Get Out—And Don’t Come Back!

A Quick Guide for Shortimers
by A.R. Quinn

Jill Colon was an accountant when she went to work for a fraudulent gold company. Her boss got federal time; she got state time in Florida. Ready to make a change, she joined a Celebrate Recovery group in prison and found two female Prison Fellowship volunteers to mentor her. Still, as her release date approached, her anxiety grew. “Nervous. Excited. I don’t know, what’s that thing when you’re scared and nervous at the same time. Apprehensive?” Jill asked her mentors. She wondered how she would find a place to live and a way to pay the bills. With freedom would come greater pressure.

The First Three Hours: Face Your Fears
As much as you might be looking forward to it, the thought of being released can also provoke a lot of fear and insecurity. You’ve probably seen enough friends come back to know it won’t be easy. Jill tackled her fears by working with her mentors to make specific, concrete plans. She applied for special transitional housing. She knew how she would get money for food and the medications she took. And on the day she was released, she had supportive people waiting to give her a ride to her new home.

Despite her anxiety—an emotion you might share—Jill was ready to succeed. She started preparing as early as possible. She sought accountability and good advice. And with a solid plan for her first 24 hours, she managed not to let her fears take her off course.

The First Three Days: Find Your Footing
When you walk from a dark room into sunlight, it takes your eyes a few minutes to adjust. The first days out of prison can feel the same: tensive, disorienting, and maybe frightening. You’ll have a lot of decisions to make. The world can seem like it’s moving too fast, and if you’ve been down a long time, new technologies might be unfamiliar. This is when a supportive mentor or community can make all the difference.

Get Your Reentry Off on the Right Foot
by John Baker

I used to look into the bottom of a bottle like I would find all the answers to my problems there. Sure, on the outside, I seemed like a success. I was a vice president of marketing operations, and I had a wife, kids, and a house, but I spent almost two decades as a functional alcoholic. I drank just enough to not ever feel anything. I was emotionally unavailable for my family, like I was living in my own time zone. I was empty inside, and there wasn’t enough alcohol in the world to fill me.

One morning on a business trip I hit my breaking point. I woke up in my hotel room and reached for a beer first thing. But for some reason I couldn’t get enough. Beer wasn’t working anymore. After that I sobered up in an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) group.

We’ve all fallen short, so that means literally everyone is welcome. In the last 27 years, CR has expanded to 10,000 churches, 20 languages, and universities. Through Celebrate Recovery Inside, many men and women behind bars have also joined and become leaders in CR programs.

Whether you struggle with substance abuse or not, Celebrate Recovery is a great place to find supportive, honest community after release. Having the right support in place was a big help to Reggie Holmes.

Continued on page 2
How Are You Getting Home?
by Jordan Jeske

As you plan for release, you'll need to decide whom you are going to ask to give you a ride. It might seem like a simple call, but it will have big consequences.

Is it going to be an old girlfriend or boyfriend? Or a so-called friend from the past, mostly there to push a drug, a drink, or a come-up on you?

Or will you go the other way, and find someone strong enough to hold you accountable for all those changes you've been trying to make in your life?

My journey home started long before I was released. The Angel Tree church that brought my son a Christmas gift recommended a safe and structured living environment for me when I would be released. My mom helped me fill out an application, and after a phone interview I knew it was what I needed to help me transition out of prison.

My mom also picked me up. We celebrated with a hug and a Lumberjack Slam from Denny’s. When I crossed the threshold into my transitional living home, I was filled with satisfaction, because I knew it would help me meet my goal of never returning to prison.

Choosing someone to give you a ride is about more than your first few hours. It’s about the direction you want to go from here. It’s going to take time, thought, and work to establish relationships with a program that will offer you a chance to continue rebuilding your future, but if you’re willing to commit to this path, people will commit to you.

Recently I got to be some one’s ride home. I took him to the reentry home I now operate, and I’m going to mentor him as he transitions into his new life. Structure your first day out as a reflection of the person you want to be, and one day, maybe, you can be someone’s ride and mentor, too!
The Ultimate Second Chance

by Johnathan Kana

It was the call I had been hoping for—and dreading. The voice on the other end of the line was friendly, but my stomach was in knots.

