

Opportunities from Behind Bars

[00:00:00] **Eloy Perez:** I started off selling drugs as I was 14 years old.

[00:00:03] **Jason Hibbs:** That's how Eloy Perez's story starts. But his story doesn't have to end in prison.

Welcome back to the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast, produced by WGTE Public Media and made possible by support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, which seeks to reduce over incarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails.

I'm your host, Jason Hibbs. As you may remember from previous episodes, to increase equity and improve outcomes for people caught up in the system, the MacArthur Grant paid for diversion opportunities for defendants who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford them. In this episode, we wanted to go beyond that and introduce you to a program not supported by the Lucas County Safety and Justice Challenge that people involved say could be a great starting point in transforming the way society thinks about and uses the criminal justice system.

And there's also lots of inspiring success stories of people behind bars. That happened organically. And for one of those stories, let's go back to Eloy Perez.

[00:01:19] **Eloy Perez:** So my life has been around drugs and selling and, the whole dope game, the whole thing.

[00:01:24] **Jason Hibbs:** First incarcerated at 19, the 57 year old has served four sentences.

[00:01:30] **Eloy Perez:** My first time I did a state, I did a state sentence. I did 18 months. The second time I got a fed, caught a fed case. And that was 10 years. And then the third time I caught a gun case and that was two years. And then this last time I did 15 years for drugs again. Cocaine, marijuana mainly cocaine.

[00:01:50] **Jason Hibbs:** Perez says on the inside, just like the outside, there are good and bad influences. And while he did take advantage of opportunities to work, learn, and save money while in prison, it was easy to get complacent and fall back into old habits.

[00:02:05] **Eloy Perez:** Because when you're in there, it's easy. You still get three hots and a cot.

There have been people in my past that, that tried to, steer me in the right way, but I wasn't having it at that time. In the system, you can get the same amount of drugs as you can out here if you really wanted to. And I was doing that. I was doing the same thing in there. Perez says it was a dream about freedom that finally woke him up.

And you know how when you wake up and you're in a dream and you just don't want to open your eyes, you want to stay in that dream? When I woke up and I realized that I knew that if I opened my eyes, I knew where I was at, the realization of where I was at, and I looked, opened my eyes, and I looked at a brick wall.

That's And I got up and I said, this is it. I'm done. I'm not coming back here no more.

[00:02:50] **Jason Hibbs:** But that's easier said than done, especially for someone in their fifties with so much experience making money illegally. Perez says it wasn't just the hope of freedom, but his family that motivated him to make things right.

[00:03:05] **Eloy Perez:** I left my kids when they were babies and I came home and I had a chance to be a better and I did it. And I went back to the old way. And then my kids had kids and I got to be with my grandkids for 18 months and I left them again. So it's like I left my kids twice. My mother, she's aging and she's my A1.

I love her. And she was always coming to see me even in that a winter didn't matter. I'm like, mom, it's a blizzard. Don't come see me. No, I got to touch you. I have to hold you. And so I didn't want to put her to that no more. But yeah, I didn't do that. I'm sorry. I just wanted to, I needed to change.

And from that day forward, I gave up everything. And I had money that people owed me in there in the prison. I said, you guys don't owe me nothing. I'm done. Don't ask me for nothing. It's over. That's it. And that was it.

[00:04:01] **Jason Hibbs:** Perez says he made changes on the inside and started thinking about a new life on the outside.

[00:04:07] **Eloy Perez:** In prisons, in the system, everybody watches the news all day. CNN on one and then you got your Fox guys on the other. But Perez prefers NPR. And I was listening to NPR all the time. And so they're always talking about this and that. And then they started talking about the trucking shortage.

More specifically, truck drivers.

And a shortage of drivers is one of the many reasons for the pileup at shipping ports. A pileup that did not surprise.

It was an answer to my question what am I going to do when I get home? Like, how am I going to, how am I going to establish myself and succeed and make good money where I'm not going to be out here struggling like other people come out here and struggle.

Because it's a struggle.

