**It Begins in Jail**

By: Augie Ghilarducci

My first day

Sharing this story stirs up feelings in me like no other. It is a recurring nightmare, even after all these years. I was a self-surrender, the judge allowed me to turn myself in. I was dropped off at the front door of a Federal Prison in Sandstone MN. I was trying to appear strong but, on the inside, I was afraid, uncertain, and lost. I was about to start serving 190-month sentence. That's how they sentence you in federal court, not only are you going to prison, but you have to be a math whiz to figure out for how long. I had a final cigarette before walking inside, just like they do in the movies.

After sitting chained to a bench for several hours, my hands were cuffed behind my back, and I was brought down to a cell. They opened the door, put me inside, and removed the cuffs through the door. The closing of a cell door is a unique and unmistakable sound; it continues to reverberate in your ears long after the key has been turned. It was a small room, probably 6’ by 10’ with a bunk bed and a sink/toilet unit that was three feet from the bed. The windows were covered by old, thick bars with a dirty screen behind barely letting any daylight inside the cell. Sitting on a lower bunk was a guy that had tattoos on every visible inch of his skin. He also looked like he lifted weights every day of his life. He introduced himself as John.

The anxiety I felt was indescribable. I wanted to use the phone, I wanted to apologize to anyone and everyone. I wanted to leave; I missed my family. I couldn’t breathe. John explained to me there was a food strike going on, every bed was full and that I was going to sit in the “hole” for a while before a bed opened for me to move to the actual prison. The hole is the jail inside the prison.

It was one of those crazy food strikes. Total lockdown where guys are trying to light mattresses on fire to throw out windows that had bars and didn’t open. Scary stuff. I sat in the hole for four days spent a lot of time talking with John who turned out to be a really nice guy. At many points I thought I was losing my mind. I was having a hard time making it through a day how in the world when I make it through 190 months? Every good thought that I tried to have turned to anxiety and guilt. My wife had to make the eight-hour drive back to Chicago by herself; I was unable to call to make sure she arrived safely. I had promised my two young children that I would call them let him know that I was OK. I needed to call my mother. It ended up being 10 days before I could make a telephone call. I knew my family would be worried sick about me.

The New Guy

When there was a bunk available, I was released from the hole and directed to C- unit. It was on the second floor, open dormitory style. I was taken to a section known as the trailer park, a row of many bunk beds with tiny lockers. As I was trying to process my new surroundings (and desperately trying to learn how I could make a telephone call I met a guy from a neighborhood close to where I lived. He had been locked up 16 years, we became a good friend and was there to greet me when I came home more than a decade later. He gave me a piece of advice which served me well through the years. He told me, “Stay out of the TV rooms, nothing good happens in there.”

I was laying on the top bunk minding my own business, trying to reassure myself that everyone at home was OK. Somebody came up to me and said, “Hey new guy there's someone at the door for you.” I had no idea who it might be. I went downstairs and saw a guy standing there who asked if I was Augie and put his hand out to shake. He placed three or four cigarettes in my hand. He told me that John, who was still in the hole, said that he should take care of me. **No charge**. I could have as many cigarettes as I wanted. I refused the cigarettes, thanked him, and told him that I hadn’t smoked in four days, and I was going to try to stay that way.

That Story Tells Everything I Needed to Know

That story tells me all I needed to know about incarceration. We don't have to go looking for trouble, it'll come and find us. Trouble is not just breaking rules. It is getting to such a negative place mentally that it is hard to come back. It’s bringing that negativity into all of our relationships. It is becoming institutionalized or “shot out” as it’s called on the inside. Unless there are alternatives, trouble in one form or another is almost certain to occur. There should be positive options of how we spend our time, and more importantly how we engage our minds to help offset the trouble that is surely lurking around the corner.

My Name is Augie Ghilarducci

I come from a loving, middle class home with two terrific parents. I was taught right from wrong. My sister and I were given every opportunity to get an education. After graduation I went to work in the financial services industry and age 25 opened a financial planning and business consulting firm which I successfully operated for nearly 15 years. More than twenty-five years later I still can’t explain why I did what I did. I got involved with the wrong people and I made horrible choices and bad decisions. I was greedy and selfish. As a consequence of my behavior, I was prosecuted and convicted of investment fraud. I was sentenced to 15 years 10 months in prison. I got pretty good at sentencing math.

Re-entry is a Jig Saw Puzzle

Through my time of incarceration and my re-entry into society I have formed some definite thoughts about the challenges and barriers of re-entry and what can be done to improve the likelihood of people returning to become productive members of society. There is no one size fits all solution to re-entering society after incarceration. Re-entry is a jigsaw puzzle and each of us that re-enters have different pieces in our puzzle. Whatever our puzzle-- being able to assemble that puzzle starts at the time of incarceration. **It begins in jail.**

Three Categories of Inmate

I was incarcerated with thousands of men over the years. When it comes to re-entry, I saw three different categories:

* Those that were going to be fine. Extremely short sentence, family wealth, superior skills and education; their time of incarceration was a speed bump.
* Then sadly there are those that simply can't follow rules. If there's a sign on the wall saying do not touch the light switch, the first thing they will do is touch the light switch. This is the category, that for whatever reason, keeps the beds in jails and prisons full.
* And there's the category in the middle. I believe this to be the majority of the incarcerated population. They have the same type of regret and frustration with the predicament in which they put themselves and their loved ones. They are riddled with guilt, anxiety, and fear. They don't want to repeat the process of incarceration. They want to finish their sentence get back to their families and move on with their lives and not come back. Those are the people that stand the best chance of successfully re-entry and have the greatest need for programs to help them identify a positive path in which they can engage their minds and their energies.

