Interview of Jimmy Wu
UCLA Library, Center for Oral History Research, University of California, Los Angeles Interview of Jimmy Wu

Transcript

Session One (April 28, 2014)

AOKI:

Okay. So this is Kyoko Aoki. Today is April 28th, 2014, and today I'm here with Jimmy Wu, who's the case manager at InsideOUT Writers. We're actually at the Inside-Out Writers office on Vermont Avenue in Los Angeles, California. So thank you so much for—

WU:

No, thank you.

AOKI:

—participating in our oral history project.

WU:

Absolutely.

AOKI:

This is part of UCLA's Center for Oral History Research's series on documenting folks who are involved in efforts to reform the criminal justice system in Los Angeles and Southern California.

WU:

Wonderful.

AOKI:

So, typically, we like to begin by asking you when and where you were born, and then I'd like to hear a little bit about your family background.

WU:

Okay. Well, I was born on November 11th, in 1979, in Taiwan, and my parents migrated to the United States when I was two years old. My childhood and my upbringing, I guess, would be one that was pretty traditional with the Taiwanese culture, you know, strict parents that were able to love me in the ways I needed, they knew how, and with my childhood, I would say I was actually quite privileged. Parents were financially well off back then, so they would reward me with pretty much anything I wanted. as long as I behaved properly.

AOKI:

And what was the decision behind your parents leaving Taiwan and coming to the U.S.?

WU:

Well, just the hope, like many immigrants, of a better life, of giving me more opportunities than what they had been given when they were in Taiwan.

AOKI:

And what were they doing in Taiwan before they came?

WU:

Well, they were really only students, so they grew up in Taiwan. They may have worked some odd-jobs, but I don't really how the details of what exactly they did. I just know they migrated when they were probably in their mid-twenties, yeah.

AOKI:

And do you know the details of how they made the trip over here, if they had family here?

WU:

They came on a plane. It was because of sponsorships. I believe it was my mother's older sister that first came to the United States, and she was able to help bring my family over.

AOKI:

And where did they land when they came?

WU:

Los Angeles. We've been in Los Angeles for the past thirty-two years.

AOKI:

Wow. So your mother's sister was in this area?

WU:

She was in California, but in Central California.

AOKI:

So then can you describe a little bit about what your parents first did when they were first in the U.S.?

WU:

Sure. Well, when they first came, they had language barriers, and so the jobs they were able to find were pretty much, like many immigrants' jobs, you know, dishwashing and things like that in restaurants. Both of my parents started attempting to learn the English language, so they both went into college, to an adult class, just to learn as ESL students, I should say. So afterwards, they opened up an ice cream shop at the Pasadena Mall, and we were doing that for a little while, just running the shop, and then my parents both ended up getting jobs with L.A. County.

AOKI:

It sounds like they're very busy. And you were around two years old, right?

WU:

Yes.

AOKI:

So did you have other people taking care of you, do you know that?

WU:

Well, when my grandparents would come to visit, they would take care of me, but for the most part, I had babysitters that would go and pick me up from school, and then I would stay with them until my parents were able to go pick me up.

AOKI:

And your grandparents were visiting from Taiwan?

WU:

Yeah, they were visiting from Taiwan.

AOKI:

Was that a frequent—

WU:

It was rather frequent, and every time they came, both sets of grandparents from both my dad and my mom's side of the families, they would all stay with us.

AOKI:

And where in L.A. were you at that time?

WU:

In the San Gabriel Valley. So I think our first condo or apartment that we rented was in the city of Monterey Park, and years later, my parents moved into a new home that was just built in the City of El Monte, and that's where we remained for quite a few years.

AOKI:

So can you describe a little bit about that community when you were small child, what it was like, what the demographics was like, anything you can remember?

WU:

Yeah, I mean, mostly Hispanics. The City of El Monte does have a lot of Hispanics. But as far as the school that I went to, it was a private school in the City of Alhambra, and so there were quite a few Asians, mostly Chinese, so I fit in quite well with them. But before I went to the private school, for about a year or two I did go to a public school, and that's when I was introduced to racism, only I didn't know what racism was, you know, being that young. I remember being on the playground during one of our recesses, and then there were a few Caucasian kids that were just telling me to go back to my own country, and I had no idea what they really meant by that. So that's when I first was introduced to, again, racism or discrimination. But then afterwards, when I went to the private school, I didn't encounter anything like that at all.

AOKI:

So the private school was more diverse in terms of (unclear)?

WU:

Well, I wouldn't say it was more diverse. It was actually mostly Asians, so that's why I blended in quite well.

AOKI:

But at that point, I mean, it must have been a surprise to you because your memory of your life had taken place mostly in the U.S., right, if you were so young when you moved out here?

WU:

Right, right. Exactly.

AOKI:

So you stayed in this private school through elementary school or—

WU:

In the private school, I was there from grades three to sixth, and for my seventh grade, the year of my seventh grade, I went to a public school, and then I hated it a whole lot because I was used to the private school setting, and public school was extremely diverse. And that's when I didn't feel like I fit in with any specific crowd, so I pleaded with my mom to let me return to the private school for my last year, and she agreed to it. So that pretty much summarized my educational experience from grades three to eight.

AOKI:

And what was the decision behind moving to a public school?

WU:

Well, my parents had ended up getting a divorce around that time. It was at the beginning of my seventh grade in school. I was twelve years old. And because my mother and I had to relocate because she had custody of me, that's when she could no longer afford the tuition for the private school, and that's why I had no choice but to go to a public school. Before my eighth grade year, I told her that was my last year before graduating and going to high school, so to please let me finish off my education in a private school setting, and she somehow was able to manage paying for my tuition that last year.

AOKI:

And did you maintain contact with friends from your old school, or what was your social environment like during that time?

WU:

No, I didn't. I didn't really maintain any type of contact with the kids that I had gone to school with for all those years. Once I went to seventh grade, it was more or less just trying to find myself, to figure out who I could make new friends with. So I didn't really remain in touch with the ones that I left behind, but it was a great reunion when they saw me a year later.

AOKI:

I bet, yeah, yeah. That must have been a challenging year for you.

WU:

It was. It was extremely difficult. It was extremely difficult. I was picked on a little bit. I wouldn't really say that I was bullied, by any means, but I was made fun of and there were a few pranks that were pulled

on me that made me really dread going to that school.

AOKI:

Did you see your father during that time?

WU:

Yes. So the divorce arrangements were that my mother would have custody of me. My only brother, who was born when I was nine years old in 1988, my father had custody of him. So the arrangement was that both siblings would only see each other during the weekends, and it would be visiting the parents on alternating weekends. So on one weekend, both my brother and I would be with my mother. The following weekend, my brother and I would be with my father.

AOKI:

Could you describe your relationship with your brother?

WU:

Well, even though I was only nine years old when he was born into the world, I already knew that throughout the remainder of my life I would have a little younger brother to walk with me once our parents were no longer around. So, for me, it was an extremely joyous moment. I was nine years old when my mom went into labor, and she was rushed to the hospital in the middle of the night, and I remember being just extremely excited that night, just waiting for the news that my brother was born. So hours later, after a Caesarian section was performed on my mother, he emerged into our world. So I had the opportunity, or I should say I had the privilege to actually name him, so I chose Aaron because I went through a names book or something. I forgot what it was that Aaron meant, but it something about being extremely strong-spirited or something, so I thought it would fit him quite well.

AOKI:

So you remember that day?

WU:

I do remember that.

AOKI:

Can you describe that a little bit?

WU:

Well, you know, like I mentioned, I was just extremely anxious and excited. I was staying with my grandparents at my uncle's house that night. They were watching over me. And I couldn't sleep. They kept on telling me to go to bed, but I couldn't sleep. I was just anxiously waiting. After a while, you know, exhaustion really took over, so I did fall asleep, but when I woke up the next day, they just rushed me to hurry up and get dressed and to go see my mom and my new brother. So, I mean, my relationship with them was the best that anyone could expect or hope for. I was able to feed him milk from the bottle. My parents trusted me enough to take care of him in that way. It really was heartbreaking once I was given news that my parents were going to be divorced and that we were going to be separated.

AOKI:

How far away did your father live from your mother?

WU:

Well, we were in El Monte for a while, but after the divorce, the best that my mom could find was a really pretty cheap apartment in Alhambra. So it was maybe seven, eight miles away, not too bad, maybe a ten-minute drive.

AOKI:

But you're still a preteen at this point, right?

WU:

Yeah.

AOKI:

So you're not driving, right?