[00:04:49] **Jason Hibbs:** He says he started talking to guys who had been truckers on the outside, he learned about the business, and started asking around for help.

[00:04:57] **Eloy Perez:** He said, man, get a hold of Willie. Get a hold of Willie. He'll take care of you. And that's what I did, and he come see me in the halfway house, started talking about it, and he wanted to see where my mindset was.

So I'm a mentor,

[00:05:10] **Willie Knighten, Jr:** I'm a community activist, I'm an anti gang activist, I consult here at Goodwill Industries of Northwest Ohio. And I also have a behavioral health agency.

[00:05:20] **Jason Hibbs:** But it wasn't always this way for Willie Knighton Jr. He had been on the inside too.

[00:05:26] **Willie Knighten, Jr:** The 23rd of November 2009, I had just left the prison commissary getting my hygiene and food items.

And when I went back to the cell, my cellmate, he told me, he said, you're going home tomorrow. I said, no. I said, I'm pretty sure my last remaining grandparent just passed away. And I said, because it's Monday and all your deaf notices

come through the captain's office because the chapel is closed on Monday and Tuesday.

And so I went to the captain's office and they told me, you're going home.

[00:05:56] **Jason Hibbs:** Thirteen years earlier, Knighton Jr. was sentenced to life in prison for a murder he did not commit.

[00:06:03] **Willie Knighten, Jr:** And I received a miracle thirteen years later. The late Judge William J. Scowl, on his deathbed, contacted the Ohio Parole Board and stated that he asserted that he had put an innocent man in prison and found him guilty.

And he said the case had weighed heavily on his heart for the last twelve and a half years. And two months later, he passed away. But before he passed away, when he sent that letter to the parole board, it went to the governor, Ted Strickland. And he commuted my life sentence immediately, once he read it.

And when I came home, I was determined to help. See, I started mentoring inside prison. I had denounced all my gang ties, and I started helping people in prison.

[00:06:44] **Jason Hibbs:** And there are so many who need help, and some who want it, like Joshua Symington, who is now one of Knighton Jr. 's students, so to speak, in a halfway house program Knighton Overseas.

[00:06:56] **Joshua Symington:** I showed up at prison July 13th. I showed up here February 7th. So just under seven months I was in prison, and just landed here, and actually a buddy in here told me about the Brothers United program, and they're in here signing up for it what is that? He told me about it. He said, it's a fatherhood class pretty much, and they do a lot of cool stuff, and he just feels like you should sign up for it, and

[00:07:22] **Jason Hibbs:** I did.

Symington says the program is changing the way he thinks about fatherhood and life.

[00:07:28] **Joshua Symington:** It came right when I needed it to. It really did, and God put me here for a reason, took people out of my life for a reason, and added some people for a reason, and the things are just, they're gonna be different. I'm working now.

I've only been here a month and I'm already at work. That amazes some people. They're like you're already working? I'm like, yeah. I'm not, I told you, I'm not sitting around here. I'm not a person that's going to sit around. I have to go get it. I want to own my own company one day. I'm working on that.

I have dreams. I have goals. Again, I want to leave my kids a legacy. I want to put them through college. I want them to live comfortable.

[00:08:03] **Jason Hibbs:** One of the many organizations that received MacArthur funds to help with criminal justice reform, Brothers United through Pathway Toledo, was granted nearly 30, 000.

Knighnton Jr. says they depend on grants from a variety of sources to help get people on the right road. For Symington, that's courses on fatherhood and behavioral health in the halfway house. For Perez, it's also literally about getting him on the road by helping him pay for his CDL.

[00:08:32] **Willie Knighnten, Jr:** The grant from MacArthur was mentoring.

So I was able to combine the mentoring, getting the guy's mindset, which was not hard with him because he was already determined. So it made it easy just to see if he was ready to go after all these years in prison. Now you have to remember, this is not a correctional officer that you're going to be seen.

This is the guy that's going to be paying you and training you. So have that mindset where you don't crash out because they talk crazy at the mom trucking companies. They talk crazy. Cause I've been doing this for years. And so I said, just remember your

[00:09:03] **Jason Hibbs:** focus. Many of the other community organizations, which we'll hear about in an upcoming episode, help people on the outside.

