

Symposium For The Soul

One of the most rewarding days of my life happened in a maximum-security correctional facility. I was honored to attend the first ever “Rehabilitation and Reentry Conference, Inside Lancaster Prison”.

Healing Dialogue and Action, the Anti-Recidivism Coalition, and Serving California had pulled off a miracle on 60th street. Guest from all over came to discuss public safety, fair sentencing, accountability, and rehabilitation. There was a buzz of excitement coursing through my body as I greeted the attendees. Humbly, I shook the hands of violent crime survivors, district attorney’s, CDCR officials, and advocates for sensible justice reform as they walked through the visiting room doors. With each hand I shook, I was struck by the power of human connection. It felt as if the ring of chairs, waiting for the occupants to occupy, created a circle for healing. I could see the kindness and compassion written on the faces of the guests filing through the doors as they greeted me and the twelve other attending prisoners.

A survivor and I were discussing Viktor Frankle’s and Brené Brown’s hidden jewels of powerful lessons on strength, courage, and shame resiliency when Javier, the normally quiet CEO of HDA bellowed at the crowd. *“Settle down everyone and please find a seat!”*

Up until that moment, I was calm. However, before Javier’s words finished punctuating the air, my palms began to sweat and my heart rate accelerated.

I sat in the front next to Javier and Nora, a survivor who lost her son to a brutal and senseless murder. I was scheduled to share a little bit about my life, crime, and who I had become. Nora shared first. As she gracefully and courageously told her tale, I cried unabashedly. Her voice broke, as did the barrier holding back her tears as she spoke about identifying her son’s body down at the morgue. Describing the scene, I saw it unfold in my head. Goose pimples and a shiver shook my body while listening to her talk about how cold her son’s hand was. Painful thoughts struck my heart like bolts of lightning. I hung my head in shame and watched as Nora lovingly touched the underside of her wrist, his name tattooed there as a constant reminder of her son, her pride and joy. His college dream, hopes to have a family of his own...everything taken away by the bullet with no name. The emotions were palpable. Everyone present intently listened, embracing her courage and empathizing with her pain, hanging on to every word. As she rubbed the cross that hung from her neck, recounting her despair, I felt sad, ashamed and remorseful for causing a similar hurt to Armen’s family.

“Lee”, Javier quietly said, “can you please share your testimony now?”

Nora handed me the microphone.

Breathing deeply, shakily I began, *“Bryan Stevenson said ‘each of us is better than the worst thing we have done.’”*

I felt that the crowd’s eyes were boring into my soul.

“I’m humbled and honored for this opportunity to share with you what I have done, how I got here, and what is in my heart. On June 8, 1994, I did the worst thing I have ever done; I shot and killed Armen Shakkharamian. He was a son, an uncle, a friend, and a family member to people that loved and cared for him. He liked nature, the outdoors, and he loved to fish. Because of me his loved ones will never hear his laugh, see his smile, or talk to him ever again.”

The last sentence came out as a whine. I took a deep breath, wiped the snot dripping from my nose with the napkin offered by Nora and continued.

“Hours after I killed Armen, I was sitting in a dusty, dirty garage with my older brother, miles away from what I had done. That was when I learned that Armen was dead.”

Fresh tears flowed down my face.

“Shame and regret engulfed me. I remember sitting there, bent forward, clutching my knees, as sobs wracked my body. I felt disgusting. As if, my soul was stained and soiled. At 17 years of age, how did I get to that point in my life where I was capable of murder?” My question hung in the air like thick black smoke.

“My journey began in Oklahoma. I am one of seven kids, raised in a chaotic and violent household. When I was about seven years old, my father was brutally murdered and shortly after that, a tornado destroyed our house, leaving us depressed and destitute.”

What would follow was a life filled with instability and rebellious behavior fueled by anger and hatred. I moved 22 times and went to 12 different schools by the time I was 17. I grew up hating myself and everyone around me. What I told myself became my reality. I felt unloved and worthless. I became addicted to marijuana and adopted the life of a criminal.” With each sentence shared, I shed a shameful mask from years past. Sitting there in front of everyone I was now crying for the boy I was and for the taking of Armen’s life.

“That is how I became huddled in that garage. Crying for the life, I took. I not only hated what I had done, but also what I had become, I hated my life as a whole.” In shameful disbelief, I shook my head for what I had done.

“For the last 22 ½ years, while incarcerated, I began pursuing the path to become the person I am today. I learned that positive thoughts and positive actions are the bridge to wholeness of self. Through inner reflection and self-help classes, I redefined my identity and principles. I realized I could alter my life by altering my attitude. I started taking responsibility for my decisions that led me to becoming a murderer and began making choices fueled by compassion. I still have my moments of insecurities and doubts but I’ve learned to love myself and those around me.

Today I help heal people. I came to realize that I shall pass through life but once, so any good I can do or any kindness I can show, I will do it every day that I can.

Here on ‘A’ Yard I have surrounded myself with positive likeminded peers that foster kindness and growth. Under the guidance and support of Men For Honor, three years ago, I co-created a support group for juvenile offenders called ‘Helping Youth Offenders Understand Their Harm.’ A support group that meets on a weekly basis, where we openly discuss the harm we caused, a path to healing, and ways to make amends.

