

I knew this was a new trajectory of my life. I have 17 years to do it. How am I going to do this 17 years and make a hole? The Muslim Chaplain gave a speech and he asked everybody who was attending. Well, what would your legacy be? Well, they know why, if you died today, and I thought about it, I never thought about it like that before. So I thought today, what would they know about me by now? Nothing positive. So from that day onwards, always something like that, how can I leave a different legacy, I can do something better with my name with my life, that's gonna make an impact.

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. In this episode, Nurudeen, Marty, Nigel and I Rome, discuss our first and last days in prison, and the difficulty of starting our lives outside after serving lengthy prison sentences. We share stories of education on the inside, turning points, and some of the growth we experienced behind the wall.

My name is Rome and my first day was towards the end of 1991. And my last day was July 27, of 2022. I've always thought of myself first as an artist. I started out sketching when I was young, messing with spray paint on walls and developed a passion for being an artist. I also have become quite the dog trainer. I spent eight years training dogs for the needs organization and service dogs. They were like my children. So I'm very proud of that as well. My name is Marty O'Brien. On June 21 2005, I went to state prison serving just under 17 years and came home on December 1 2021. I actually happened to know Rome from the needs program at MCI Concord. We trained service dogs together while we're on the inside. So it's nice to be involved in this program. Now that we're both on the outside. I'm also a father of two daughters. While I was incarcerated I learned to tattoo. Now I have my own tattoo shop. In addition to learning to train service dogs into tattoos, I was also able to receive a college degree while incarcerated. So I made something good for the time that I served. My name is Nurudeen Alabi my first day was June 15 2007. And my last day was June 22 2022. I feel like prison didn't change me. I changed myself by being the best version of me being the true me. My name is Nigel Vaughn. My first day was April 14 2005. My last day was July 21 2022. I always felt like I had a great imagination. I never thought when I was younger that I would end up serving such a lengthy sentence. During my sentence I felt like you know, I learned my lesson. It shouldn't take nearly two decades to teach someone a lesson.

First day and was at the age of 17. That day was crazy. I got arrested. I was a juvenile at the time so I thought it was just a juvenile case at the time because I cut off my ankle bracelet. When I went to court they brought me to the dope session and told me I had an adult case so that was confusing at first when the transport van came calling my name and I when I came out with this number of adults there was no juveniles there and it was like you don't naturally street going into the facility. It was like the unknown because now they didn't treat you like a kid. They treat you like you don't fend for yourself. So my whole mindset is not to be a victim and always attack first. And that's all I thought about my head going in knowing that I'm in an adult facility there's always the aggressor, always the alpha. I first walked in it as somebody approached me from I know what that question is, until basically asked me one thing I was part of, I noticed as

more people came in, that's what people did. Me seeing that now coming from the juvenile facility was very different from those so now I'm paying more attention to in that holding tank what what the rules were and things like that. So I started partaking in the things that they were doing basically acting as people came in as an away from to make sure I'm safe in the holding tank. People started coming in and people asked them where they were from. And it's leading to multiple fights. People can jump in, it brought me to another whole thing, trust and estate uniform, sitting there for hours gave us old milk in a bologna sandwich that had probably sat there for weeks. When I went to the other side, the wings went upstairs to a new man. I knew I noticed somebody coming in. I had issues from the street. And before they brought me upstairs, they brought him around. And that's what got into a physical altercation and brought us segregation, which is a hole, which was 23 and one. No, it was my first night on Nashua Street.