But here, we're focusing on options available to those inside. And there's another local program that did not apply for or receive MacArthur funds that's bringing outsiders in.

[00:09:22] **Dr. Renee Heberlee:** I am professor of political science. I am co director of the program in law and social thought. I am coordinator of the UToledo Toledo Correctional Inside Out Prison Exchange Program.

[00:09:35] **Jason Hibbs:** University of Toledo professor Dr. Renee Heberle and her colleagues teach a variety of accredited college courses inside the Toledo

Correctional State Prison. And they bring outside undergrad students along with them.

[00:09:48] **Dr. Renee Heberlee:** Every student on the inside and outside has to be interviewed or talked to individually or in a small group.

Before they're enrolled. Before they're enrolled. Before they Get to touch the class. We have to know that they have the level of maturity, level of commitment. Once they are enrolled, the outside students become volunteers for the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, which means they have to go through an orientation and fill out a pretty good packet of and that's the top of the list of materials including doing a background check.

The inside students are screened by staff for disciplinary issues, behavioral issues on the inside. And if they have a reasonably clean record, and if the people in the education department in the prison believe them, they can be trusted in such an environment, then they will be invited to enroll in the class.

I still talk to them. The faculty on the outside still talk to them as well. We want to lay out all the expectations. make very clear to them what this is and what it isn't. The courses are all accredited through the university or college. And the students on the inside, some institutions give credit and waive tuition, others do not.

Our students on the, who are incarcerated, can take their portfolio from the classes and pay for credits when they leave towards graduation at any college or university that will accept that through adult learning processes. Everyone's doing it for credit. If the persons on the inside get released and choose to pursue their education, they'll have credit from this class.

The outside students are getting university or college credit. And the idea of the Inside Out Prison Exchange Project program is to just show, by doing, that we can make the walls of prisons in this country more permeable, that we can collaborate as institutions to educate. That we can do community based education in a way that brings it to unexpected places and do that successfully.

And we can help people as citizens on the inside and outside start to understand a little more about what our prison system is about and what it does and doesn't do. I would argue that people on the outside need that more than people on the inside.

[00:12:08] **Jason Hibbs:** The National Inside Out Center says the unique learning experience emphasizes dialogue across differences, ensures equal participation, eliminates technology distractions, Fosters collaborative projects and encourages students to think more critically about social injustice and devise creative solutions.

[00:12:29] **Dr. Renee Heberlee:** People on the inside also work there and those people have their own interpretation of what's going on. And so it's a black box what happens in prisons and we get access to it through culture and through media and through some news reporting. News reporting tends to be when the house is on fire.

People die, there's violence, there's scandal. Culture tends to oversimplify it and make it look very different than it actually is. As if it's just a constant site of violence and horror. The reality of prisons is very different from both of those.

[00:13:05] **Jason Hibbs:** While just being there is an eye opener for outside

[00:13:09] **Dr. Renee Heberlee:** Students always reflect on what it feels like to have that cement door clang behind them when they walk in.

Or the feeling of walking out again and knowing that their classmates are going the other way.

[00:13:18] **Jason Hibbs:** Heberlee says she emphasizes that the insiders are not the subject they're studying in the three hour per week course.

[00:13:25] **Dr. Renee Heberlee:** We're not there to help them with cases. We're not there to help them at all. We're there as an educational project, as a class.

So the students are interacting just as if they were students on campus. And we really emphasize that.

[00:13:37] **Jason Hibbs:** She says a few years ago, the Inside Out program was open to UToledo Law students, and many of them have taken advantage of the opportunity.

[00:13:44] **Dr. Renee Heberlee:** The benefits are to learn about a system that incarcerates more of our population than any other criminal justice system on the face of the earth in the United States.

We tend to keep our distance from prisons, and that's for a lot of reasons, historical and cultural and symbolic, and security and safety. And prisons tend to run under the radar, and yet they cost us more money than public higher education does as taxpayers. And they don't do the work that we think they do, or want them to do.