WU:

No, I'm not driving. Every time that I was able to go see my brother, it would only be when my parents, both my dad or my mom would pick us up.

AOKI:

So then around that time, you were preparing to go on to high school, is that correct?

WU:

Yes, yes.

AOKI:

Thirteen, fourteen?

WU:

Yes.

AOKI:

So what was that transition like for you?

WU:

Well, the private school that I went to, there were maybe thirty-five students who basically grew up together, who went through all the grade levels together. So the public school, from my seventh-grade year, it was when I was first exposed to a public school setting with a larger group of kids, a large number of students. So going back into a private school setting with only about thirty-five eighth-grade kids, and then going into a public high school, it was a bit intimidating. I, again, didn't know where I was going to be able to fit in with, like who I would be able to fit in with in high school. I didn't know any of the students. I would only see maybe a handful of the kids that I knew from elementary and junior high school that actually went to the same high school I did. So it was really intimidating for me the first year. I can't really say that I made any friends that first year. I just went to school to sit in on my classes, to do my assignments, and then right after school, I would walk home because the high school at my mom's condo that we later moved into, it was really close to each other. So that was pretty much it.

AOKI:

What was your relationship to school? Did you enjoy your studies?

WU:

Some classes I did enjoy. That was where I learned to type, took a typing class. I enjoyed physical education classes. Some of the others ones, like the more common ones, math, English, history, I didn't care too much about them, to be perfectly honest, like many high school kids, I guess. I mean, I did what I had to, but nothing more than that.

AOKI:

So did you play sports, or was it mainly just be that—

WU:

No, just be, yeah, because I didn't have enough confidence in myself to try trying out for any team.

AOKI:

Did your parents encourage you to do any other extracurricular activities?

WU:

Not at that time, no longer, no. When I was younger, my dad, in particular, would really want me to be involved with as many sports as possible. He wanted me to learn how to play tennis, which I did. He wanted me to learn how to swim, which I did. Learn how to play golf, take Tae Kwon Do classes, I did all of those things. For my eighth-grade year, in my private school I did try out and joined our basketball team, but then for my ninth-grade year, I guess they kind of sensed that I wasn't really as confident as I normally was, because I was just intimidated by my new environment, my school environment, that they never pushed me to do anything. But I didn't want to.

AOKI:

So how did you fill your days outside of school?

WU:

That would be it. I would go home, I would do my homework, watch a little bit of TV, play my videogames, and that would be it.

AOKI:

And your mom was usually working at that time?

WU:

Yes, she would work, and then when she would get home around six, six-thirty at night, she would cook us a light dinner, and I would eat and that would be it.

AOKI:

So then what? What's happening in your mid-teens?

WU:

Well, my sophomore year in Alhambra High School, that's when I did start making some friends in my classes, and, in retrospect, I guess they weren't the best friends that I could have made, and it led to my introduction to Asian gangs. So the Wah Ching gang is rather prominent in the San Gabriel Valley. That is where there is are lot of areas there, I guess in a way belong to them, because they're known for extortion and for taking advantage of fellow immigrants from Asian countries. So there were a lot of active Wah Ching gang members there, and so I made friends with some of them. But then it led to me becoming, I guess, a little more popular, having a little more of a social life. Now that I was a sophomore, I was able to be looked up to, I guess, by some freshmen students. So I became really

friendly with quite a few girls, and I remember that on one occasion, I was carrying one of my female friends' backpack, and we were walking to the girls' locker room, and I remember just three guys from the Wah Ching gang just approached me and proceeded to beat me up. One of them just pushed me onto the floor and then they started kicking me, and I had no idea what was going on. So I guess some of the staff—they used to call them narcs, but they were like the ones—the security, I guess—

AOKI:

At the school?

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WU:

—from the school. At the school, they rushed over. The guys that were beating me, they all ran away, and I remember that day that they took me directly to the nurse's office to make sure I was okay, started asking me questions about whether I knew who the people were that just beat me, and I told them I had no idea who they were, even though I did. I just didn't feel like giving them up.

So it turned out later on that all three of them did get caught. They were suspended for a while from school, because some of my friends that were with me at that time identified them and told the security who they were. And I later found out that the reason behind my beating was because the girl whose backpack I had been carrying, she had a secret admirer who was envious of my friendship with her, so that's why they felt that it was justifiable for me to get beat. They also thought that I was the one that turned them in, so later on, members of that same gang came to my mom's condo where I was staying and proceeded to try extorting me, saying that if I didn't pay them $300, then it would result in more beatings and possibly robbing our house. So I was terrified, and after I told my mom, she reported it to local law enforcement, and they came, they interviewed me, they did their research, I guess, investigation, and they later on went to go to arrest the people that said they were going to extort me. So those culprits ended up being sent to probation camp, and that is when I got even more threats, because now I basically played a role in sending three of their members of the gang to jail. And because we had never been introduced to any type of gang activity or we were never victimized in any way, my mom was terrified, and she was really in fear of my life, so she decided it probably would be best for me to be sent to Taiwan to stay and possibly attend a boarding school there overseas. So that's exactly what ended up happening. I was pulled from my school in Alhambra and sent to Taiwan. I stayed with my grandparents and one of my uncles that remained over there that did not migrate over to the United States like the rest of our family, and they proceeded to enroll me into an international boarding school for Taiwanese-born students that had moved on to other countries but now wanted to return to their homeland.

So I went to that boarding school for a while, ended up being expelled from the school because I got myself into some trouble. I was not supposed to leave the premises, but my roommate and I—my roommate that shared the same room as I—we decided it would be okay for us to go and leave the campus without permission, so we scaled the wall, we went out, we had a good time, and we got caught the next day returning to school. We got expelled, and it was rather serious. So my parents, of course,

were horrified, my entire family was, that I'd only gone to that school for maybe two weeks before getting expelled, so they were wondering, like, "What now? What are we going to do?" Coming back to the United States wasn't really an option because they felt that my life was in danger, so I ended up staying in Taiwan for a total of about six months, and I found work at a local restaurant as a waiter. So I did that for a while. Finally, at the start of the school year for my junior year in high school, my parents said, "Okay, we found a different boarding in Escondido," near San Diego. So they're like, "You're going to come back and we're going to take you there." So I went over to Escondido to a boarding school called San Pasqual Academy. Again, I was only there for a week or two until I got suspended, and it was actually because I ended up getting to know one of my fellow students really well, and she and I were not supposed to be going to certain areas of the campus without supervision, but we did. Basically, the school is in the middle of pretty much nowhere, and there's just nothing but orange groves, and so we disappeared into the orange groves, and when we came out of the orange groves, one of the teachers caught us. So I was suspended for that. She was as well. She was a local in that area, so for her it was just, "Okay, you can't go to school," but she didn't have to worry about not having anywhere to go home to. But because I was a boarding student, that meant that I had to return to my parents.

And when I came back, they felt that they had pretty much had given up, like, "We're trying to send you to all these private schools, boarding schools, that's costing so much money," and I was not being appreciative of it. So they ended up using my father's address in Arcadia, because by then he had sold the El Monte house. He had moved to the City of Arcadia. They felt that perhaps it would just be better for me to go to the Arcadia Public High School, and so that is where I went for the next three, four months.

AOKI:

There's a lot there, so I have a few follow-up questions. So when you were sent to the boarding school in Taiwan, was that the first time that you had returned to Taiwan?

WU:

To Taiwan? No. I've gone back repeatedly throughout my life to visit, but I've never gone longer than maybe two weeks to a month during a vacation. But when I was there for six months, that's when I actually lived there temporarily.

AOKI:

So those temporary visits were just to see family and that type of thing?

WU:

Exactly, exactly.

AOKI:

So what was it like to go back there and be immersed in this culture that you had only sort of seen glimpse of growing up?

WU:

Well, it wasn't really strange or unusual for me at all because it's my culture, and even though we had migrated to the United States, my family was actually rather traditional. So we still went to a lot of Taiwanese Chinese restaurants. We spent a lot of time shopping in Chinatown and things like that. So because I went back so frequently, I was never out of touch with my own culture. Going back was just being able to see my family. And, of course, there are a few things that were a bit different, like the mini mopeds, scooters are all over the streets, that we don't have here in Los Angeles, but that was pretty much it. I grew up speaking my native tongue at home, so it wasn't like I wasn't able to communicate with them. The only thing I couldn't do was read or write Chinese characters.

AOKI:

Is that a specific dialect, or what's the language?

WU:

Yeah, Taiwanese is a Chinese dialect.