“Mr. Kana,” I said, “I’ve reviewed your qualifications, and I’m pleased with what I’m seeing here. I’d like to offer you the job, if you’re still interested.”

You bet I was. This was an amazing opportunity: a mid-level management job with a growing company—and for significantly more money than I was earning. I was practically drooling over the offer.

There was just one problem: I hadn’t yet revealed my criminal history.

I knew that what I was about to say could change the whole conversation. My leadership skills and relevant work experience might no longer matter once this hiring manager heard that I had been to prison for a serious crime. For a moment, I considered saying nothing. Don’t ask, don’t tell—right?

Deep within, I knew that wouldn’t go well for me. Better just get it over with, I decided.

“Thank you very much,” I began. “I’m eager to work with you, too. There’s just one more thing we need to discuss...”

Coming Clean

That conversation was a paraphrase of many I’ve had in the years since my release. No matter how many times I do it, sharing my criminal history never gets any easier. It’s awkward and embarrassing. But it has to be done.

Sometimes the interviewer listens with interest as I share how I’ve grown from my past. Other times, I can sense the interviewer’s discomfort as he or she abruptly ends the interview. In both cases, I’m more likely to get a form rejection letter than a job offer.

It hurts when someone either can’t or won’t see past my crime, because it’s only a small part of who I really am. Yes, I’m an ex-offender. But I’m also an intelligent, hard-working individual with plenty of valuable skills. All I need is an employer to give me the chance to prove it.

Unfortunately, not all of them will. For some employers, a felony conviction is an automatic deal-breaker, and that’s their right. I may not think it’s fair, but no amount of pleading on my part is likely to change their hiring criteria.

God’s law is like that, too—and we’re all guilty. Not everyone commits a crime worthy of being sent to prison, but when it comes to God’s standards for our lives, all of us have a “criminal history” we have to answer for. The Bible says, “The person who keeps all the laws except one is as guilty as the person who has broken all of God’s laws” (James 2:10, NLT). It also says, “If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth” (1 John 1:8).

Because we all mess up, all of us are marked as lawbreakers. And that’s an automatic bar from admission to God’s Kingdom.

Landing the Job

“I appreciate your candor, Mr. Kana,” the hiring manager began. “We all make mistakes in life, but not everyone learns from them.”

I waited breathlessly to hear what he would say next.

“As far as I’m concerned, your past isn’t a problem—as long as it’s in the past,” he said with happiness. “Thank you, sir.” He was giving me a shot, and I was determined not to disappoint him. “Now,” he continued, “let’s talk about the future. When can you start?”

God wants to give us a second chance, too. He sent His Son, Jesus, to live as one of us, modeling the life of love, integrity, hope, and purpose He wants all of us to have. Both fully God and fully human, Jesus chose to die a criminal’s death on a Roman cross to pay the penalty we could never pay for ourselves. Then, God raised Him from the grave three days later, breaking the stranglehold of sin and death in our lives.

“Now, everyone who turns to Jesus can be forgiven, accepted, and made new—no matter what they’ve done in the past.”

Thanks to Him, our sins don’t have to keep us from approaching God. We can come just as we are, being honest about our “criminal history” without fear of rejection. When we do, God exchanges our guilt for Jesus’ perfect record. “He canceled the record that contained the charges against us,” the Bible says. “‘He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ’s cross’” (Colossians 2:14).

Best of all, when we make Jesus the boss of our lives, He puts us to work for His Kingdom. And that’s a job with excellent growth potential—and eternal benefits.

A criminal record follows you around, but it doesn’t have to define your future. Did you know God offers you a new identity and a place of belonging in His community?

The Following Checklist contains things to do and things to have prior to release, or as soon as possible after you return to the community. Checking these items off your list can help you stay on the path to change your life, but not everyone learns from them.

Let’s make mistakes in life, but not everyone learns from them.

The Ultimate Second Chance

WHEN CAN YOU START?

Checking that dreaded box on a job application feels like an immediate disqualification. Yet it’s risky to leave that space blank, and even worse to lie. Most employers perform background checks, so honesty remains the best policy.

