, it just made me really take that time out and just, you know, I had a detox in there. I was like, I had two, like mini seizures in there. I was detoxing off opiates, like, the COs don't care. They're like, Yo, what are you detoxing off of? I was like you know opiates, they're like well, there's nothing we can do, you'll be alright. I'm putting in letters to the nurse, like, I need Tylenol or something, like I was, I felt like I was literally dying. I would stay in the shower all night. Like, those are things right now that I look back at to keep me going, like, I never want to be in that position again, like, it was bad. It was like really bad. So those are the things I do hold on to the past, just to keep me motivated and be like, Man, you were at the bottom, and now you're climbing back up, and let's

stay that way. It ain't worth it. My daughter's seven, gonna be eight in July. Like she's very aware. She's growing. She's smart. I love the little girl she's becoming and I want it to stay that way so I'm going to do everything possible, continue my education, just work hard and keep doing what I'm doing.

David 26:21

So Willie, you had said something that actually like resonated with me a lot. You were talking about when you were at your lowest of lows, and you were detoxing and you were in there, like, what was your state of mind? What was going through your mind? What were you thinking about or who were you thinking about that really kept you pushing at your lowest moment?

To keep it 100, I was up and down. But it was my daughter. It was her, like, I was, like, when I'm telling you I was hurting, bro, like I didn't sleep, I was, I was diarrhea, sweating, like everything you can imagine. And just all I could think about was this shall pass. You know, and I just thought about, looked at my hand because I got my my daughter's name tattooed on my hand, and just looked at that and say I'm gonna get through this, because I need to get through this. Because that little girl needs her father.

I completely agree with that. Like, I was at my lowest moment, I'd probably say about three years into my incarceration. I was depressed, I wasn't playing basketball. I wasn't working out, like, I'm three years in on a 10 and a half year sentence, like, yo, I have to do seven and a half more years of this shit. Like I didn't know if I could handle that. Like I contemplated suicide on multiple occasions, like my girlfriend had left me, my uncle had died, me and him were like best friends, like, and the one thing that just kept me alive, kept me going, was my daughter. Like you said, like, I have her name tattooed on my right forearm, like I looked at that and I knew that she was going to need me, like I knew that if I was not in this world, that little girl, her life would not be the same. Like she needed me, so I slowly but surely kept to pushing and like I'm here, we're thriving together, like, and I'm just so glad that I have her in my life because without her I wouldn't have made it through that ten and a half year sentence.

Willie 28:21

I feel the same, like if I didn't have my child, I would have just, I probably still, I probably would have got out and still been doing what I was doing. Went right back to Lawrence, went right back to the plug, yo, let me get a pat, I need to get back on, I need to do my thing. But having her in my life changed everything, made me change everything that I do. And just my mind state, you know, I can't do what my father did to me which is not be consistent. That's what I need for my daughter, I need to be consistently in her life. I need to consistently show her love. I need to consistently teach her about life and be there for her.

Eugene 29:25

Thank you for listening to the MyTERN podcast. MyTERN is a community-based 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 Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life. Music brought to you by Elmo Play Test. Learn more or support MyTERN at tupit.org.

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