I've witnessed the revolving door of recidivism. Time and time again I would watch men leave and then months sometimes even years later they’d return. I'm embarrassed to say that I used to be angry with these guys when they come back. I’d think, “You got your chance, and you blew it. I'm sitting here waiting for my day.” Once I opened my mind, I came to understand that they didn't stand a chance. They didn’t have stable housing, they had outdated or non-developed employment skills, limited education, substance abuse issues, trauma and a limited or non-existent support network.

The Role of County Jails

I have been doing work inside county jails since January 2018. I see two basic categories of detainees with respect to re-entry. There are those that are in jail for the short term. They will bond out, charges may be dropped, or they are serving a short sentence and will be released directly to the community. Conversely, there are those that will have a long journey of incarceration prior to re-entry. They will be in the county jail until they are sentenced and then will move on to the State Department of Corrections or the Federal Bureau of Prisons, depending on state or federal charges. Spending most of our time in the TV room, playing cards or dominos, and complaining about the bad hand we’ve been dealt is not the path to successful re-entry. In fact, it is digging a trench from which we will have a hard time emerging, regardless of the time we spend incarcerated. I’ve seen too often, people that are released and carry the negative mind set with them that makes it extremely difficult to rebuild or create new relationships, which affects every facet of their lives.

My Journey Made this Work my Passion

Ultimately, I was incarcerated for 12 years, 10 months and served more than 3 years on Federal Probation. Much happened during that time that allowed me to have a deep understanding of incarceration and how to best prepare for re-entry. I lost both my parents while I was away, leaving a hole in my heart that will never heal. I returned to my faith which I leaned on every day for survival. I worked in the Education Department of two prisons and developed and instructed dozens of courses to fellow inmates. I participated in a Community Outreach Program for nine years. I served as RDAP Clerk for five years, RDAP is the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Drug Abuse Program based on Cognitive Behavior Therapy/Rational Thinking. I got a U.S. Department of Labor apprenticeship and began taking college classes that I continued upon release until my graduation in 2022, at age 62 with an MBA. My friends tease me that I have a PhD in prison.

I’ve Lived the Barriers and Challenges of Re-entry

I have experienced rejection from some family members and friends. I emerged with social anxiety making certain situations very difficult for me to navigate. I routinely have trauma-based reactions to a variety of situations. I have been overwhelmed by everyday activities such as shopping, driving, going to events with large crowds. I was completely lost with respect to technology and am desperately trying to catch up. Successful re-entry includes being prepared for these, and other challenges. Things relevant to meaningful change starts with a blank slate.

There is a process that started with me taking responsibility for my actions. The problem with this is, once I took responsibility, I became angry with myself. How could I have behaved that way? How could I have been so foolish, so greedy, so selfish? How could I have let so many people down? It took me several years to transition to the next step, forgiving myself. This is when I was able to think more clearly about my future and to create an ever-evolving plan on what re-entry should look like and what I wanted my life to be.

Incarceration provided opportunities for me to better myself. The apprenticeship I achieved brought, not only the value of a post release employment option but allowed me to slowly rebuild my self-worth. Likewise, the college courses I took helped me to gain confidence and critical thinking skills. I went from a feeling of being worthless to having a cautious optimism about my future. In turn I became a more positive person which I carried with me the day I out the front of prison.

The other thing I learned to do in the process of rebuilding my life, was the willingness to ask for and accept help. In retrospect, had I done this back in 1996, I doubt that I would have made the decisions that led to my crime. This is a lesson that I use to make certain my thinking doesn’t cause me to stray from who I want to be and how I want to live my life.

My Career- Post Release

I arranged my first post release job in a Prison Visiting Room. It was like the weight of the world came off my shoulders. With the encouragement and support of my employer I began to volunteer in Cook County Jail, at the time the largest single site jail in the world, to instruct the re-entry programs I had created while I was away. I went in there every Tuesday, walking behind the double razor wire and echoing doors of the jail certainly stirred up some emotions. It also convinced me that this is what I should be doing, this was my purpose.

2nd Opportunity was born. Dan Effrein, who I didn’t know before I went away saw what I was doing and wanted to create something to help many others. From there things took off, expanding into other county jails, prisons, halfway houses, substance abuse recovery centers, juvenile populations, and recently veteran groups. We have established a second office in the Atlanta area and are now doing work in numerous states. I still haven’t been able to comprehend that we are becoming a national organization. This started in a prison cell as I was preparing for my own release, I never thought it to be a career.

The 2nd Opportunity Program consists of 5 courses available in both English and Spanish. We focus on employment readiness, life skills, financial literacy, obtaining advanced skills and education, and re-entry. We transmit our material into jails and prisons through tablets, streaming, and DVDs. We provide workshops and workbooks to stimulate engagement and completion of the program. In the event someone is released before completing the program, they can finish it through our website at no cost to them. We never charge an inmate for our services.

We provide a post release support network including referrals for employment, housing, substance abuse treatment, and other supportive services. We offer access to peer support groups and access to mentoring. We can help qualified, released individuals to obtain a no cost, fully activated Smart Phone. It’s almost impossible to even apply for a job without access to the internet.

It’s possible

I interact with jail staff almost daily. I understand their frustration of seeing the same person come back time after time. I know the toll it takes on that person and their family. I understand well that re-entry is difficult. I also understand that it’s possible.

* It’s possible to do productive time
* It’s possible to develop good habits and to lean to think differently
* It’s possible to learn skills and take advantage of opportunities
* It’s possible to become a success story
* It’s possible to walk away from jail or prison and not return

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