For me. My first day was a bit different. I got arrested over the weekend or something. So, you know, coming to arrest me there was suddenly a whole bunch of a whole bunch of banging going on and police surrounded the house. I looked out the window. I saw them falling in. I'm like whoa. And then suddenly I can hit the helicopter. Whoo. It was alarming. They were banging, banging, banging on the door trying to get in and the door was actually unlocked. They never turned in. Nope. So I ran to the door and I locked the door. But they were banging so hard on every window and every door that the door just unlocked. And they came in. I laid on the ground, you know, just to make sure that they didn't think I was armed and dangerous and just an issue and they could say anything behind that door. I don't know what they would have said about me. Yeah, I walked out there in handcuffs. The helicopter was up there. I guess I was on live television. The family had told me that it was like a stamp captured on the screen and they watched them. They watched me get placed in a cruiser. So I was actually like right around the corner from the police station when I got caught. As soon as I got there in the back of the police station, there were like 100 Cops there or whatever they were. And they were in full riot gear. I didn't know what that was about what it was for. I think they did like a sweep in the city called Operation Blue binder within the next couple of days. I saw it in the newspaper but that's what I saw going on. It was the first day and it was kind of scary. It was different to see, kind of like the army was walking around. But it was a little bit. So I'm just from there. I just sat in the police station for a couple of days until I got brought to court to be arraigned. The arrangement was a little different. Um, I was in behind the glass. There were a whole bunch of family and friends there to support me. People were crying. And I was, you know, making faces trying to comfort them. I have this face about me that kind of smiles a lot. But the newspapers were there and they captured the certain smirks that I had on and they tried to portray it like I was smiling at the crime. And my case was very high profile. So this picture is going to the newspaper repeatedly. This is still in people's heads that I don't care about the crime that I'm charged with. And I think it's funny and I think it's a game. So, um, I got held without bail. And I was being brought to jail when I'm being brought to jail. It was myself inside of a paddy wagon. There was a canine in front of me and backing me into unmarked cars in front of me and backing me and we drove straight in a straight line from the courthouse city jail. Just mean five cars transported me, you know, kind of made me feel like a monster. Yeah, so that was my first day.

And when I think about the night that I got arrested, the crime was committed on a Thursday, and I actually got away. At the time, I had a drug habit. I was addicted to OxyContin and being on the run in being an addict is not a fun situation. And then as soon as I went back to the safe house where I was hiding out, I noticed you know a lot of police lights in the area. I just had a bad feeling and I called my girlfriend and the cops had detained or they were monitoring our phones. So I called and she answered the phone in tears. I told the cop that, you know I would surrender if they would let her go and the Boston Police took me to the area a police station and then I just sat in the holding cell waiting to go to court in the morning, I knew at that time that my life had changed, you know, for quite the worse, I was a single dad. And I knew that, you know, I was going to prison for a long time. And I was gonna have to break the news to my mom, and knew that was gonna break her heart. I didn't know how I would tell my daughters, they were 13 and 11. At the time, their mom had just gotten killed in a plane crash two years earlier. So I felt like a real ass for getting into trouble when I knew that they needed me to be their dad.

It's hard for me to remember my first day or night in, I do remember feeling that it was all over. Whatever life I did have at that time was over. It wasn't until I got to Max and I was already sentenced to life. Without that I started on that first night that when I consider my first night, I knew I was in Max and I knew I was around a bunch of adults. And none of my peer group was there, I was still just a teenager, and everybody was bigger, stronger, faster, smarter, that first night was full of fear that was toxic as hell for me. I didn't feel remorse for any of my crimes. I didn't even think about it like that. I didn't think it was a big deal at all. Later on. After I served my first 22 years of the prison sentence with life without parole. I had made such a problem with myself in that state, they did send me to Massachusetts, that's a whole other story. Because actually, I had grown into a man, I don't consider myself much of a man at 19. I consider myself an angry young kid, misguided. I didn't even think about remorse. Yet. 22 years later, on my way to Massachusetts, I felt like I was a man. I didn't think about hurting anybody. You know that first night, you know, falling in Vegas, I wanted to hurt somebody and make a name for myself and violence and create fear. However, getting to Massachusetts, it was a completely different story. I couldn't wait to see what strangers thought of the man I really think I am today. And I knew that the strangers were going to be able to tell me and say, you know, I'm not really the monster I initially was brought up to think I was. And now I'm a man who I built. And I like who I am, I've developed character, I have morals, I do have remorse, all those things had time to develop in me, not because of prison. But in spite of it. However, by the time I did get to wrap Massachusetts, and that first day there, I didn't feel like I needed to hurt anybody. I didn't want to be anyone's enemy. So there was a definite contrast in those first days.

I sat, I'll say, 14 years before I really, really took education. Seriously, the first part of education for me was just earning good time. They gave you that to add some insane incentive to go. That was perfect for me to try to get out as soon as I could. But when mytern came, the program came into the prison. It really installed some humanity back into me. It just gave me that sense of security. Looking back. I don't think I knew who I was, I think I was a person that I thought I should be. I looked up to the wrong people and admired the wrong things. And it took me a long time to realize that, you know, I was a follower. I think my first experience with education, our continued education is what really helped me find my own identity. Inside there was a lot of

madness. A lot of zombies are treated like animals. For an example. I asked the CEO "Can I get some toilet paper?" The CEO put a burly toilet paper on his fingers. He rose up to 10 times at most. Some of the toilet paper off of the toilet paper roll he rips it off he gives it to me to use for toilet paper, and there's nothing I can do about it. I actually put in a grievance once about it. Just to document what was going on, you know, I'm down to you having to use my rags sheets. I'm going to the door, see? Oh, can I get some toilet paper? Yeah, I got you on my next round. Next round comes around, it's the other officer, see, oh, I asked your partner for some toilet paper, can you give me some toilet paper? Yeah, I got you on my next round, getting treated like that repetitively for years on end. It's going to take some time to do that.