They don't do the work that we want them to do. And I'm not talking about just this sort of classic discussion about recidivism, that they don't keep people from coming back. I'm talking about justice.

[00:14:35] **Jason Hibbs:** According to the U. S. National Institute of Corrections, the United States has the second highest prison population in the world, with more than 2.2 million people behind bars.

[00:14:47] **Dr. Renee Heberlee:** And this is a really big black box that we haven't taken responsibility to know anything about. And yeah, we have been instilled with fear through culture and through the news coverage that only focuses on the terrifying things that happen and can happen.

So as we would with any kind of government tax funded, publicly funded institution, we should know what's going on there. I think that we actually need to send our own citizens inside and this is such a great way of doing it because we're not going inside to help, to bring therapy, to proselytize to reform people.

We're going in there purely with the goal of offering education to folks who have, for the most part, not had any access to it. Formal education. The students who come into this program come in thinking, Oh, I want to help someone. And they leave realizing, these people don't really need my help. We need to change the system.

That's what they, I think, get from it. I think citizenship is at stake. I think opening up the black box of prisons is at stake.

[00:15:57] **Jason Hibbs:** That's why the UToledo Inside Out program also engages community leaders, like school superintendents and legal aid representatives, in discussions with the group to have mutual learning without formal presentations. They also host Family Day twice a year, inviting families of incarcerated students to participate in a mock class, hold study groups on topics such as conflict resolution, and share a meal.

There are inside out prison exchange programs throughout the country to learn more about the nationwide efforts or the one at the University of Toledo, visit

our website, [www. wgte. org](http://www.wgte.org) forward slash rjj. There you can also find a link to the Glass House magazine. It's a collaborative work written mostly by the insiders.

Heberle leaves us with a passage that she says impacted her, a poem from someone sentenced to death.

[00:16:54] **Dr. Renee Heberlee:** My punishment will end when death comes for me as it did for the elderly man in my cell many years ago. Until then, I choose to heed the words of the author Joseph Campbell, quote, We must be willing to let go of the life we planned so as to have the life that is waiting for us.

End quote. I will make that work for me.

[00:17:25] **Jason Hibbs:** You can imagine why Eloy Perez is so thankful he's free and living a new life.

[00:17:32] **Eloy Perez:** It's a Kenworth 560, T560, and it's a 40, 43 foot trailer. Right now we're driving a 53 foot trailer. And right now I'm just driving, we drive the material is copper, brass, and aluminum. For Perez, it took the right person.

We got the same backgrounds. We come from the same past. We come from the same streets.

[00:17:53] **Jason Hibbs:** His mentor, Knighton Jr., to help him get the life

[00:17:56] **Eloy Perez:** he wanted. This man helped me. He helped me. He helped me to where I'm at today. I got a house. I got a car. I'm going to Disneyland here at the end of the month. I'm taking my kids to Disneyland.

I'm doing, I'm, we're gonna have some fun.

[00:18:11] **Jason Hibbs:** He's hoping now to help others find their own road to a better life.

[00:18:19] **Eloy Perez:** At this interview that somebody's gonna hear me and say, I know him, you know what, if he can do it, I can do it. That's all I want. If it's just one person, that's all that matters. That's all I care about.

Change your mindset, and your whole world will change. And that's the truth.

[00:18:38] **Jason Hibbs:** Thanks for listening to this episode of the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast. And remember, more information can be found on wgte.org forward slash rjj. Until next time, I'm your host, Jason Hibbs. On the next episode of the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast. Everybody needs a little bit, but those who need more need to get a little more.

The intersection of behavioral health and criminal justice.

We need to talk about this. It's painful, it's hard, it sucks, but you know what? That's why I'm here.

[00:19:16] **Jason Hibbs:** How Lucas County mental health professionals are responding to new challenges.

After the pandemic, there is research that. That is showing that there is an increased need for mental health treatment and addiction services.

[00:19:30] **Jason Hibbs:** And how you can help a loved one without making matters worse.