AOKI:

So if you went to Taiwan, people would just assume you had grown up there based on your speech and your—

WU:

You're talking about now or back then?

AOKI:

Back then.

WU:

Back then, yes. I mean, no, I take that back. They would know that I was someone from a different country, that I may very well be Taiwanese but didn't grow up there, because of the way I dressed. So, yeah, that was one thing I forgot to mention was the way that we dressed here in the United States is much different from how they dressed over in Taiwan. They're a lot more conservative there with a lot of things, even public displays of affection between boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife. Here we're very open about it, but then in Taiwan, the extent of public displays of affection are maybe handholding at best. So just looking at me with my hairstyle, with the way I was dressed, they definitely knew that I didn't grow up there. But once I spoke, they would be rather surprised, like, "Oh, wow," because I didn't really have very distinct accent or anything like that because I spoke fluently and naturally.

AOKI:

So in your home back in the U.S., you spoke primary in your native language with your parents?

WU:

Yes.

AOKI:

And then English outside of the home?

WU:

Exactly, exactly.

AOKI:

Yeah, that happens. I know how that is.

WU:

Yeah, I'm sure.

AOKI:

So then I'm interested to hear a little bit more—and maybe this will come up again, but about this gang and just if you feel comfortable and would like to describe it a little bit more and the sort of prevalence, how big it was, if the people who were beating you up and then subsequently harassing you at your home, were they your age, that just sort of contextual information about this group.

WU:

Well, sure, I can definitely share what I do know about the Wah Ching gang, is they originally started overseas. I don't know if it was Taiwan or it was in China, and when they came to the United States, one of the first places that they took over was San Francisco. The name Wah Ching, from what I understand, was because these gang members originally started off as organized crime, a lot of extortion, things like that, and it never was to become a street gang. But because of the illegal activities that members were engaging in, they had several lookouts, so that's where they came up with "Wah Ching," as in "watching."

AOKI:

Interesting.

00:29:51

WU:

Yeah. But the direct translation, Wah Ching is—what is that direct—something youth. I can't remember what the "Wah" means, but "Ching" means youth. So, anyway, they then slowly got into the streets more and more often and started engaging in illegal activities, firearms, smuggling, and selling, and I think they may have touched on narcotics, although I don't know for sure, because I'm not a member of the gang, so I don't know their entire history. But they eventually spread out further and came to Los Angeles, and they started recruiting a lot of members for their gang, and many of them were high-school-aged kids, and many were also from immigrant families. No one was really an American-born Chinese that they recruited, so it was rather strange. Maybe it was just like many gangs where they reach out to their own race and their own kind because they have a mutual culture and understanding of where they are now. It's kind like an "us against the world" type of mentality that they embrace. So, yeah, they came to Los Angeles, specifically the San Gabriel Valley, all over the cities in the San Gabriel Valley, and are rather large and well known now, but that's pretty much my limited understanding of that gang in particular. So when they beat me up, it was, again, (unclear)>, and also started actually a little bit before that, because I have a fondness of the color blue. Even to this day I still like that color. So because I wore that color blue, they thought that I was from a rival gang called Asian Boyz, because that's a gang color for the Asian Boyz. So they started asking me on numerous occasions if I was from Asian Boyz, and I said, "No. What are you talking about?" And they would question me, like, "Why are you wearing those clothes, those colors?" I said, "I just like blue," because I didn't even know the Asian Boyz, their gang color was blue.

So that kind of created a bit of tension, I suppose, between me and the Wah Ching gang members at my school, but then the final straw was when, again, they were just envious of my friendship with one of the girls that one of their members had a crush on.

AOKI:

So were those the two main Asian gangs in the area?

WU:

Yes, Asian Boyz and Wah Ching were really well known.

AOKI:

At your high school, did you see any conflict between those gangs, or was it mostly—

WU:

Well, they went to different schools.

AOKI:

Oh, they went to different schools.

WU:

Yeah. So that was another thing. Alhambra High School, where I went, that was mostly Wah Ching. I mean, there were other gangs that I can't even think of the names of, but Monterey Park area was where the Asian Boyz resided and where all the Asian Boyz members would all go to the same high school. But every now and then, you would hear about certain incidents that took place where the two rival gangs actually went to an area and ended up bumping into each other or something. But for the most part, it was pretty segregated.

AOKI:

Just generally speaking, so this is early mid-nineties, I think, right?

WU:

Yes.

AOKI:

So there's other gangs, right, in the L.A. area?

WU:

Yes.

AOKI:

But was it kind of isolated to Asians?

WU:

Of course. Of course. I mean, for us, for me, being Taiwanese, I was in tune with some of the Asian gang activities that were taking place, but I guess that's true of every race. Like the Hispanics, they were very in touch and they understand the Hispanic gang culture, and the same thing with African Americans. But for the Asians, because we are considered extremely conservative and reserved, I guess they didn't really think that there would be Asian gangs, and I think what really catapulted Asian gangs into the spotlight was in the mid-nineties when an incident between the Asian Boyz and Wah Ching was featured on the Fox Nightly News because there had been a shooting incident at a pool hall. That's one

of the favorite pastimes of gang members, you know, coffee shops and pool halls. So the two rival gangs ended up at the same pool hall, words were exchanged, it resulted in a physical altercation that led to one of the Wah Ching gang members pulling out a gun—actually, initially running out of the pool hall to his car to retrieve a car and came back in and started shooting at an Asian Boyz gang member. Surveillance cameras showed the Asian Boyz gang member in fear of his life, trying to crawl under a pool hall, and the guy from Wah Ching showed absolutely no mercy and just kept on firing the gun, even as the guy was crawling under the pool table. So, obviously, he ended up killing him. So because of how heinous that act was, they did feature it on the news. I think that's when people did start having a better idea of what was really taking place in front of them, but they were just never able to fully recognize it or see for themselves.

AOKI:

So do you personally remember seeing that on TV?

WU:

I do. I do.

AOKI:

This was after all this had occurred in your own life.

WU:

Yes, yes. So I was actually, like, "Wow, these guys are real," because I never, even though I knew about the Asian gangs, I had never known how deadly they really were and how serious things could quickly get. I mean, the physical beatings and the fights, those happen everywhere, especially with a lot of teenage boys. They fight all the time, so I never thought too much of that. But that was the first time that I really understood how serious these gangs were about taking things to the extreme.

AOKI:

So your time in San Diego or Escondido, you said, that was very brief but fairly quiet.

WU:

Yeah, but in comparison, yeah, yeah, absolutely.

AOKI:

The didn't follow you there, right?

WU:

No, no, not at all.

AOKI:

So then you returned, went to a different high school?

WU:

Yes, went to Arcadia High School.

AOKI:

Last two years, you said, or year and a half or so?

WU:

Oh, my high school, like, years?

AOKI:

Yeah.

WU:

It was my junior year solely.

AOKI:

So you're around sixteen, seventeen?

WU:

Well, I was fifteen going on sixteen, had a later birthday because , right.

AOKI:

Oh, right, you're early, right.

WU:

So I was about fifteen going on sixteen, went to the school.

AOKI:

What was the school life like compared to your first public high school?

WU:

Well, now I was a little older, I've gone to high school already, I've already been introduced to the public school high school experience, and so I fit in rather naturally. One of the advantages was that one of my cousins, my distant cousin, he went to the same school, so I automatically, by default, ended up having a lot of friends on my very first day.

AOKI:

Older or younger?

00:36:17

WU:

Same age. Same age, yeah. So I didn't have to worry about, "Oh, where do I go sit for lunch?" when I would just meet with my cousin and he would just bring me to his group of friends, who later on became my friends. So everything went well, but I also think that because I was so openly welcomed at that school and, again, girls were always problematic for me, I ended up getting a little too arrogant for my own good. And now that I had been introduced to the gangs, the gang life, because of my acquaintances and seeing what they were doing every now and then and being around certain things, I guess I thought that maybe it would be kind of cool. I was intrigued. I should say that I was intrigued by possibly being a gang member myself.