The same is true if you want to begin a relationship with God through His Son Jesus. If you’re ready, you can do that with a simple prayer, like this one:

God, I know that my “criminal history” means I deserve to be cut off from You. But I also know that Your Son Jesus died in my place, and I ask You to forgive me, for His sake. Thank You for accepting me as I am. Now, help me become more like You. Amen.

If you’ve just prayed those words from a sincere heart, then you can rest assured that your application to become a follower of Jesus has been received and approved. To learn more about your new job description, you can register for a free correspondence Bible study—and receive a free Bible—through one of our trusted partner organizations. Simply write to “When Can You Start?” c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.

Get Social Security Card and other forms of ID (certified copy of birth certificate, picture ID).

Complete any in-prison reentry programs available.

Deal with outstanding warrants, charges, and detainers under your legal name or any name you may have used in the past.

Complete a drug treatment program or find a program in your community, like a Celebrate Recovery chapter, immediately after release.

Form a job search plan (make a résumé, network with friends and family).

Secure short-term housing.

Make a plan for a safe, positive, and healthy way to celebrate your release.

Get directions and a ride to a local church on the first Sunday of your freedom.

My short-term goals: __________________________

My long-term goals: __________________________

The Following Checklist

The Following Checklist contains things to do and things to have prior to release, or as soon as possible after you return to the community. Checking these items off your list can help you stay on the path to change your life, but not everyone learns from them.

A criminal record follows you around, but it doesn’t have to define your future. Did you know God offers you a new identity and a place of belonging in His community?
What Employers Really Want

by John Rush

A

nding steady employment is one of the biggest challenges you’ll face your first year out of prison. Some employers will take one look at the checked box on your application and put it in the waste bin; you’ll probably hear “no” a lot more often than you hear “yes.” Sometimes it may feel like employers have all the power, but the ball is really in your court. There’s a lot you can do to make yourself a more appealing job candidate, and, once you find someone willing to give you a chance, make yourself an invaluable team member in the workplace.

The “Right-Now Check”

I have a good friend who spent about 15 years in prison. He once told me, “It’s not about the background check. It’s about the right-now check.” He meant that who you are right now, and who you are becoming tomorrow, are more important to your job search than the mistakes you’ve made in the past. Focus on the value, passions, and desires you bring to your career. Take an honest inventory of your gifts, talents, and strengths. Then, practice communicating those things to potential employers. If you do, you’ll be positioned to take advantage of what’s available in the marketplace.

There is a broad cultural misunderstanding that people with a criminal history won’t have anything to offer employers. If you get stuck in the past, believing you won’t ever find good anything, you are buying into the same lie. Acknowledge the past and learn from it, but be focused and confident on where you’re headed. You’ll find an opportunity.

Change Your Social Network

You have to be intentional about changing your social network. Many job opportunities come not from answering an ad, but from the people you know. If you are serious about creating opportunities for yourself, you will need to form new, positive relationships and decrease the time you spend with people who are caught in the same old mess. You don’t have to lose what’s good about where you came from, but you will need to break out of your comfort zone.

Find a Career—not a Job

Once you land a job, make sure you show up every day and hit a home run. Be on time. Be professional. Even if it’s not your dream job, cultivate good, consistent habits and keep a long-term, growth-oriented mindset. The people who do this are the people who are able to take advantage of opportunities, transforming jobs into careers.

Keep Your Tools Sharp

Your body and your mind are the most important “tools” you bring to work every day. So it’s vital that you take good care of them. Get into an exercise routine. Spend your hard-earned money on the most nutritious foods you can afford—not fast food, alcohol, and cigarettes. Find healthy ways to manage stress. Sleep well. Build your mental capacities by engaging in activities that stretch your mind; turn off the TV and read a book or take a class.

Insider Journal: What is something you wish you had known coming out of prison?

David Norman: How much easier this is—the honest working life—than leading a criminal life. We expend so much energy in a criminal life, and that energy is wasted in so many ways. The working life has its stresses and its problems, but there’s a better payoff in the end. I have this new life of working, learning, being involved in civic enterprises. It’s so much better.

