

“Bad chapters can still create great stories. Wrong paths can still lead to the right places. Failed dreams can still create successful people. Sometimes it takes losing yourself to find yourself.”

– Cynthia Thurlow

If you told any of my teachers at any grade level that I would become a heroin addicted convicted felon who served prison time, they would not believe you. I was never considered a “troublemaker” or a “misfit.” I was not a bad kid. I was not the kind of person that you would at all expect to serve prison time. I was not a rule breaker. I was not disrespectful. In fact, I can only remember having detention once. I consistently made the honor roll and I excelled in sports. Growing up, success and praise came to me easily, which was the beginning of my problems.

As my childhood accomplishments came to me so effortlessly, as did my adult expectations for success. I believed that life would always be easy for me. I believed that I would never have to work as hard as others. My ego was inflated. That trait, combined with an inability to understand and express my emotions, a family history of hidden alcoholism and addiction, and a rigid belief system, was the foundation for the life of addiction which would come.

Another factor in my addiction was how I handled failure. Instead of acknowledging that I needed to work harder or be more disciplined. Rather than considering that I needed to realign with my values, I blamed external factors—favoritism, social class, or popularity. I rarely took responsibility for my results, fed my ego, and created a narrative of victimhood. Drugs and alcohol became my escape. I was bored with life and used more substances to cope.

Those substances were my solution to the internal prison I created until I was 37, facing aggravated robbery charges for using a childhood BB gun to rob a pharmacy. My crime occurred in February 2017. My actions led to my first and only arrest that winter. That’s where my best thinking had brought me. Sick. Addicted. Alone. Facing prison time. I questioned everything and everyone except the person most responsible for my misery—myself.

No one else was responsible—only me. Today, I am grateful for the consequences of my actions because they forced me to take responsibility not just for my crime but for my mindset, my beliefs, and attitude. I spent nine months in rehab at The Recovery Village in Umatilla, Florida, and in a sober living at Cameron Villas in West Palm Beach, Florida. Those were the most critical months of my life. Without the changes in perception that recovery brought, I have no doubt I’d either still be in prison or ashes on a mantle. During rehab, I was introduced to Alcoholics Anonymous, got a sponsor, and worked the 12 steps. I developed a spiritual existence and gained emotional intelligence. I experienced spiritual growth, confronted my defects of character, processed my resentments, addressed my anxieties, made amends, and began taking daily inventories of my actions. These changes led to a spiritual awakening and a genuine desire for continued growth as I entered incarceration.

While in prison, I focused on spirituality, consciousness, and mental growth. Through self-inquiry courses and reading over 100 books on art, quantum physics, music, psychology, and spiritual philosophies like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. I discovered meditation, prayer, and a connection to

a God of my understanding for the first time. This brought me peace and patience where there had been stress, fear, and anxiety. I learned to accept the moment and respond to life constructively.

This mindset shift inspired me to explore art—a skill I once believed I had no business pursuing and would have told you “I can’t draw a stick figure.” I developed a process, practiced daily, and used art to express my growth, connect with others, and share my story. Over time, I began drawing portraits for fellow inmates and even prison staff, earning trust and respect. This opened the door for me to start an AA meeting within the prison, giving me the purpose of helping other addicts.

Since my parole in June 2021, I’ve continued this journey. I graduated and then volunteered at the Johnson City DRC program, worked for Frontier Health on Magnolia Ridge, and obtained my Tennessee Peer Recovery Certification. I’ve led recovery groups professionally and as a volunteer. Today, I’m a small business owner, landlord, dedicated active father, and portrait artist. I’ve served on the boards of Carter County Drug Prevention Coalition and REBOS of AA.

As the founder of Recovery Renaissance, I am pursuing my passion for helping others rebuild their lives and support their recovery journey. We will accomplish this through programming designed to help our clients tap into the strengths they don’t believe they have, accomplish goals they don’t believe possible, and chase the dreams they don’t believe are attainable. This started for me with the 12 steps. In my sponsorship family, we say, “Look what God did!” My life today is everything I once thought it could never be. Recovery and faith have done for me what I could never do for myself. If this is possible for me, I know it is for others. I am living proof that recovery is possible.