But in regard to education, when the TUPIT program inside out came in, that was like a breath of fresh air, they came in and accepted us, they had a genuine face, they had a genuine smile and handshake. Everyone there made me feel like a human being again, they restored some sense of humanity. And it was very much needed, I was in a dark place at a dark time. And I just really appreciate the opportunity for that education, I was able to learn about the person that I really was or the person that I could be if I made a decision for myself, and it takes a long time to reach that point. Because like Nigel said, there are a lot of programs in prison designed to, you know, truly rehabilitate somebody, it's up to the individual to decide what kind of person that they want to be. And you have to put in the work to become that person, because they're not going to do it for you. The transformation for me was, you know, just wanting to be intelligent enough to challenge them and hold them accountable.

I was in medium security, I was D report free for like four years. And I got into the tufts, mytern inside out program. And for some reason, the CEOs, they just decided they wanted to throw me in. Oh, I felt like they did it just because they could. And I was in that situation like Damn, how can I let them just get away with that. So I started thinking of ways to like, combat that. Thinking of ways to hold them accountable. And I ended up like, actually learning the law, or trying to because I'm not very seasoned at that. But I started digging into that. And I ended up suing them civilly, I lost but like, I wanted to challenge them, I didn't, like I wasn't comfortable with them, just being able to talk to me in hold for no reason. I sat for like four and a half months and then got found innocent, I ended up beating it, getting out and then got into college. One year later, they threw me right back in Oh, the same day. But they ended up being successful this time. And it sent me to the max, they ended up playing with a knife and myself, I lost the program, I was supposed to be a part of the first court. So like in those instances where something like that happens where an inmate or prisoner is wronged, he can't get any justice unless he files a grievance. And he has to file a grievance in a certain amount of time. So like, I didn't know these things until I started learning. And most of us are coming into sales. I gotta tell you, Oh, yeah, go to the law lab, and we learn how to sue us. They're not going to teach you that. So I had to learn that this expands on what you said about how he doesn't change your diet, you got to change that's true.

You have to change on your own, the individual has to make a conscious decision of which path they want to take. For me, for myself. It was hard for me to make a conscious decision of not living that life. My choice wasn't what the prison offered the programs and things like that. It was

nothing like that. The conscious decision of making your own choice and what you see your future out to be. And for me, it was just like analyzing my outcome. We analyzed friends that went home or people I just know in prison that went home and got killed, or went home and killed somebody. And then going home and being successful and me in life and those people. I noticed one particular thing that separated the people that went home and got killed or killed somebody and went home and made them successful was education. The people that went home and did good were people that had like, went to college courses, learned some type of trade and went home and pursued that. So I knew that was something that I had to do, consciously noticing that these colleges were coming into the present, and giving us that, that all events that change our life were so drastic. If you're going to grow, I used to call it swimming up the waterfall. If you want anything good out of your experience in prison, you're going to do it against the grain. No one gives a shit about that in there. As it turns out, while building my character, despite the environment, I realized that I wanted more from myself than just to be an ugly part of another plate. Well, for me, when I was serving my sentence, all I thought about was getting home to my family and just the horror of being imprisoned with this everyday torture to me. But finding that sanctuary for me during that prison sentence was the ending of the college program in just having that brotherly community and having professors come into the classroom. And treating me like a human being was so great for me that I didn't want to leave that community when I had the opportunity to do so, since we talked about our first day. And can we talk about our last day, oh my God, my last day in. It was madness. There was a lot of weight in the holding cells. Just waiting, we're waiting for clearance. And I remember just pushing my car, like to the fence. And I fell.