So, again, I made some friends that I regret making, and they introduced me to this other—I don't know how to describe it. They're definitely not a street gang. They're supposed to be an organized crime group of people, I guess, called Red Door. They ended up presenting an opportunity for me to make a lot of money if I was to do something that they were really in—and that was to steal a very popular car back

then. It was a Lexus LS400. The idea was that once they were able to get their hands on these stolen vehicles, they would ship them overseas to Taiwan or possibly to China, and they would sell the car in the black market over there. And once the funds for the profit gain was transferred over to the United States, they would give us our cut of the pot. So the proposal was that if I was interested, I could go and recruit my own team of people that would go and get these cars, and each and every one of us could make up to $8,000 for each vehicle. So $8,000 for a fifteen-year-old is a lot of money. Even to this day as thirty-four-year-old, $8,000 is a good amount of money. Because I was reckless and careless and definitely didn't reach mental maturity, I was like, "Yeah, why not? Let's do this." So they were like, "Okay. Well, we want you to go and recruit your own team of people that you want to work with, and we'll provide materials necessary," including those plastic zip ties, duct tape, guns. (interruption)

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WU:

So that was the offer that was presented, and so I agreed to it. I ended up recruiting two of my fellow classmates, friends that I'd made, who were also very fascinated by the idea of making such a large amount of money for something that we consider relatively easy to do.

So we ended up leaving on a Saturday afternoon. My friend had a car, he picked me up and our other friend. And as I was leaving my mom's condo, it was during one of the weekends that my brother was with my mom, so I remember he was about five years old now, and he was sitting on the floor playing with his toy cars. As I was leaving, I said, "All right, Aaron, I love you. I'll see you later. Be a good boy." And he just looked up at me and said, "I love you too," and he just waved, and that was it. So then I left the house or the condo. We ended up just driving around our area, Arcadia, Temple City, just all the cities in San Gabriel Valley, looking for this specific make and model of Lexus LS400, and we saw a few. Our idea from the very beginning was that we were going to look for this car and we were going to follow the owner of the vehicle to wherever they were going to go, whether it was to another location or to their home, and then we would basically bring them with us. We would take them by force if necessary, and we would have them in our car, and then one of us would be driving the stolen car. And the reason we were going to do that was because our orders, our instructions, I should say, was that if we were able to successfully steal one of these cars, we had to drop it off at this isolated warehouse and leave it there. So stealing it would have been a lot easier, but we also were aware of what they called LoJack, which is a tracking devices in certain cars. We knew that if we were to steal this car, the owner of the vehicle could simply call the number which would notify the authorities and then GPS tracking would automatically pinpoint the location of the vehicle. So we thought that would be stupid if we did it that way, because then what if we're still in transit trying to drop off this vehicle and then we get pulled over because of the GPS tracker of the LoJack. So our idea was never to hurt anybody, but we felt that it would make more sense for us to take the owner of the vehicle with us, and then once we dropped off the car, then we already did our part, then we would just have to find a different place to drop off the owner of the car.

So after scouting out several prospects, we finally decided to follow home an elderly couple in the City of La Cañada. We have left my mom's house, because I was the last one to get picked up—there was only three of us—at about twelve or one in the afternoon, and by the time we decided we were going to take a specific car, it was like well into the evening, perhaps like seven or eight p.m. So it was at a restaurant. The owners of the vehicle went into their car. It was an elderly couple, Caucasian man in perhaps his mid-sixties, possibly even early seventies, and his wife was an Asian woman, possibly in her mid-fifties or her early sixties. So we followed them into their gated community in the City of La

Cañada, followed them right up to their house, and once they pulled into their garage is when my crime partners and I, my friends and I, came out of our car with two guns drawn and ordered them to not do anything stupid. We told them all we wanted was their gun, and we wanted them just to cooperate with us, and we kept promising, "We're not going to hurt you. We're not going to hurt you. All we want is your car."

And of course they were terrified, and they were just standing in their own garage, but here were these three people, and we had ski masks on so they didn't know who we were at all or how old we were. The woman, she—I don't know if it was just instincts or what it was, but she reached into her purse and pulled out a can of pepper spray. So I was actually rather astonished that she did that, because we had guns pointed at her, but she actually—her only defense, her only weapon was her pepper spray. So we asked her, "Please just drop that. Please don't use that, because we have guns right now, and please don't do anything stupid with the pepper spray." So she dropped it. Later on, one at a time, we bound their hands and feet with duct tape and blindfolded them, and we put the man into our trunk of the car that we had arrived in. It was a Nissan Maxima owned by one of my friends. And the woman we decided to put in the backseat with one of my friends, while the other friend went to go drive the Lexus that were stealing. So I was the one that was driving both the husband and the wife and also one of my friends. We proceeded to caravan or to make our way back towards where we needed to drop off the stolen car, all the while we're reassuring to the best of our ability the wife, because her husband was in the trunk. In all likelihood, he wasn't able to hear anything we were saying, so we kept on comforting her saying, "We're not going to hurt you. Okay. We promise we're not going to hurt you. This is going to be over very soon." As we were trying to make our way to our destination, the gas light went on. So my friend failed to make sure that his car had a tank full of gas. So here we were now thinking, "Do we try risking going all the way to where we need to go to drop off this car at the risk of completely running out of gas and then being stuck, or do we go to a gas station very quickly to get a little bit of gas?" So we decided it would be best for us to go get some gas. So here we were at a gas station, and there were two people that had just been kidnapped in our car. Just thinking about it, it's just like it's seems like it's from some type of movie that's not really happening in real life.

But after we were done filling up our car with gas, we ended up going to the warehouse, dropped off the car, and that's when my friend got into the front seat, into the passenger's seat, and I drove us to an area that we thought we be good to drop off our victims. It was in an alley in the city of Monterey Park. As we were pulling the husband out of the trunk, a patrol vehicle drove by us, ran routine inspection, just routine drive-by. And there was only one way in and one way out of the alley that we were in, and the patrol vehicle actually drove by, but then I think he caught the movement from the corner of his eye, from the peripheral. So he backed up, shown his spotlight, saw what was taking place, and immediately told us to freeze and all that stuff, came out with his gun drawn. Within minutes, within minutes we were surrounded by several patrol vehicles and even a helicopter was overhead shining a spotlight on us. So we were frozen in place, didn't have anywhere to go. There was no way for us to run anywhere, and because I was terrified, I ended up jumping into the backseat with the victim, with the wife. The man—the trunk was already open, he was already halfway out. So they made sure that nobody was moving, and they told the victim, the husband, to remain motionless and just stay on the ground.

And one at a time, they ordered for the rest of us to walk to them with our hands over our heads backwards. So one a time, both of my friends did that, because they were still outside the car. I was the only one that was still inside. So once they had already been handcuffed and secured and in the back of the patrol vehicles, they kept on yelling for me and for the wife to get out, because they had no idea that there were—they knew that there were two people in the backseat of the car, but they didn't know that one was actually a victim. So they kept on yelling at both of us to come out with our hands behind our head. So I didn't know what to do. She was shaking. I'm sure she was terrified at that moment as well. I know throughout the entire ordeal she was terrified. But I ended up opening the car door, I got out with

my hands up, and proceeded to do as my friends had done, just walk backwards with my hands over my head until they had handcuffed me and thrown me into the backseat of the car. So they finally kept on yelling for that last person to come out of the car. They kept yelling and yelling, and I was just sitting in the backseat of the patrol vehicle just, like, wishing I could tell one of them, "She's not—she's a victim. She's a victim." Because I didn't want anything bad to happen. I was like what if they shoot or something. And they finally, I guess, the husband, I think, somehow managed to get the duct tape that we had put over his mouth free, loose, so he started yelling, "That's my wife! That's my wife!" So that the officers slowly approached the vehicle, opened the door and saw that, in fact, it was another victim. So they were freed.

After that was done, one of the rescue officers came to the car and proceeded to beat me in the car. He ended up dislocating my jaw, and he was just shaking me and choking me, and he kept on making threats to kill me once we got to the sheriff's station. How dare I go have the nerve to kidnap someone in his city? And I was terrified now, because I never got into trouble like that ever before in my life. I was like, "Oh, my god," because I knew then that this was really, really serious. Even though we had done something that we knew was wrong, we didn't realize how serious that that happened we did, the crime that we just committed, really was. So I ended up being transported to a sheriff's holding tank. I forgot what city it was in. After I had been fingerprinted and my photo had been taken, I was allowed to make my one phone call. So I called my mom. It was about twelve a.m., one in the morning. And I called her and I told her, "Mom, I got myself into trouble today. I'm really sorry. I'll tell you about it at some other later time." She said, "Are you okay? What happened?" I said, "I just got into some trouble, but, anyway, I just wanted you to know that I'm not going to be able to come home tonight." That shows how, again, in retrospect, how naïve I was, how in a way I was somewhat innocent, not in the sense of what I did, but just in the sense of how young I was, because literally really thought I was not going to be able to make it home that night and that night only.