So as I sit here, I represent all of us that have changed. We have changed our past negative thoughts and behaviors to positive ones. As someone, that has lived a selfish and criminal lifestyle; I would like to say to everyone that we have harmed and those that have been hurt by others...I am sorry.” I bit my lip trying to abate the tears from flowing again and from becoming choked up beyond my ability to continue.

I hurt. As I exposed my shame to the light, it screamed at me for being revealed.

Staring into Nora’s eyes I continued, *“I’m sorry for the pain and suffering you, your family, your loved ones, and your community members have endured. I empathize with the sleepless nights, the heartache and the pain you experience from the daily reminders of the loss you have suffered, the missing of your loved one’s voice, their favorite food, song or just their presence at the dinner table.”*

I began crying again as fresh feelings of remorse slid through my soul.

“I’m saddened that I am the representation that took away all those special moments and major milestones that come with having them in your everyday life. I am sorry. If there is anything I can do to help in your path to healing, I will.”

Looking around the room I said, *“Our hope today is to help bridge the gap between survivors and offenders. To help create a healing dialogue that promotes change for the betterment of us all. And I would like to thank all of today’s participants for doing just that.”*

As I finished, tears dripped like a leaky faucet down my face. Deep breaths could not slow the pounding in my chest. Our eyes were locked while all of the attendees stared at us. I felt vulnerable, exposed, bare, and raw. Nora opened a bottle of healing oil that had been blessed by a person of the cloth. The scent caressed my nostrils as she opened the container.

Her gentle words carried years of pain, freeing the emotions from years of turmoil, *“I see the change in you”.* My nose burned.

“I see your heart and feel your sincerity,” her eyes filled with compassion.

My lip quivered and I clamped down on a sob. All my life I wanted to be seen. To be loved for me, for who I am. In front of that room of people, I felt as if my soul was being scrubbed of the stains of shame that I carried.

I hung onto every word Nora spoke, captivated by the freeing of bottled up emotions, *“If those that you hurt, and family members of those that you harmed were here, they would agree.”*

A warm flush built in my body. Time stood still and my heart felt like it stopped. She took my hand and the warmth within me heated to a boil, sending tiny tingles to every hair follicle in my body. Drawing an oiled cross on my palm Nora’s eyes filled with a soft kindness as she said, *“On behalf of them...I forgive you.”*

The dam of heat broke, and flowed over every fiber of my being. It felt as if years of self-hate and shame were

being washed away. Tears fell, snot ran, lips quivered, and my eyes stayed locked on hers. It felt as if I had forgiveness to draw upon from the compassion in her eyes, as if all of my slick and evil deeds were sitting in my oily palm. With those words of, *"I forgive you"*, waves of love rose within me and warm fuzzy feelings felt as if they restored some of my worth. Placing that palm of forgiveness over my heart the "thump thump...thump thump" raced and reached for the mercy being offered. There was a freeing of shame and disgust that weighed me down and held me back from being the best person I could be. Placing my hand to my nose and mouth, I inhaled the love. It was as if those deep breaths breathed in tiny priceless jewels of forgiveness, compassion, and hope. Racing through my blood stream, a sensitivity set off through every vein and artery I had. I felt alive and grateful for the opportunity to receive such a wonderful gift.

Putting oil on my finger, the very one that pulled the trigger killing Armen; I began drawing a cross on Nora's palm. I felt as if I was exposing the shame in my soul.

My hearts remorse began spilling from my lips. *"Nora. I'm sorry you had Nico taken away."*

I could see the pain in her eyes.

"For everyone that has harmed you", I looked around to the crowd, *"or anyone in this room"*.

My heart felt as if it was breaking open like an egg spilling out the yolk that held my container of accountability. Pain slipped from Nora's eyes, big droplets journeyed down her cheeks. A softening of her features ensued. The room was still, *"I'm sorry."*

The collective breath of everyone present seemed to release, releasing sniffles and sobs that carried away pent up pain. I felt as if the regret, remorse, and pain from my soiled soul was exposed for the room to see. It was liberating for my soul's spirit to be seen. There was a connection within that circle, of over 60 people, that carried an energy of strength, courage, hope, and forgiveness. Nora placed her hand over her chest, feeling the apology reverberating through the air into her heart. She then breathed it in. I felt a renewal of self. There was an inner salve spreading over my core. Flowing like life giving water quenching a desert floor, my soul soaked up the positive energy in the room.

It felt as if magic crackled through the air. Gloria and I held hands as one by one everyone aired their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. With each word spoken, we were building community and instead of feeling isolated, I felt connected to the soul's sitting around me.

At one point, I remember looking at Javier and thought about how amazing, he is. He created a safe container that allowed us to enter into a conscious relationship where everyone was respectful, safe, and secure. Our needs were being met to help bridge the gap between victims, offenders, prosecutors. We were on the same path at the same time towards healing, wellness, and resiliency.

Having this diverse group of people sitting in the same room, listening to one another with openhearted compassion exceeded my expectations. The restorative justice model that HDA, ARC, and Serving California provided, provided a platform and arena for everyone affected by crime to be heard.

The day carried on with meet and greets, smaller sharing circles discussing the lives of those present and solutions for our paths to healing. One of the most rewarding days of my life, happened in a maximum-security prison.