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Willie: 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.

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Willie: As a warning, this podcast series contains material about emotional and physical trauma that may be upsetting to some audiences.

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David: In this episode, Patrick Lys, Jimmy Heang, and David Delvalle discuss their reentry experience and struggles against recidivism. From relocation, to reputation, to relationships, the “pull of the streets” continues to pose challenges to them in their own reentry journeys.

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Patrick: For me, like, I have experienced too much trauma within my life to, like, wanna step back into a facility, into a cell, into someone else telling me what I have to do as a man. You know that trauma is, like, it can forever be with you if you don’t know how to bring some form of healing to that… Jail is not for nobody. Nobody.

David: So you said that you didn't want to go through the trauma of being incarcerated again. I can relate to that trauma, but I can also relate to the trauma of poverty. And I know that there's so many people who are fighting like which trauma is worse, being embarrassed, being ashamed that I'm broke, and then I can't pay my bills, or I can't have the finer things in life, or being ashamed and traumatized by the institution that robbed me of my freedom…And ultimately, the trying to run from this is one of these traumas to the other isn't necessarily better.

Patrick: There's more opportunities in the free world bro, more opportunities in the free world, you can't do not and behind those walls, alright, and I know we can all relate to that man.

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Patrick: “My name is Patrick. I’m previously incarcerated. Spent 3 years of my life behind the wall. After 3 years, I was able to prove my innocence and I was acquitted. Not guilty. I've been back in the community for about a year and a half, and the topic of discussion is the pull of the streets.”

Jimmy: “How’s it going. Jimmy. Ever since 13 years old, I’ve been in and out the system. I did DYS time, county time, state time, and federal time. And currently I'm on the bracelet, house arrest, and that’s the pull of the streets that I want to get into discussion.”

David: “I’m David. 29 years old, I was recently just released on parole about 4 months ago after serving 7.5 years on a 9.5/10.5 year sentence. My reentry has been crucial. I'm on parole and probation stipulations so I literally have to be extra careful, so the pull of the streets is a very sensitive topic in my life.”

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Patrick: After long years of incarceration where you know you have to come home with a better mindset previous to how you lives your life previously, there were times where obviously you reflect back on who am I today after sitting down and being incarcerated and you wonder how do I adjust to society how do I adjust to a new environment before I come home. You try to come up with a plan prior to you leaving incarceration. So for me, I made the decision while I was incarcerated because I was able to observe the individuals that was there constantly coming in, lost in the system with no direction, and reflecting with my loved ones and my family. I made a promise to them that when I come home, I had to do better. I had to give my loyalty to the folks who really cared for me. And at the same time show respect to myself, so when those doors was open for me, I made a commitment to giving everything back to the community, giving back to my loved ones, giving back to the ones that really supported me. It was critical that I find a direction because a lot of the times when you come home and don’t have a direction, you could easily be lost. There's definitely a lot of negativity that can pull you in the wrong direction. I don’t know if any of you gentlemen can relate to that.”

David: “my personal definition of the pull of the streets is like its kinda like physics. There's a gravitational pull. You're trying to have upward mobility and leave outside of these pockets of poverty that has pulled people into incarceration. It's like a force that's trying to pull you back down. And as a man coming home trying to change, trying to reinvent himself from a life of crime, trying to become a college student is difficult. It's a long journey, it's a stressful journey. There's not much instant gratification in there, there's not much money in there, and as we all know, we come from a capitalist society. We live in a world of goods and services. If you don't have the goods or services to live the right life, now you're being judged, now you're being questioned by other people. I’ve personally had to deal with that, swallowing my own pride and not turning to the streets and not turning back to selling drugs in fear of going back to prison

Patrick: I’ve lived a whole life committing myself and being loyal to the cause of my brothers. But these were the causes that at one point I believed it because these were individuals that I considered my family when I didn't have a family. I watched so many of my friends go upstate and they ain’t never coming home, they're fighting that real struggle. When I say toxic in terms of, there’s a lot of individuals who will say they’ve been through what you’ve been through. I sat for years fighting to get my freedom back. I thought I'd never come home. There's individuals in this world that’s gonna find any means necessary to bribe you to come back down to the pedestal or position that they’re in. Whether it's hey if you’re financially struggling, I got these drugs for you, let's get back to the bag, let's get this money. Damn you’re struggling? I got this gun for you, let’s go rob these dudes. Or whatever the case is. It puts you more in a tough position because if you're understanding where that individual is coming from, you’re like damn, it’s tempting.How do I figure out how to get this money, when in all actuality, we’re just trying to find that curve, we're trying to jump ahead when that’s never worked for us. You feel me?