So I was held there for a day, I think, and then they sent me to Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall out in Sylmar, where I remained for maybe two or three days, because the following day—I got arrested—I take that back. I was only in the holding tank for a few hours, because Sunday during visiting hours when parents were able to visit their kids that were incarcerated in the Juvenile Hall, my parents ended up coming. I had been awake for most of the night, because I was just terrified. I was scared to death, just hardly slept. But then even during my visit with my parents, I didn't know what to say. We remained silent for most of it, because I guess I was in disbelief of what had happened. A couple days after that, I was transferred over to Central Juvenile Hall in downtown Los Angeles. I'm just going to stop there for now in case there are—I don't want us to go, like, on and on.

AOKI:

Yeah. Wow.

WU:

So that's what happened.

AOKI:

Well, thank you, first of all, for sharing all that.

WU:

You're welcome.

AOKI:

How does it feel for you to go through all of that? I mean, I'm sure you talk about it frequently enough, right, but—

00:53:06

WU:

Yeah, frequently enough, but never in that much detail. I basically went during like what I do now when I have opportunities to give a presentation, I do always go back to what I was ultimately convicted of, but I never go into the details of the actual crime, because it's difficult. It's difficult to relive those moments and think about what I had personally done.

I mean, although the victims of our crime were never, ever physically injured, I can't even imagine the emotional trauma that we inflicted upon them. What makes it worse when I think back is later on when we were starting to go through the trial process to go to court and everything, there would be moments when the defendants—I'm mean, excuse me, the victims would be asked to go up on stand and answer a few questions or whatever that both prosecuting attorney and our defense attorneys would have for them. And I remember on more than one occasion, the husband, the victim, the male victim, he would actually say that on stand under oath that we were the most polite criminals that we would have ever expected encountering. So that makes it so much worse. Like here is this man with such compassion. Anyone else would have just said get rid of us. Do something horrible to us. We deserve whatever is actually coming our way. But to actually have that compassion, I think maybe later on obviously he was informed of everything about us that the officers could share with them, our age and everything, so maybe that influenced how he really saw us or judged us. But it makes me feel that much worse because I expected—and I don't blame anybody for having nothing but anger, hatred, resentment towards us, but for him, it was weird. So when I think back to that moment, it definitely is difficult that that is that one moment that changed everything for me, for my loved ones, for my future.

AOKI:

So I guess going back, I mean, you had started this story by saying that you had initially been a little intrigued and sort of peripherally exposed to some of the things that were going on.

WU:

Yes, absolutely. Exactly.

AOKI:

What did that look like? Like your friends would talk about certain things that they did or did you just hear about rumors of these types of activities?

WU:

Yeah, I mean, it would be both. Some of the ones that were doing certain things would tell me about what they were doing, but more often than not it was just rumors, hearing gossip, right? So I think that at that time is when, again, I became rather arrogant, and I felt like a little more competitive, like, "These guys around this school think that they are tough guys, doing whatever it is they're doing. I'm going to make a name for myself." And that's how stupid it was, it's about building my street reputation, even though I wasn't even from an actual gang. That's how ridiculous it was. I just thought that it would be cool. And I think that's why there's so many young people that do such stupid things, because they think it's cool. They want to be more popular or raise their social statuses higher in whatever ways possible, and that's what I ended up attempting to do. And I did accomplish that, because even I did get arrested, of course everybody found out, and I was the talk of the school for quite some time. It had been unheard of that anything like that ever—nothing like that has ever taken place.

AOKI:

So that was the most extreme version of that.

00:57:03

WU:

Exactly. So people were like shocked, and they were like, "Oh, my god." At the same time, my social status did get elevated where all these people started writing me letters. It was strange. But then it kind of helps me understand now like why there's a lot of—for most people, let's say like Scott Peterson, right, who was convicted of murdering his wife Lacy and their unborn child. Someone like him, why is there so much fan mail?

People don't understand it, but I guess it's kind of like—I don't know. It happened to me as well, where I did something really bad, but then there were people that really were fascinated by it, for whatever reason, because I think it's just abnormal. People are, like, just—I don't know. I don't know how to describe it, but they just feel like it's extremely intriguing that someone can actually do something so unusual. So, yeah, I hope that answered your question about that.

AOKI:

Yeah, yeah, definitely. That's a really intriguing point too. So how were you approached to do this task?

WU:

Just I guess they were my friends who were connected to this Red Door group of people, and they were the ones that were actually doing some of the—performing the petty crimes, and they heard about this opportunity. I think those that were first aware of that opportunity were probably—I mean, not probably. They were a lot smarter than me, because they didn't want to do it. They probably figured that if you got in trouble for stuff like this, it's going to be serious. But with me, I was like, "Oh, yeah. Okay. No problem." So, yeah, that was how I found out, through them.

AOKI:

So it was just kind of word of mouth. You weren't ever directly dealing with the—

WU:

No, no, no, no. It was word of mouth. I felt that it would be cool. Like if I did this, it would be part of my initiation process where they would validate me, they would include me, and I would become an official member. So it was part of that process as well, just the opportunities, I thought, were great of becoming a member of this group of people and also just to do something that no one has ever done before and get away with it.

AOKI:

And that was your assumption all along, that you'd go along with it?

WU:

That was my assumption. And not even thinking once—I said, "I want to brag about it." Eventually it would get to people, right? But I never thought about it like that, no.

AOKI:

When you recruited your two friends, they had a similar reaction?

WU:

Exactly, exactly.

AOKI:

No problem?

WU:

No problem.

AOKI:

Wow.

WU:

Yeah. I'm sure we'll touch on it later on here in this interview, but it helps me a lot with the work I currently do, because I can really understand that thought process.

AOKI:

Sure. What was it like when your parents visited you on that Sunday?

WU:

Well, obviously, it was like heartbreaking for them. They were crying. They were shocked, in disbelief, and I was just sitting there. I barely looked at them, I was so ashamed. Again, I just found the whole thing completely surreal. I was overwhelmed.

AOKI:

Kind of dissociated?

WU:

Absolutely, absolutely.

AOKI:

So did they know what had happened until they arrived, or had the police talked to them?

WU:

No, the police talked to them, and after I had my conversation with my mom, one of the arresting officers actually told her that, "Yeah, your son's not going to be coming home, if he ever does come home. Your son's not going to be coming home anytime soon, if he ever does come home." When he was saying that, I remember, like, wondering to myself, "Why is he saying that? What does that mean? Why would he tell her that?" Because, again, I didn't understand the severity of the consequences of what I had done. So they were somewhat aware of what had happened, that I had been arrested for committing those crimes, but they didn't know the details of it. But they kept asking, "Why did you do this? Like, what's wrong with you? Why would you even—what are we going to do now?"

AOKI:

Had you or your family members experienced any kind of interaction with law enforcement or the criminal justice system up to that point?

WU:

Not at all.

AOKI:

Personally or family members?

WU:

None at all. That's why it was, to them—they were just clueless as far as what to do next. Again, because they were from a traditional and conservative Taiwanese family and they were raising me the same way, it was extremely difficult for them to seek advice from others, because it's so much—I dishonored the family, I shamed the family, so they didn't want to talk about it. They didn't want to go to people for advice. They didn't know what to do.

AOKI:

Did you grow up with any kind of religious beliefs or spirituality in your family?

WU:

For the most part, yes. Actually, the private school I went to for third grade to seventh, then eighth grade, was a Christian private school. So I grew up Christian. I was actually going to church, getting involved with church activities, so I was a Christian.

AOKI:

Did your family go to the same church throughout, or did that change a little?

WU:

Well, the private school I went to had a church on campus, so I would go there for Sunday services, but once I graduated and went to high school, my mom and I went to the church. She found one called the Evangelical Formosan Church of—no, it was just EFC, so it was Evangelical Formosan Church. So my mom and I would go to that one. My dad was not a Christian at that time, so, no, he didn't go.

AOKI:

Was that a community that at least your mom was able to reach out to?

WU:

Yes. So that was the community that she reached out to for advice. She couldn't find anywhere else. Then with her own family, some of them were just, "Well, we don't know what to do either because we never experienced anything like that or have gone through anything like that." So it was through some of her close confidants at church that she was able to really reach out to them and start figuring out what was going to be required or what was needed for me under those circumstances, and that meant looking for the right attorneys to be able to represent me, to look into my case, to understand what the bail process was, even though I was never bailed out. That was how she started having a little more knowledge of what many parents have to go through when it comes to their kids that end up incarcerated.

AOKI:

Do you feel like you want to take a break?

WU:

No, I'm fine.

