Hey y’all, my name is Jodie, I go by JJ to my friends, I’m 28 years old, I’m from Lowell Massachusetts, I served just under 5 years, I’ve been home for about 4 months now, and I’ve been a part of the TUPIT community for about 2 and a half years. Throughout my segment of the podcast I am going to be talking about the myths in prison and the fact that fear and adaptation to your environment are not what some may expect them to be.

I’m David Delvalle, I’m from Lowell Massachusetts, I’m 30 years old, and ive been home just over a year after an 8 year sentence at MCI Concord. I will be unpacking the myths of racism and adversarial relationships between correctional officers and residents.

My name is Rome Chacone, I’m 51 years old now. I served 31 years straight in prison. My home town is Las Vegas Nevada and throughout this podcast I’m going to be speaking about prison’s nothing like the movies real talk in prison about gangs, hope, fear, might surprise you. This is the prison myth busters.

So Jody, there's a myth of hope and fear in prison, how are they intertwined?

Long story short, we've all been scared at one point or another during our incarceration and through that fear we've found the strength to have hope. I remember my first day in state prison. I went up with an undisclosed name, I'm going to use the name Bill, me and bill took the van ride together from the Lowell courthouse to the Walpole prison. I remember when we first got there we was just laughing. He’s like “not again,” I’m like “this can’t be real.” I got a smile on my face, little did he know I was shaking inside. We go through the booking process, we start walking down the hallway, and I got a very peculiar smell and I can put my finger on it but it just took my breath away. We finally get to the unit, they yell incoming, everyone stares at you, people grill you walking by, come to your cell, ask you a whole bunch of questions. Being 22 in that type of environment I went into defense mode. Growing up how we grew up I didn't care about nothing so at the end of the day its not that i wasn't afraid but I couldn't afford to be. So, I’ll fast forward to about 4 days later, it was christmas. My first christmas in prison and it was about 11:30 and they didn’t open our doors yet. And so I’m getting used to it now and I’m learning the motion and they still didn't open our door so we knew that in prison if they don’t open your door, something just happened. About 2 hours later, we found out, Bill hung himself inside of his cell. That was the point where i thought, damn, I just want to make it home to my family and fear was ever so prevalent in that moment. If you can sit here and lie to our face and say you was never afraid during your incarceration, that aint ever going to be held truthful. But, through that fear, I found the strength to have hope. Hope for a better tomorrow and hope that one day I’m not going to be that man that dies in prison, and thankfully I didn't.

David, there is a huge myth about the stigma of racially segregated prisons, what is your experience with this?

Oof, that's a loaded question. But, racism in prison is prevalent. Definitely. I remember walking into the chow hall at MCI concord for the first time ever and just seeing a sea of people of different colors. Like the boston section was mainly african americans. And charlestown, and billerica, and the guys from southie, they all had this section of white guys. And the Latin American population, the guys from Lawrence, the Dominicans, the Puerto Ricans were all sectioned off. It was like separate sections where it was like guys who were from a certain neighborhood or a certain city would share a table and those were a little bit more racially mixed. So I sat with the Lowell guys and I;m blessed to say that I’m from a place that's very diverse. There are a lot of Cambodian people, a lot of Irish people, a lot of african americans, and a lot of Puerto Ricans. And i just sat with my table and it was like awkward, people were looking at me like I was crazy sometimes like “why aren’t you sitting with the spanish guys.” At walpole I remember the phone situation like it's literally there's only three phones on a block and they didnt care what gang you were from they didnt care what city you were reping, there was one white phone, one black phone, and one spanish phone.

One quick question for you, did the spanish community still own you after you didn't sit at one of their tables?

I can say that it wasn't easy at first, there was push back. I remember my spanish brothers were talking like “oh you hang out with the cambodians too much.” I was like those are my brothers they're from my city, like I know they, were from the same place those are my homies, like thats my home. And I pushed back against the racism and its like it exists if you allow the structure to just oppress you but if you want to push back against the norms of that place, make friends with people from other walks of life cause thats the greatest thing I ever did was to break that notion and become friends with my cambodian brothers. I evern left my chow hall table and started sitting with them, and I’m grateful.