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Patrick: Jimmy, have you ever been in a position where you felt like you were offending somebody because you turned down something that they might have extended to you?

Jimmy: A lot of times because there’s just no, your reputation from back then, whether it's your generation or the new generation coming up from the neighborhood. They have an expectation based on who you was or who you are so they are always asking, yo I need a favor. Basically, I got a problem with these dudes on the street or what not. They expect you to be the old you, so when you say “nah” they’re like damn, Jimmy done turn soft or this and that, that and this. But now though, they’re starting to understand because man my whole life I’ve been in and out of the system, so now they are like he did enough, the pull of the streets got him. Basically this kid lives behind the criminal system more than he lived on the street because of his loyalty. That’s where my pull of the streets was, my loyalty. So when I came home I was still on some, not even fully processing what was going on, I was still like nah, I did my bid, I did this and that and I'm still trying to mislead the younger generation. I don’t mean to laugh. But yeah, I came to realize that like you can't teach what you aint know, you can't lead where you aint go. So I had no guidance, so that was the pull of the streets for me.

Patrick: How do you tell someone you’ve known for your entire life that you know at some point, you ate at their mothers table, you slept in their bedroom, yall shared food, yall broke bread, that I have to disassociate myself from you because you’re toxic within my life and I want to do better. It’s hard to tell that.

David: Not removing yourself can be so, like, dangerous to your health, to your life, to your reentry

Jimmy: I agree. Misdirection, temptation, just obstacles.

Patrick: When you come home, a lot of the times you come home to nothing. The most critical point of my life and the decisions in my life is when I did come home because, granted, when I came home, I came home to bills, I came home to wanting the finer things. Immediately, when somebody told me “Oh I’m so glad you're home. Hey, I got a pack for you, I got a gun for you, I got some money for you. Now let's figure out how to get you back in position to where you was.” But that’s not what I want. I no longer want that. So I had to turn some of that stuff away. I’m like I don't want none of that stuff, especially from someone where it's, when you do things, when some of these individuals do things, it’s not for free. There is motives behind it. And if you don't meet those motives, then you're in debt. I don't want to be in debt to an individual that's not genuinely looking out for me. So that was a decision I had to make.

Jimmy: Nah definitely. I’m currently on house arrest, so I have to get permission just to come to school, so it kind of tempts me to like, ‘I’m locked up still’ . You get what I’m saying? granted I'm at a house, but it’s like it tempts me. Some days I think about cutting off this bracelet just because I have to go through so much stuff just to get approved for trying to do the right thing. So like, there are definitely obstacles, temptation, misdirection, I totally agree.

David: I feel one of the biggest pressures when dealing with the pull of the streets is that love or that perception of love that other people kind of force upon you, because these drug dealers have plenty of dudes in the neighborhood who are begging them to go work for them. But they think they are showing love by offering you the job. But they are looking out for their own pockets. These gun runners and gang members and all, they could’ve went and recruited somebody else but they know that a good amount of these men that are coming home are solid individuals. They are movers. They are shakers. Everybody isn’t cut out to be a drug dealer. So when they know that you have that potential to be able to contribute to their movement and their team and their pockets, it's bigger than them just putting a couple of dollars in your pocket. Like Patrick said, you’re gonna owe that man something. You might’ve thought that those drugs and that money he gave you were free, but at the end of the day, you are forever indebted to that man, because he felt like he made your reentry a little softer by giving you a pack of drugs.

Patrick: I’m gonna go all the way with you because your extended something so so minor to me, I’m gonna go all the way with you, whether it's, you know, somebody trying to bring harm to if they bring harm to you, they bring harm to me, because I'm loyal to you now. But in all actuality, you just bought my loyalty. That's all it really comes down to.