They brought me into a room and gave me some regular clothes to put on and I remembered jumping in the truck with my girl. Just driving home, it just felt surreal. And if it were, I didn't know how to like or fail at the moment, I just didn't have a lot of feeling. And I was a little paranoid about things like, who knows I'm coming home, who's gonna know where I live, like who's gonna see me and, you know, things of that nature. But for that reason, I kind of just stayed to myself. I had to immediately report to parole. They were like, make no stops, go straight over there. So the first thing I did was go check in with parole soon as I got there. My parole officer supervisor was there. And he was my parole officer like 17 years ago. Before I did that sentence, he's like, Oh, yeah. But he strapped the bracelet on me. And that was pretty much it. I walked out of there trying to adjust to society. Just because you disassociate yourself from any issues or drama, doesn't mean that people that you know, opposed to you are ready to take that step with you.

When I think about my last day on the inside. I had a lot of mixed emotions that morning, when I woke up. And it was finally a reality. That was the day I was going home. I knew my family was on the other side of that door waiting for me and I was excited to go. But part of me was pretty sad about the people that I had grown to care about. We're going to continue to endure the miserable existence that I've just been through for, you know, many years. All four of us just happened to be released from the same institution. And when you talk about that phone number or correctly, it's a big red door, this little thing. And when that door opens, you see your family for the first time knowing that you're free. It's really an emotional time before the day I was

supposed to be released. I spoke to my sister and Somebody contacted her on Facebook saying I guess it was like the victim's family contacting her and saying oh, I know he's been released so Nigel spoke on. People that don't forgive or people that are still on a street mentality shows like how the mindset that you have to have going out there being aware your surroundings so knowing my family told me that helped me like all edge we'll be like, cuz I know what my plans was to go home and pursue my education. But at the same time, it's like difficult because I'm gonna be still in the same city that I committed all these axes and don't know who's around me who's might do something to me or my family because of my actions 15 years ago, so, going home that next day was like, kind of hard for me, like, do I continue to education? Or do I just go back to the way I was? Just to make sure I'm good. So leaving that day, that morning, the CEO came to my door, not gonna let you leave in. I still didn't believe it. Because prior to me, doing the 15 years, I was going home but getting charged and never not going home that day. So I didn't believe it. They brought me down to booking seeing the nurse, she gave me my medical papers and things like that. And they brought me down to booking and they stripped me.

They gave me back my clothes, brought me down to the property, and grabbed my property. And I sat looking for like, for like days. I'm just looking at the clock and they put a clock rate on it. Just looking at the clock every minute I looked up, there's only one minute that went by, looking up against only two minutes felt like three hours. I'm just sweating. I'm just nervous. Then they finally called me out of the white fog, like two hours, but it was too much sitting in SL. So they finally caught my eye. They own your family's hair. But prior to them releasing me they asked me stupid questions like, What was your last address? Like 50 years ago? No, I don't remember my last address acting like who's your mom? Who's it? Little stupid question. I'm answering it. But as I'm answering the questions I can see out front of Concord, and my little sister, my mother's out there. They just looked around, you can just tell that they were nervous. Like, is it really going to happen? I'm just looking at them. They can't see me. I can see them. They pacing back and forth. So finally they gave me the little 15 always in my own jailhouse check. And then the door bursts open, like, solid door that the bus is open and cocking. Then when it finally bursts open, or completely, it feels like going ahead and giving relief. Yeah, I looked at I'm like, sure. He's like, Yeah, you release. So now I finally walked down and gave my sister and my mother a hug.

I can remember being in Toastmasters one time. And there was an older guy that was never getting out. And a lot of guys, he talked about how younger guys say Oh, I can't wait to get out. I can't wait to get out. And what he added was to do what? And it dawned on me that day that life was going to be drastically different. You know, I had been incarcerated for 17 years, the world had changed a lot. And you know how I was going to survive was weighing heavy on my mind. When that door finally opened, I got to hug my daughter and my niece and my mom, though that was really exciting. But in the back of my mind, the reality of having to get a job and you know, take care of myself now. Most people are 53 years old, take that for granted. And I can remember thinking that a lot of my friends had their own houses, they had nice cars, and 53 I was going home to nothing. I left the prison with a check for \$1,400. So you basically start with nothing, and you have to accomplish and achieve everything. And you don't have a lot of time to

do that. You know, life comes at you fast. So it was exciting to go home. It was also pretty intimidating at the same time.