AOKI:

You're okay?

WU:

Yeah, I'm fine.

AOKI:

All right. So I guess we move forward from there.

WU:

Okay. Sure.

AOKI:

So you were saying that you were transferred to Nidorf.

WU:

Barry J. Nidorf, that's where I transferred initially, but I was only there like a couple of days. The bulk of my juvenile incarceration experience took place at Central Juvenile Hall, yeah, in downtown Los Angeles.

AOKI:

That's right. So can you describe that process from when you were arrested, transferred. At some point you were getting hearings, right?

WU:

Mm-hmm.

AOKI:

So could you go over that?

01:05:2301:07:28

WU:

Well, the first time I—okay. So how this works is within seventy-two hours d you have to go to an arraignment hearing, and that is when the courts will determine whether or not they are going to release you or they're going to actually file the charges, and you have to remain detained or even to get bailed out. So I went to my arraignment hearing, and this was because I was sixteen years old—I had just turned sixteen like two months prior to my arrest—I was in the Juvenile Courts. So I went to Pasadena Juvenile Court, went before the judge, and during that time, both me and my two friends, my crime partners, we all went to court together. So all three of us were always seen at the three time.

We had to undergo what is called a juvenile fitness hearing. So the fitness hearing, I don't understand—I mean I don't remember the exact criteria, but what they do is they have to determine whether or not each juvenile offender is fit to be tried under the Juvenile Court or if they have to be transferred to the adult courts. Some of the criterias I do remember is whether or not this person's case or crime was severe or sophisticated. Their age was another thing. There was like three other things I can remember. But when I was going to my arraignment hearing, they said, "Okay, well, we have to go through this fitness hearing." Afterwards I met with my defense attorney, and they said, "Okay, so right now, because of what you guys did, you guys are facing juvenile life." "Juvenile life" was mandatory release by the age of twenty-five. So since I was only sixteen, that meant that I would have to serve nine years, and to me that was already a lot. Like, "Oh, my god, how am I going to look at nine years of my life being in here?" They're like, "Oh, that's worse-case scenario, but that's only if you are to remain in the Juvenile Courts. We don't even know if that's going to happen yet, because it looks like they're going to transfer you to the adult court system." So I didn't understand what that meant, just like, obviously, it would be on my adult record. We ended up all losing—I take that back. So as we started going through our juvenile fitness hearing, the day of, instead of the three of us, me and my two friends being escorted to the courthouse together, it was just me and one of my friends. The other one was transported separately. We ended up being in the same holding tank, though, so we were there waiting for our case to be heard. When we went out, we were still together.

As they were going through with the hearing, one of the prosecutors called their witness to the stand, and it turned out to be one of my friends, one of the people that actually committed the crime with me. What they ended up doing was basically having him testify against both me and my other friend and to basically cast all of the blame on mostly me, actually, and they called in the principal of our school, who was showing the contrast between me and this guy, talking about how great this kid was at school. So,

obviously, it was his attorney's strategy to highlight his achievements and showcase how horrible I was as a person, and my other friend, with the hope that it would help his client get out sooner.

AOKI:

Did he have a private attorney?

WU:

He did.

AOKI:

Did you have a public defender?

WU:

At that time I actually had a private attorney as well. I only had a public defender maybe once or twice, and this was, like, several times afterwards, maybe like the sixth or seventh time we had gone to the same court before the fitness hearing took place. All the other preliminary stuff was just go, and they're doing all kinds of court stuff that I can't really remember, possibly just getting everything on record before the juvenile hearing. So I was sitting there, shocked. I was just, like, in disbelief that this guy is saying all this, like, "What happened?" So after he was done and we were done for that day, they ended up putting him in a separate holding tank, isolating him from me and my other friend. So that's, I was like, "Wow. So this is what it's come down to, where it's a dog-eat-dog, every person for themselves." So he ended up going—

AOKI:

Sorry.

WU:

No problem.

AOKI:

Was he the guy who drive the stolen car?

01:11:42

WU:

The stolen car, yes. Yes, he was the one drove the stolen car. So we ended up losing our fitness hearing, me and my one friend that didn't say anything. The guy that did say something actually got released from custody about three months afterwards, so his incarceration experience was rather short-lived. He never went on further into the system. So when I was transferred to the adult court, instead of juvenile life, now I was looking at two adult life sentences, so that, obviously, speaks for itself. Now instead of just juvenile life, at worst getting nine years in the Juvenile Courts, I was looking at spending the rest of my life in adult prison. So that's when it got really serious, and, of course, I was starting to—oh, I didn't know what to do. I started to have all types of depression issues, was terrified. I was scared to death of my future, of the unknown, of the uncertainty of it. That's when my parents also realized that there was a lot at stake, because even though nine years was already a lot to begin with, now they were looking at losing me forever. So my mom was having to pay a whole lot for my attorney. In total, she spent about 70,000 for the entire duration of the case. She had to sell a lot of the things that she had, including property, including trading in her car for something much cheaper, including have to eventually give up the condo that we lived in and moving to a house that she co-owned with two of her brothers, two of my uncles.

So during that time I was Juvenile Hall for nearly two years before I finally took my deal. The first deal that I was given was ninety-eight years, which was ridiculous. I felt like, "Okay, how am I going to be able to serve ninety-eight years? I might as well take a life sentence." The second deal was about fifty-five years. Again, it was too much for me to even think about. Then the third deal was thirty-eight years, and that one I actually considered very briefly, because then I was like, "Okay, if I have to do 85 percent of thirty-eight years, that would be maybe roughly thirty-four, thirty-five years I'm going to have to do." Given that I was about sixteen, seventeen, I felt like, "Well, it's better than a life sentence." But then I decided, "No, that's still too much. Like I can't even think about how to manage thirty-something years of my life in prison." And the final deal, and it was this last deal or it was going to be going to trial. Going to trial, I did not want to do no matter what, because we were caught at the scene of our crime. We were as guilty as we could possibly be. So I did not want to risk being sentenced to a life sentence. The only thing that we had to think about was if we were going to be found guilty no matter what, perhaps the jury and the judge would be somewhat lenient with our sentence. So that was the only thing

we had to consider, but I still did not want to risk that. So I ended up taking a final deal of fifteen years, eight months, with two strikes—two strikes on my adult record—even though it was my first and only offense, but that was a part of the deal, and so that's what I agreed to. The same was for my crime partner. I think he actually took a deal for fifteen years. There was something that happened where I had to do a little more time, or I had to be given a little more time. I don't remember what exactly it was. But my crime partner had fifteen years, and I had fifteen years with eight months. So all that happened, yeah, nearly two years after my arrest, and at the age of eighteen, I was transferred to adult prison.

AOKI:

For those two years, you were at the Central Jail?

WU:

Yeah, at Central Jail. I mean, there were times I would leave very briefly. I don't really mention that most of the time, because it would be a transfer to Los Padrinos Juvenile Hall in Downey, back to Central Juvenile Hall or back to Barry J. It was depending on where they had availability. I guess there was just a lot of internal stuff going on with the probation department, because that was when it was extremely overcrowded even in the Juvenile Halls. A lot of kids were being arrested and being held, not released on probation or anything. So that's when I think they had to shuffle us around every now and then. But for the overall majority of the time, I was held at Central Juvenile Hall.

AOKI:

So it was just a sort of arbitrary move if it occurred?

WU:

Yes, I think so. I think that's exactly what it was. I mean, I can't say that, because I don't know what the reasoning was behind these short transfer periods, but, yeah.

AOKI:

What did that look like? How often were you in court and then—yeah, I guess that's the first question. How often were you in court or in these hearings throughout those two years?

01:16:10

WU:

They would take us early in the morning, because we had to be transported on the sheriff's bus because we're in adult court. So they would pick us up at about five-thirty, six in the morning, and then we would make our way over to the men's county jail, where they will proceed with loading up the bus with the adult offenders that were also going to court. Then it would just be an all-day thing, where we would be up for the entire day—I mean, excuse me, we would be out for the entire day, and we would be sent to our courthouse. I can't even say there was any set time. It was just depending on which inmates had to go to their hearing earlier, or whatever it was.

So we would then be in a small holding tank at the courthouse until our case was going to be heard or our case was next to get be on the judge's desk. Our actual time inside the courthouse would vary from as few as only five minutes to maybe up to thirty minutes, depending on what had to be discussed. Again, a lot of it was just the legal jargon. So, yeah, that's pretty much how we went, and then we would be back in our holding tank until it was time for the sheriffs to pick us up and return us to our facility.