Rome, are there any myths about gangs and joining them in prison?

Damn right there are. The biggest myth is that they run the show in the joint. And, they dont. Gangs don't run shit, they just have the illusion of running shit. Heart runs the show in the joint. Problem is when i first came in i was a teenager, i had some fears i didn't want to admit to so my idea was I’m going to beat the shit out of the biggest dude I could find. I was gonna stab him and take him all they way down. Thinking I was going to be a lone wolf and ride alone. Well, turns out that some of the guys liked my style, they liked that I was violent. The figured they would use my ideas to use me but I still wasn't feeling joining the gang. But, I had some people come across me as bigger brothers I never had and that appealed to me and there was a sense of safety in numbers so I'll admit to that but after a while I started considering joining that gang and did. That was one of the worst decisions I ever made. I was dedicated for years, I was one of those soldiers that held people to the standard and in many cases I regretted those things. I remember picking up extra cases for trying to aspire to a life that i was taught i was supposed to belong to and I found out later on that I was never meant to belong to that life at all. And I started to resent myself because of that gang myth. At the beginning I could have done it myself, I didn’t realize it like that thought.

Um, Rome, you were incarcerated in 2 different states, Nevada and Massachusetts. Was there any difference in prison culture between those prison systems?

Big difference. Nevada was hyper racist and hyper violent. By the time I got out to Massachusetts I was really trying to shake the violence and I really didn't like the racism. And by the time I got out to Massachusetts I started taking a look at how people were doing it out here. And I saw my very first skinner table, I never had seen that before in my life. You know, I sat at the lowell table and the Lynn table, and I sat with my dudes over there because my place started with an ‘L’, Las Vegas. And those dudes accepted me but we saw these dudes sitting at the skinner table and I was like what the hell kind of place am I in. But you know I rolled with the punches and I didnt rock the boat. But thats one major difference that I saw. We didn't that on the west coast. We didn't have no skinner tables. Skinners got to go. That’s the way that went.

So jody, is there a myth with disconnection and do you have to disconnect yourself from your situation or your morals, values, and principles so they don't become compromised?

Yeah i have some very personal experience with this after serving almost 5 years as a humanitarian in prison. I’m a naturally giving spirit, and so I heard everyone always say “its either eat or be eaten.” And so you have to adapt to your environment so they don't take advantage of you, so youre never seen as weak, so you're never seen as food. But at the end of the day I found strength in being one of the people who never succumbed to those expectations, I never became that violent heinous person that they was trying to make us all out to be. And through that journey I found so many other people who were on the same time of time. I remember leaving my housing unit one day, I was just trying to go to the yard man, i was just trying to enjoy the sunlight with my guys, go play some basketball and mind my business. On the way there, I seen this guy that sits at our table. But we have four different cities that sit at our table so he wasn't from my area but it still didn't feel good to see this man on the floor getting beaten pretty badly by three other individuals, getting dragged through a puddle all over the place, ripping his shirt off, its raining outside he's all in the mud and no ones helping this dude. Hes a gang member, hes from a specific part of that city, and no one is helping this dude. So I’m like, is that what they're going to do to me? You want me to become accustomed to this so I can be your scapegoat so you don't have to handle business for yourself? And overtime, more and more situations taught me that people going to say a whole bunch of stuff but they aint going to live that same stuff. And so words don’t mean nothing to me until I see actions back up that word. And I aint never really seen much of that in prison, it's a lot of talk and not a lot of action. And therefore I just stayed in my own bubble, I protected myself, and unfortunately I did have to become disconnected from my environment but I didn;t compromise the love I have to give to this world. And returning homie it was a process regaining that connection, but I’m still me and I still love, so we fumbled that myth right in the bag.

So david, theres also another heavy topic about the inmate-CO relationship and the level of tension that is present or not present. Do you think you could speak on this a little bit?