David: I feel like that speaks huge volumes on the moving aspect, like the relocation of like where your reentry actually takes place. So leaving and going to another community. I was blessed to be able to move my arm away from the city of Lowell where my mother was, you know, afraid that I would come back and see the same people that would pull me back into my whole lifestyle. And it just speaks like, the interchange community and like the imprint of your reputation before you left and how anchored that identity is and to the people that know you, they don't understand change the way that we do. They don’t understand evolution and progress the way we do.

Jimmy: The world’s bigger than the block.

David: Yeah, we don't realize how much more there is out there. We don't realize how much we are affecting.

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Patrick: I ask myself even to this day like, why was I more loyal to them than anyone else and individuals who should have gotten my loyalty? There have been many times while I was incarcerated, where I went with no money in my canteen. None of these dudes who say they love me, and will go all the way there for me. My account’s empty. I’m not eating. It be my loved ones, my significant other, that would really go there for me and be like ‘babe i gotta make sure you good,’ babe lemme come up there and make sure your mental is good, let me pay you a visit. I found a new family, and I use this phrase all the time, my restorative justice family, because this is the family that helped me get away from these toxic individuals. This is the family that is providing me with the opportunities, education, jobs, you know, just positiveness all around me. I had mentioned in a panel before, where I was like I've been hearing “I'm so proud of you” more now than I have ever in my life because I'm putting in the work for it. I'm grabbing onto my fellow brothers that is on the same page as me and we’re growing together, that’s so important. Because this is really a movement. It's so easy to get lost, so easy. But when you have someone else that’s willing to support you more than the people you’ve known your whole life, it's an easy decision for me to be like I have more respect for you because you might not know me but you see the potential in me. And you’re like I want to work with you, I want to uplift you, and that’s where the motivation comes in. I love the individuals that’s willing to help me.

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David: Jimmy, you had spoke about something that really stood out to me. And it was talking about how when Bobby had flipped his case, it had told you something. And from my perspective, I took that as Bobby flipping his case, had gave you hope. And that hope had allowed you to move in a better direction, and change your life and see that maybe there is something else out there for you. I couldn't relate to that hope. Coming home, I was unsure about what I was going to do, who I was going to become and the MyTERN program through TUPIT had changed my life, had gave me hope, had gave me something to look forward to something to aspire to. And I'm honestly just grateful for that opportunity. And I hope that that can give the next man hope.

Jimmy: While I was incarcerated my uncle …he passed away in Norfolk on that to two lifetime bids with 40 years on top, he passed away in Norfolk. Like he even get a chance for appeal. You know mean? So I'm like damn I'll keep coming in and out Bobby, he's telling me like well he before he flipped his case like ‘Yo bro, what are you doing? You coming in three, four times like I got a life bid. You got a chance, and you still missing up. You know what I mean? So I'm like yeah you right, but not fully listening you get what I’m saying? Then this last go round, no not this last go round, when I was caught that fed bid, I think I spoke with him on a conference, and he was just like ‘Yo bro you still like not learning’ I’m like yeah, you right? He's like ‘yo, but I got some good news’ and then I see it on the news on my Oh shit. He flipped his case. So now my lawyer hits me like yo, they can't say it says overturn on your record. They can't use that against you. When I got out, he hit each other like, oh, I want you to do some circles and stuff. I want you to get involved with this. And then from there, I did like I did a circle. And I liked it, and it’s hard for me to open up. Sitting in a circle with people the same background as me, being incarcerated, opening up sharing their own individual stories, to me made me feel like I was part of the community slash felt like I belonged. So I liked it. So I'm like, I think I could keep doing this. So I just asked him, like, you got more groups like this or whatever. And from there he introduced me to MyTERN.

Patrick: The circles I'm very familiar with, you know, I've actually facilitated circles and all of that myself. But my first time stepping into that same restorative justice setting the restorative justice circle, it was so therapeutic to me because similar to what you said, I was in the same space with people from the same lane of life as I was. People who have done time before, but not just people that's done time. I'm meeting all types of different individuals, students, probation officers, teachers, a variation all in the same space, building community in a therapeutic space. I've seen people break down, shed tears and in a space with people, with people that do one point called strangers. And at the end of that process, you call yourselves friends.