I: What was valuable about going to college later in life (besides your degree)?

DN: I learned that the people who are most successful are not the ones who set out to make money. The successful people are the ones who set out to make something, to do something, because they love to do it. Maybe they’ll make money. But more important, they’re doing useful things with a good attitude. For me, service is important. I had this “it’s about me” attitude for such a long time. I didn’t become happy until I started to serve other people.

I: What would you say to someone who feels like it’s too late to start over?

DN: It’s never too late. It’s still worth it. The whole thing is a journey anyway, and it can still be enjoyed. Don’t bite off more than you can chew, but if you can acclimate to one small change at a time, you can accomplish things. So take an honest inventory of yourself—maybe you need to change your attitude about something, or about people. Be humble and open to change. You’ll see small, incremental changes, and you’ll reach the end of your life better than how you were when you started.

by E.G. Andrews

A

fter 35 years of addiction, count- less arrests, and two prison terms, David Norman is on a new path. He gradu- ated as the oldest member of Columbia University’s class of 2016 at age 67, receiving a bachelor’s degree in phi- losophy. Now he works as a researcher at the university and volunteers for causes that help returning citizens and people struggling with addic- tion. He recently sat down with Inside Journal to talk about his journey.

Inside Journal: What is something you wish you had known coming out of prison?

David Norman: How much easier this is—the honest working life—than leading a criminal life. We expend so much energy in a criminal life, and that energy is wasted in so many ways. The work- ing life has its stresses and its problems, but there’s a better payoff in the end. I have this new life of working, learning, being involved in civic enterprises. It’s so much better.

I: How did you end up attend- ing Columbia?

DN: In prison, I was reading all the time. I worked as a teacher’s aide and later worked in a program called transitional services. They gave me training in facilitat- ing classes while I was teach- ing other people life skills. I had a lot of people tell me, “You should be a teacher!” So when I got out, I got a job as an outreach worker at Mount Vernon Hospital in New York, and eventually got a part-time job with Columbia doing research. That gave me the chance to go to school tuition-free—but I had to apply and get accepted first!

I: Did you ever ask yourself whether you would finish, and if so, what kept you going?

DN: Of course. But I spent six years telling people what I wanted to do with my life, and I felt like I had to own that. A lot of people knew my previ- ous reputation and thought I was faking. They thought I had conned the parole board or something. But I believed my transformation was real, and I knew I could live it out. Whenever I had trouble in school, I remembered how far I had come, and I knew I couldn’t give up. I used to be addicted to heroin, man, and there I was, finishing a degree. And I had those people who said, “You know what, Norman? I’m really proud of you.” That kept me going.

I: How did you find supportive community on the outside?

DN: I’ve chosen people, at my jobs for instance, to become my mentors. I knew I’d need their wisdom and support. My supervisor is like a mentor to me. And I built good relationships with them just by being honest. I told everyone about my past; I knew they’d find out anyway. Bosses, professors—they’d see where I had come from and what I was attempting to do. They’d say, “Wow, that’s quite an accomplishment.” You see, I was really bitter in my early life and thought everyone was out to take advantage of me. But I found that I needed to be honest, and I needed to work hard, and someone would have the goodness to work with me and encourage me on my journey.

I: What was valuable about going to college later in life (besides your degree)?

DN: I learned that the people who are most successful are not the ones who set out to make money. The successful people are the ones who set out to make something, to do something, because they love to do it. Maybe they’ll make money. But more important, they’re doing useful things with a good attitude. For me, service is important. I had this “it’s about me” attitude for such a long time. I didn’t become happy until I started to serve other people.

I: What would you say to someone who feels like it’s too late to start over?

DN: It’s never too late. It’s still worth it. The whole thing is a journey anyway, and it can still be enjoyed. Don’t bite off more than you can chew, but if you can acclimate to one small change at a time, you can accomplish things. So take an honest inven- tory of yourself—maybe you need to change your attitude about something, or about people. Be humble and open to change. You’ll see small, incremental changes, and you’ll reach the end of your life better than how you were when you started.

There are lots of stereotypes about applicants with a criminal history. You can prove them wrong.