Yeah, just like racism, the relationship between the COs and the residents isn't all black and white. There;s good people on both sides. There's a bunch of COs that play very dirty and want to make convict’s lives hell, but there's others that just come in, do their eight hours, and go home. And i've gotten jobs because COs have literally saw the way that I moved and saw that I was a good dad just trying to make it home to my daughter. I remember there was this one time I got fired from a job, for no reason. I was working for central records department and it was one of the best jobs. And an IPS officer just walks up to me, hands me my ID, and tells me to get the hell out of his office. Didn’t explain, didn’t tell me I was fired, didn’t say anything to me. I didn’t even know how to handle it, I was in shock. And I went back to go talk to the person that had hired me at the bubble and I remember telling them and they went, got a capitan, and the captain came back and he went to bat for me. Literally went and chastised the officer and everything. I didn’t get my job back but that just gave me hope that all of them were not as bad as people made them out to be. And there were people who, my daughter didn’t have the right clothes on that day and my mother didn’t have the right clothes on and there were COs who would purposely turn them away and there were others who would let them in and be like, “hey Delvalle just tell your family wear the right thing next time.” And I was grateful. I’m not going to lie.

One thing I would like to know more about, if you wasn’t on good terms with a CO did you become a target or did you become a person of interest in their mind?

Oh yeah, if I copped any type of attitude, I copped back, I kicked back, they were ready to give me a ticket at a moment's notice, throw me in the hole at a moment’s notice. Because the system trains most of them, that training that they put them through its intense, it's indoctrinating and it just turns everything adversarial.

Rome, are there any myths about fear or hope and rehab in prison?

Oh yeah there are lots of those. Speaking as a person who went into the prison system with life without parole, and as young as I was, I went in with a severe drought of hope. It could easily be said that I understood fear and despair more than anything. Hopelessness became a daily vitamin I took and it’s the way I lived my life. I didn't care about my own existence or anyone else's. I didn;t think I had any other purpose than to be in prison other than to just die there an ugly death. So I resented a lot of the things I came across in terms of rehabilitation and schooling. I hated the whole idea of GED and highschool diploma because it wasn’t going to relate to me. There were other people in prison who were never going to get out again. You know, later on, I started to develop differences about what hope meant for me, but early on I realized that rehabilitation wasn’t a real thing. The system wasn’t built for us, it was built to contain us. It wasn't built to rehabilitate us, it was built to oppress us. It was built to divide and conquer us. So these ideas of rehabilitation were simply non-existent to me and I looked at other people who believed in that kind of ideology as fools. And it disturbed me deeply. Later on I started learning in the books and paying closer attention to my own heart and thinking that I had a greater purpose. But that was what provoked me to feel hope, not the system. The system provoked me to feel hopelessness. I felt hope despite the system.

So you speak a lot about institutional hope and rehab that’s supposed to be designed by the state, but did you see any rehab or hope that was crafted by the guys inside there? And how did that impact you?

Well that’s exactly where hope and rehab came from. It was within us. We came together and we started to build eachother up, despite the walls around us, despite the hate that we were fed every single day. And we were the ones that built each other up. And you know then we would come across people later in life that were real crusaders that would try to come into prisons like TUPIT and bring education to us out of love and compassion and the desire to share that education. And now that was later on, when we came in in the 80s and 90s that didn’t exist. Plain and simple. So we were raised up in a different mindset. Now we are being taught what hope looks like. We are being taught how we can be, how we can rise, how we can build eachother up. So yes we do serve each other in that respect.

Jody, I got a question, is it true that when you go into prison for the first time ever, the first time you ever go into a unit, you're supposed to find the biggest dude in the jail and punch him in the face and take him out to prove that you're tough? Is that a real myth?

Let me just tell you, walking into jail for the first time, I’ve heard this my whole childhood so I’m looking at the biggest dude. Ain't no way i'm walking up to the biggest dude and punching him in the face I promise you that. I'm fresh and I don’t know who here got my back. If I go up to him and punch him I promise you that dude is going to crush me. I was like no thanks brother yall can have that.

And Rome, I got a question, so there's a huge myth about sexual violence and the term dropping the soap. How prevalent is sexual violence in the prison system from your experience?