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Patrick: We are somebody that’s lived it and we are the ones that can make the difference in some of these kids coming up. I hate the fact that when I was younger you had the older individuals point us in the wrong direction. We’ve lived it. We can personally tell these kids, these younger youth, listen, you don’t want to live this life, and why not listen to me? I've been in those shoes. I’ve been here you are going. If not, I probably experienced so much more than you have. Let me stop that trauma right now before you dive even deeper into something you can't come back from. There’s a lot of young kids, 18, 17, going up into the adult system that’s never coming home because they didn’t have that positive influence in their lives. Based on the work that I do right now, I'm in the community. I’m grabbing a hold of these kids. How can I help you? You know, and they reply “what’ve you been through?” What haven’t I been through? What haven’t I been through? That’s the real answer. Hear me out. Don’t hear out these... You want to listen to the glamor. You want to listen to the cash. That’s only for a moment. Let's talk about what your future is going to bring you. Because right now, I know I’d be so far ahead now if I had the same mind set that I had back then. Like if I brought this mind set back then I’d be so far along. But because I was stubborn, because I was stupid, because I was easily influenced, I didn’t pay no mind, I didn’t listen to that. Mentors are critical.

Let me ask you a real question because I was in the system with you. We’ve been in this facility together, Nashua street, wasting days of our lives. Now here we are in the classroom, what made you wanna change that? What made you wanna do better?

Jimmy: Definitely because of my family. I put them through a lot. First and foremost, like every incarceration, they holding me down. Like they’re the only ones. Like you’re just saying, like the ones that said ‘I love you.’ Your friends and stuff? I come home every time, I still embrace them, but then I'm like, they try to pull me back. You know what I mean? But I’m like, nah, I did a federal bid already at the age of, I went the feds 29 or 30. No I’m sorry 30. I'm 32 right now, like what’s next? Like a life bid? You feel me? So there is nothing hiding in the feds, like a life bid, a death penalty for the feds? I’m like nah, I can’t afford another one.

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David: The one thing that I would say that like to help people to not go back to the streets is to, to find, give them something to take the place of that community, give them something to take the place of that belonging, whether it be education through Tufts, whether it be restorative justice, whether it be some other form of community engagement, whether, you know, meeting youth mentorship. Anti-gun violence rallies like there's so many ways that people can get involved. It isn't just like we don't have to tell somebody, join an organization like we should be teaching men coming out, You can create your own organization, like have your own, build something from the ground up that's going to create a sense of belonging. Maybe there's not a specific space for you because there's not a specific cookie cutter mold. For every man coming out. Every man coming out isn't going to be into RJ. Every man coming out isn't going to be into education, but we should give them the skill set to create community, give them the skill set to create some form of belonging in their community that can be a positive outlet, that can ultimately make the difference in their life.

Patrick: Giving back to the community is critical. Dudes come home, they're lost like we was once lost. So it's like, why do I use my resources? Or, you know, some of the some of the things that I've learned through my journey and uplift and uplift them for real. I don't want to see I don't want to see my fellow brothers struggle. You feel me? I want to give back. This is this is the most giving back I've ever been in my life. Because at one point I was selfish. I wanted to keep every single dollar I wanted to take from the world. Now I'm giving back, brother. How can I uplift you? How can I help you? I've had several of my friends, people I consider friends coming home and I'm trying to point them in the right direction. Like, yo, appreciate your freedom. What can I do to uplift you? How can I help you? You need some clothes, you need some money in your pocket or whatever. Whatever I can do to keep you on the right track and in the long run, you're going to appreciate that. And guess what? When you become successful, you're going to do the same thing for the next person. So that's my fight.

David: Isn't it amazing when a man who was fighting the pull of the streets is now providing resources to fight against the pull of the streets.

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Eugene: 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 the Tufts University Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life. Music brought to you by Elmore Pleitez. Learn more or support MyTERN at tupit.org. T-U-P-I-T dot O-R-G.

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