This is the story of my first day. It is a tale of two days. I was leaving Concord, a place that I built many relationships with. I had received notification from the Nevada pardons board that they were willing to see me. That began my exit from Concord, but I didn't know whether or not to say goodbye or see you later to the fellows that I'd grown to love and respect as I went and finally the day came where I was getting ready to be taken over to Logan International. You know, there was a lot of things going through my head that I had a woman I loved out here in the free world that would come and see me every week and I had a dog that I was training I had college I was involved with and now I'm going back to Nevada where am I, my reputation was horrible. That's where it all started. And they didn't see me anything like Massachusetts did. Finally I got over to Nevada and they put me in the hole. 23 hours a day locked down. And here I am getting ready to go to the pardons board in a week. No shaving, nothing like that. Get ready to go when that miracle happens. And the Attorney General says yes, we commute your sentence to life with parole. Thunderbolts are going through a roller coaster ride, tears coming down my face. I thought about my victim. I thought about my family. 31 years in the joint. Nothing that I had when I was a kid is there anymore. So now, I don't know where I'm going. But I know I'm getting out of prison someday. Because now I have life with parole. I got scheduled for a parole board hearing within three months. I can't really explain how exhilarating that was to know that I was about to embark on a whole new world that I did not really prepare for. And now I'm getting ready to go be what they call a free man. I thought I was already free. I had told people in prison I said your life isn't over because you're in prison. It's not a place. It's a state of mind. Used to burn me up when I hear people saying Oh, I gotta wait till I get out. I mean for three years and my life's over until then well, by saying that you're saying my life's over permanently, because I had life without parole when you're telling me that garbage. So I didn't believe in that kind of mentality. And here I am getting ready to leave after believing in my heart that I was never gonna walk out of prison. So now I'm leaving into a state that I don't want to go back to Vegas. So now I touched down in Reno, the halfway house. So I didn't feel like I was getting out. There's a sense of excitement, but only a sense. My family's in Vegas, California. And all my friends that I still want to be a part of their life are out here in Massachusetts, all my old gang member friends are out in Nevada, and I can't go back to that life. So I didn't want to see them. So that sense of getting out was lukewarm. That said, after four months, when I finally got told that I'm done with the halfway house and Massachusetts accepted me, Nevada is kicking me or going back interstate compact outside this time. Now that was exhilarating. I know that wasn't the day I got out of prison. But to me, that's the day that I felt like I really got out of prison. I'm on a plane now with no cuffs. I'm walking through airport security on my own volition. The whole world's open to me and I can't believe it. I'm excited to meet whoever I meet next. I'm making friends everywhere I go, even though I'm not going to see him again. But that's when I really felt like I got out was the day I left Nevada and came back to Massachusetts.

That's crazy that you say that because it resonates with me with the bracelet like I always feel like I'm locking in when this curfew time it's like, Am I allowed to go back and it's supposed to be like the happy place home is my home. Like I'm supposed to be happy and comfortable at

home. But something about the you have to be there. That this time, you can't leave in this uncomfortable device on my legs scar on my leg like something about that just doesn't make me feel free. It has a way of doing it.

People getting out with a knee ankle bracelet or they got to breathe into a breathalyzer and they got to sign in and sign out and there's a graduation of freedom to where they kind of steal that excitement away from you. At first I didn't feel excited to be around them. I felt like they were designed to try to find a way to put us back. I feel like they were allies to try to build us up, put us into community and activate us as strong community members. I felt like they were trying to tear us down and prove that they were always right. You know when I sit here and I look around at you guys. And I think about this journey of education started on the inside. It was the beginning of a change for all of us.

And it's, you know, we hear so many stories about guys getting out and coming back because of the lack of these opportunities. So for me, I think that we started on the inside here we are on the outside and it's really only just the beginning.

Yes, definitely surreal for me like to be here now with Rome. I sat in the chow hall with all you like, different towels, but you know, always sat while I was in jail always thought that, you know, a day, a surreal day would be like, my first day out or when I finally made success. And now that I'm here right now, it's like, this is what surreal, seeing so many of us return. And we're all involved in this education. I'm especially thankful to be here with you, fellas. I love you and I respect you. And I really appreciate seeing the trials and tribulations that you went through that we all went through together and you're sharing and it means a tremendous amount of growth to me, and I'm excited to see how we fare in the future. As we're now embarking in a free world. I'm just thrilled to see you guys going along with me in this in this adventure ride for freedom. For me, I always say the prison is 90% mental and 10% physical. In the scene all of us here today we got out physically and now mentally we're free as well. So we want to battle.

Thank you for listening to the mitering podcast. My tour is a community based university accredited program providing education, mentorship, and career development support to a by those who have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system. My tears objective is to provide an opportunity for each participant to rediscover and reframe their skills, interests, responsibility, and commitment. 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 my term at Tepic dot o, t u p i t dot O R G