I feel like it happens but i think its way overblown and it's been sensationalized through movies and shows and it seems like society finds it more interesting to believe that nonsense than to non believe it. So its what you hear in the first five things you hear about prison that you're going to the booty house or something like that and that's really not the case. I mean you're making everybody out to be these sexual predators inside and that's really not the case at all. Its more rare than you would believe. And once again this whole mindset means that society would have to listen to us and society has been taught not to believe us, not to listen to us. What they'll do is they'll go talk to the guy that's just spent a week in jain and they'll ask him how he felt and what he went through and he really doesn't have an idea what he went through or what's going on except for that one week. So he doesn’t really have a full understanding.

David, what is a “short” and does everyone in prison have to take a short from correctional staff?

So a short is pretty much, you allowed someone to disrespect you. And people created the term short for not allowing another man to disrespect them on the compound and having to deal with the repercussions of being disrespected. Now, administration is always going to hand you a short. That's the name of the game. When you walk into prison for the first time and they tell you to take your clothes off and squat and cough so they can check you so they can see if you have anything inside you in your rear, that is literally a short. They're literally emasculating you and sexually violating you in a way that you would never allow a normal individual to do. So, were taking shorts form administration on a person to person level that the average person can't even comprehend because theres a power dynamic behind it. People believe that they could never take a short in life coming home from prison, “i was locked up, I don’t take shorts.” In reality you're going to come home, you're going to have to take a short from your boss, from your mom, and from your daughter. And you're going to have to learn that taking a short sometimes isn’t the end of the world. We live to fight another day and that’s how we get closer to becoming more human.

Jody, tell people about the one time you felt like you taken a short and you walked away from it. And it wasn’t an easy one, you walked away from a hard one.

Um, that definitely is a hard one man. I remember I’m walking back from school one day and you guys all know how COs felt about education in prison. They was not accepting of it. And so you guys know the specific person I’m talking about. And I’m coming back, there like seven of them lined up just watching us walk back. And I go back and he's like “where do you think you’re going?” Like, “Bro I’m walking back to my unit.” “get the fuck over here.” “Bro fuck you how about that.” I immediately acted off of emotion and as soon as I realized I said that, I realized I just promoted him to disrespect me and now whatever is going to come I have to take this. Cause its either hook off on this CO or I have to lose everything I’ve invested into my education so far. He went on to write me a ticket, he belittled me, he called me a bastard, and went on to say things that I would never allow no man to ever call me. And I had to look that man in his face and watch him say that shit to me and take that. Because what I had was worth his words not meaning shit to me. Like your words are just that, they're words and they're not backed up by no type of action. And so therefore those words are going to float up into the sky and I’m going to go about my business because there’s a greater purpose at play here. And so the initial feeling of disrespect was overcome by the prolonged feeling of just I need to be better.

I honestly feel like taking a short from administration gives you a different level of self discipline because you have so much on the line. I remember coming out of class one day and I’m coming out of the metal detector and the guard stops like, “hey whats in your bag.” I had a bunch of books in a little laundry bag but its like see-through so you can see all my books. And I’m like, “I got a bunch of books.” “Okay get on the wall!” And he’s pat searching me like mad hard, like literally grabbing my arms very hard, grabbing by back very hard. And I’m like, “calm down bro.” He spins be around like a 180 and gets like an inch from my face. “I’m not your bro!” And I just remember that level of disrespect like someone screaming that close to my face like spit flying in my face. Normally I would literally just punch this person in the face, but we're playing our odds, like I have parole coming up. I’m worried about my good time, I’m worried about my job, I’m worried about my daughter, I’m worried about getting this college degree. If I put my hands on this correctional officer that is a minimum 2, 3, 5 years on top of my sentence. So they know this so if you allow them to really just play with you and you fall victim to that it’s on you.

I always say that having life without parole I did that many times. I did the cell extractions, I had them gas me, I did the riots, and it was the only way I would fill that hole in the bottomless pit. And I felt like I was trying to get revenge, I was trying to get mine off, but you know in the end you always lose and then I look for another fight. But I look back on those moments as learning moments because you’re taking a short either way you go. And the smarter man isn't going to give the other man the position to give the other a short. So if I can put myself in a position to keep me out of shortville I’m good. If I walk into it I got half myself to blame for whatever happens after that.