AOKI:

A lot of waiting.

WU:

A lot of waiting, and a lot of times where mistakes happen. We weren't even supposed to go to court, but we spent the whole day waiting for nothing. Yeah, so there were a lot of times when that happened to me as well.

AOKI:

That's a long time. So, reflecting on that time period, what did you do when you were waiting?

WU:

Daydream. Daydream. I mean, that's when my imagination came in extremely handy. Where even I was physically held inside, my mind was out with my friends, with my family, and I was doing everything but being stuck in a holding tank. That would pretty much be it, because there was not much else I could do. Depending on the time, sometimes I would be able to use a phone and call friends collect or something, but they were in school, because court hours are school hours, work hours. So it would just depend, and more often than not, though, I would just be spending the entire day there, especially if I was isolated. There would be times when I had other inmates I could talk to, and so we could engage in conversations, but a lot of times I was actually in the holding tank by myself, and so I would just imagine all these different scenarios and situations and take naps when I was able to, and that would be it.

AOKI:

So this is your first time in jail?

WU:

Mm-hmm.

AOKI:

And you're being transported with adult, people who are on trial in adult court, right?

WU:

Right.

AOKI:

So what was that like for you?

01:19:36

WU:

I guess by then, my adjustment, my transition to incarceration had already taken effect, so I felt like it was part of the natural process. It didn't seem like anything to think about too much, because even though we were in the same bus as the adult offenders, we were still separated by cages inside the bus. I know for the average person, they don't know what the inside of a bus looks like, but there are cages that block off the females from the males, and then also for different populations, I guess, incarcerated populations, including those that need to be isolated and segregated from general population, those that are minors from the adults. So I would be on the same bus as them, but I would either be in my own little cage area or, at most, sitting next to one other minor defendant.

So, I mean, it wasn't strange at all, but it was interesting. It was always interesting to hear the conversations the adults were having, though, just how they would openly discuss some of their personal experiences with their own cases. It would be much different from what the minors would be speaking on. Opinions would be extremely different, because they were adults, I guess they had more world experiences, life experiences than we did. So it was always interesting to hear them talk. But, again, that was only when they were allowed to, because more often than not, we weren't allowed to have conversations in the bus. The officers would make a point to make sure that everyone was quiet, and they would just turn on the radio, and that would be it.

AOKI:

What was the housing situation like at the jail?

WU:

For me, it wasn't good. Again, because of the overpopulation, there were two people in each room that we were in. There were no toilets or sinks. We would have to pound on the door for one of the staff members to open the door to allow us to go use the restroom down the hallway, and that would be it. We'd be allowed to maybe have a book. That's it. We would be allowed to have our parents brings us certain hygiene items like soap and shampoo, toothbrushes, but we couldn't keep it on our person or in our room. So they would keep that in lockers, and we would only use them when we needed to, like in the mornings to wash up or later in the evening to take our showers. But the rest of the time, we would

be left in our room with pretty much nothing other than a book.

AOKI:

Did it have, like, someone come by with books that you could choose from, or was there a library or—

WU:

Every unit, every housing unit, has its own small library inside the unit, so you can read the books from that library, or when we went to school outside of our unit, like to the facility's school, there was a library there where we could go check out books.

AOKI:

So what's the school like?

WU:

The schools—you know. I mean, it all depends on the instructor, right? Because some take those jobs more seriously than others. If we're talking about teachers inside detention facilities, especially Juvenile Halls, the level of professionalism really varies from person to person, because some feel like, "Regardless of where these kids are right now, it's still our duty to teach them properly, to properly educate them," whereas other instructors were like, "Well, they're locked up anyway, why do we want to—let's just come and sit here, make sure they're not fighting amongst themselves and getting themselves in trouble and just collect our paycheck." So I can say that I experienced both. So the school was okay, I guess. There definitely needs to be a lot of improvements done. Actually, I take that part back, because I can't really say that. I'm talking from about eighteen years ago when I was there. Maybe a lot of reform has already taken place that I'm just not aware of now because I'm no longer a student there. But based on when I was there, I can say there was definitely a lot of improvement that was needed. That's where I ended up getting both my GED and that's where I had my high school graduation. It was at the chapel inside the facility. I worked on my high school education while I was in there, was able to earn my units, my credits, and then ended up having my graduation in there. It was a very bittersweet moment. My family came, my parents, my grandparents. They all went inside the facility. And there I was, wearing a bright orange jumpsuit with a cap and a gown, and with my high school diploma. But it was bittersweet for pretty much everyone, because it's like, "Yeah, it's a proud

moment in our lives that we graduate from high school, but look at what our future is looking like right now. What's in store for us?" But so that's where I ended up graduated high school.

AOKI:

Was the schooling mandatory?

WU:

For the most part. I mean, if we wanted to have our privileges like being able to have recreation, to go out into the dayroom to watch TV, then it was required for us to go to school. If we adamantly refused to go, they wouldn't force us, but that would mean we wouldn't be coming out of our rooms for the rest of the day, other than for our meals and to use the restroom.

AOKI:

So by that point, you had gone through a lot of new experiences, changing schools, and it seems like at every step you were learning a little bit more about how to adjust to those environments, but, I mean, this is a whole new environment, right? Can you talk about just what it was like for you to enter this environment and then to get used to that being your reality over those two years?

01:25:53

WU:

Yeah. When I first went in, I didn't know how to talk to anybody, because I grew up in mostly Asian communities, and even though there were people from all races from the schools I went to, I mostly stuck with my own kind, with the Asian kids. So I didn't really interact with any other race.

When I went to the facility and to Juvenile Hall, there was pretty much hardly any Asians. It was mostly Latinos or African Americans. So some of the language they would use, the slang, the way they spoke, it would be difficult for me to understand, because they didn't speak like regular—to me, I guess it was regular English, like I had been speaking with my friends. So I was definitely intimidated by them. Most of them were larger than me physically, and most of them were actually seasoned gang members who were really—like what I aspired to do and what I ended up doing and what I aspired to become, that wasn't to become a real gang member, because I had no idea what a real gang member was. It was just what I was introduced to and all that I knew. Being in the Juvenile Hall, these were real gang members

with all the tattoos all over their faces where they were, even while incarcerated, fighting with their enemies, being pepper-sprayed and tackled by the staff to separate them. So it was extremely intimidating. I was scared. Eventually, after being bullied on a few occasions, having my personal belongings stolen from me and things like that, that's when I realized I had to learn to stand up for myself. I ended up getting into the first fights I've ever had, in jail, because I was just like, "Okay, I have to do this or this is going to keep on happening." So it took about six months for me to be able to establish myself, I guess, inside the Juvenile Hall—in my unit, I should say—where people would go, "Okay, let's leave him alone." Because the way it is, and once you go and you start showing fellow inmates that you are not going to just tolerate their any type of abuse or anything like that, then, for the most part, you end up earning their respect from them. So that's how it was for me for the first half year or so, and by the rest of my time, I didn't really have any problems. I don't think I ever got into another fight while I was in Juvenile Hall.

AOKI:

What was your relationship with your cellmate or—

WU:

It was good.

AOKI:

—the guy you were sharing the—yeah.

WU:

Yeah, I mean, it was. The first few, again, because I didn't know how to talk to them, there would always be, like, awkwardness inside the rooms. I would just be silent. I would be subdued, completely to myself. But then later on throughout the months while I was there, I was just talking to them, got to know a lot of things about them, learn more about different cultures, because they do their best to try to integrate all races in Juvenile Hall. They don't segregate like in the adult facilities. So I got to become a lot more familiar with just these different cultures and backgrounds. They would tell me about what they referred to as war stories, about some of the things that he had done when they were still outside, and it was a great way to pass time, just to talk.

AOKI:

Same guy the whole time you were in?

WU:

No. Several different, several different.

AOKI:

Would that just be one day you'd wake up and they'd be like, "He's gone"?

WU:

I mean, there were times that it was that quick, yeah, but for the most part, we would probably be—I mean, yeah, I can't even really say what the average stay was between me and one person consistently, because I got transferred for whatever reason, came back later on to a different room, or whatever. So the soonest was actually one day, and the longest was maybe four or five months.

AOKI:

Stay in touch with any of them?

WU:

From Juvenile Hall? Yes and no, because many of us all got sentenced to lengthy adult sentences, some of them were actually handed life sentences or are still incarcerated. But for those of us that made it out,

I've only met with one other person out here since my release in 2009, and that's about it. We don't remain in constant communication. We're all Facebook friends, but that's pretty much the extent of it, because we've all grown. Those days are way behind us, and we're no longer the kids that we were once were. And other than the common history of incarceration, there's not much else that we have in common anymore.