That's a fact

David or Rome, whoever feels inclined to answer, what was the classification process like? And if you stay out of trouble are you secure to move to a lower security?

Ill take this one first and then I’ll be sure you can say something. For my first ten years there was no classification process. I was subject to maximum security and that was as a teenager and I was not among my peers. Everyone else is older, bigger, stronger, smarter, and good luck kid, that's what they gave me. There was no classification process. I was going to stay there indeterminately. There was no points and there was nothing for any kind of good behavior, not that I was behaving good. Even later on, because I was a gang member at that time, they put me in a classification where I’m going to sit in maximum security regardless of my behavior. They're going to put STG tags on you, they're going to sit you there and they're going to say you're a safety and security to the institution problem so we're not going to let you see our medium securities. You ain't never going to see a minimum no matter what. And I wasn’t the only one that was happening to black brown and white. So all the people were feeling this. As far as classification goes I used to wonder for years what the hell does that even mean. You know, you designed these classifications and put it on paper for society to read just like the menu for what we are eating in the chow hall. Because what you read on the menu is not what we're eating in the chow hall. And its the same thing with the directives and the rules and all those classifications.

Classification might be the biggest myth of them all, because according to the DOC it is an objective, point based system. There is nothing objective about a system that has a bunch of override codes, code F, code E, a bunch of codes for safety, code that you didn’t finish this program so we have to keep you at this security level. There are hundreds of men sitting in medium security prisons with minimum points for years on years on years. There are men in mediums with maximum points and they don't ever make it to the max because they may be working for administration or have some type of, the person who is working in the system of classification if they’re biased its up to their discretion whether or not to put in an override so classification is a very big myth.

We went in on some subjects so lets talk about something that we built from ourselves and took with us as we left. A model that, ill say that at the end I was involved with TUPIT i was also involved with the dog program. I felt it in my heart that I knew I was a good man, I knew I deserve a pardon. I was blessed, I felt like a miracle happened and if not for that pardon I wouldn't be here speaking to you today. That gives me all the hope I’m ever going to need in my life and I’ve been fortunate enough to meet some wonderful people and some of the greatest men on earth that have endured the rigors of incarceration and they did it in a stand up manner that I can respect and say I’m glad and proud that I know that man. I'll take that from our experience, I'm not going to say anything about the system, I’m not interested in that, what I will say is the comradery we developed from all races, from all different cultures, means a lot to me. I’m blessed to have known all of you.

Likewise, but I would just like to say that Rome you just broke two myths with that last statement. You broke the myth that there is no hope, and you broke the myth that people like to say that life means life. That when they gave you life that was it. And because you kept that hope alive you were able to break that myth. You were ever able to get commuted. And I commend you, I salute you for that.

And how many people sat there and told us that we would never change. I think that’s the biggest myth we've deconstructed of all. Look at the three of us sitting here right now, changed men.

Amen to that. There’s a lot of change going on and as long as any of us have the guts to keep that light on, to keep that fire burning, for ourselves, share it with another, there’s always hope. You have the strength, we all proved that, we walked that life. We walked an ugly life, we were brought up in the ghettos, we were taught all this wrong bullshit and we still swam upstream, up the waterfall, and made different men of ourselves. We basically constructed ourselves. I’m proud of us.

I think by breaking these myths while we were in prison and changing the social norms and dynamics is what allowed us to really change. We pushed back against everything everyone told us. We challenged it. We started to question all these myths of racism and not having hope and not being scared and really just being present and grounded in that moment and I'm grateful that we had the courage to push back and break some myths. I’m grateful for you guys.

Yeah, Yeah

One thing we didn’t do is break the statistic of what’s becoming a statistic. But we are a statistic in a more powerful way now. Shout out to the ones that came home and stayed home.

Let the people listening believe that they could be out here with us doing what we're doing. They’ve got it in them.