AOKI:

Yeah, it's a long time ago.

WU:

Yeah, that was a long time ago.

AOKI:

Let's see. I feel like we're going to start a new chunk of your life soon. So it's 12:40 now. I wonder if we should schedule a separate session.

WU:

Sure, and then we'll go on to, like, maybe growing up, I mean the things I experienced while in custody to present day, because that was a lot.

AOKI:

Yeah. Does that sound like a good cutoff right now?

WU:

I think so.

AOKI:

Because it can get exhausting, so and it's—

WU:

Yeah, I think that makes a lot of sense.

AOKI:

Yeah. And you can have a little time to think about today's session, and I'll do the same.

WU:

Okay. Sounds good.

AOKI:

Okay. Let me turn this off. (End of April 28, 2014 interview)

Session 2 (May 8, 2014)

AOKI:

This is Kyoko Aoki. I'm with the UCLA Center for Oral History Research. I'm back at the InsideOUT Writers office with Jimmy Wu, who's the case manager here. This is the second session, following last week's interview. It's nice to see you again.

WU:

Likewise.

AOKI:

I think last time we talked about your arrest and sentencing and a bit about your time in Central Juvenile Hall.

WU:

Right.

AOKI:

So I wanted to pick up there and just begin talking about when you first encountered InsideOUT Writers, because I assume that was in Juvenile Hall. Is that correct?

00:02:28 00:04:19 00:06:32 00:08:58 00:10:42

WU:

Yes. Yes, it was. So about a year after my arrest, I encountered the nun of the Chaplain Office at that time. Her name is Sister Janet Harris. So what she wanted to do was to bring in professional writers to teach the kids that were incarcerated how to form their thoughts into the written word. She felt that there were extremely powerful stories that needed to be shared, and all the kids that were incarcerated have

voices that needed to be heard. So what gave her that idea was there was a person by the name of Eric McGinnis. He worked as a substitute teacher through LACO in Central Juvenile Hall, but he also had an interest in arts. So he formed a group called Trouble Souls, and I was selected as a Troubled Soul, and what we would do was create these plays to perform in front of the rest of the kids that were incarcerated that were not a Troubled Soul. So Sister Janet used to go and see some of our plays, and through the plays, there would also be various elements that showcased writing abilities. Through creative writing, we would form presentations to share with the audience. She found that extremely compelling and intriguing, so that's what gave her the idea, "Okay, there's something more to it. Let's bring in professional writers to teach a creative writing class, specifically."

So during one of our Troubled Souls plays, I went up and alongside two other minors, we basically shared a story of various milestones, I guess, in our young lives, from when we were born to the age of five, and then from the age of five to the age of ten, and then from ten until we were incarcerated or arrest. So what we did was we would each take turns going through these various timelines, and every time one individual would speak, the other two would turn their back to the audience, so that it was just a spotlight on that one individual. Once he got through the portion of his story, he would turn his back, and the next person would go, and so on and so forth. So I had no idea that my future writing teacher was actually sitting in the audience during that presentation, and he was blown away by what he witnessed. So Mark Salzman was asked by Sister Janet to sit in on one of IOW's very first writing classes, before there really was an IOW. And, again, this was just a theory, a concept of the value that was behind a program like that that would result in IOW's formation. But Mark Salzman went and sat in on a class taught by Duane Noriyuki, who was a Los Angeles Times staff writer, and, again, he was blown away by what the kids in Duane's class revealed through writing. So later on, he agreed, through a bit of persuasion from Sister Janet, to form his own writing class, and so that's how I was introduced to Mark officially.

One of the days when the Catholic Office had volunteers visit various units, Sister Janet approached me and she asked if I would be interested in a creative writing class. I told her yes, without any real expectations of learning much of anything. It was simply a way for me to spend more time out of my room. I didn't believe that I had any type of creative writing talent or abilities, because the extent of my writing was mostly through letters to my friends and family. So she selected me, along with two other minors, and we went into the library inside our housing unit. It was Unit KL at Central Juvenile Hall. We walked into this room and we saw Mark for the first time, and he was unimpressive, I would say. I mean, not to say—in no way am I trying to be insulting, but what I mean by he was unimpressive is because of our jailhouse mentality, a lot of the respect was given through physical appearances. If someone was large and intimidating physically, then he would have a bit of respect. I think that is the best way to illustrate what I'm trying to say, because young people are easily influenced through superficial things, and a physical experience is actually quite superficial. So Mark, he came in relatively unintimidating, stood five-feet-six, five-feet-seven, maybe 140 pounds, and we're like, "Okay, yeah, this is probably another square, another do-gooder. We're not going to learn much from him." Because by then, we had been accustomed to many people coming in from trying to do good-will. We understood they had compassion, they were good people, they had very kind hearts, but given the reality of our situation, which was a very uncertain future, possibly a very lengthy time in prison if not for the rest of our lives, what was this guy going to teach us? That was our initial thoughts.

So then Mark started sharing a lot about himself, his personal life, about graduating from Yale, having a childhood dream of growing up to be a martial arts master. So from an early age, he began taking martial arts classes, was infatuated with all the Kung Fu movies, Bruce Lee, and he ended up actually moving to China to teach writing—to teach English, I should say, for about two years, and there he met a Kung Fu master who he the great fortune of studying with when he was in China. Then he never once thought about becoming an author, but because of some of the stories he shared with his friends and

family about his experiences in China, it prompted him to write his very first novel, called Iron and Silk. So that was when he started thinking, "Well, maybe I can earn a living and make a career out of being a writer, as an author." So that's what he ended up doing. He shared how he was able to meet his future wife, Jessica Yu, while he was studying at Yale, and she was into fencing, so he found that quite fascinating and intriguing. He asked her out, they got to know each other very well, began dating, and later got married. She turned out to be an Academy Award-winning documentary filmmaker. So it was, through him sharing these things, we were like, "Oh, wow, okay. Well, this is all fascinating. It's so different. It's a different way for us to be talked to," because he talked to us like we were just everyday normal people. He didn't really come in with authority in his voice, expecting us to just be receptive and abiding of certain commands or instructions that he would give us. He came just to talk to us, and we weren't used to that. Because, again, since we were incarcerated, most of the adults that were there, they would just come in and they would demand certain things of us and give us very specific instructions, and we couldn't really say no, because if we did, it would result in disciplinary action.

But the other volunteers, they would come in and they would talk to us, but, again, because we weren't able to just see anyone whenever we wanted to, we would only meet those that had an interest in coming to help us in ways that they knew how. So a lot of it was through religious services, and when they came in, it was obviously to talk about God and spirituality. And then we had those that came in that have a scared-straight mentality who were formerly incarcerated who wanted to basically scare us, and that didn't really go over well at all. It wasn't received well, because it was a little too late for scared straight. Instead of just coming in and trying to scare us out of getting ourselves in trouble, well, it's after the fact. We're already in trouble, we're already in here. If anything, they should have came in and gave us a realistic presentation about what we would be encountering in prison, instead of trying to scare us. So Mark's take was completely different. He came in, he simply just wanted to share himself with us, and he hoped that we would be able to do the same. So we ended up learning some of the most valuable lessons that we've ever—that I can say that I've ever learned in my entire life, even today at the age of thirty-four. He taught us how to be vulnerable in a very hostile environment. He helped us remain true to ourselves and to keep in mind that no matter what happened, we couldn't allow our surroundings to completely dictate our life, that at the end of the day, we had to remember who we really were and what we were capable of. He taught us how to vent our frustrations, our emotions, our stresses, whatever it was, in a very therapeutic way through writing.

So that was something I carried with me throughout my entire incarceration experience of thirteen and a half years. Every time that I had anything going on in my life while incarcerated or if I was given news of certain things taking place outside in the free world I had no control over or where I wasn't able to assist with, I would just vent whatever my emotions were onto paper. So it really proved to be my salvation, because there were times where I couldn't turn to anybody to speak with them or talk to them or just seek advice. My only outlet was through writing, so I will always be forever grateful of Sister Janet and Mark for really helping, literally, save my life. And I am only speaking for myself, and I can honestly say that I feel that if there was anyone else that was in this room right now speaking with you, they would say the same thing. So that is how I was introduced to InsideOUT Writers.

AOKI:

So I'm interested in how you first became involved with Troubled Souls. Were you chosen or was it—

WU:

I was just chosen. I mean, it was like an open roll call. "If you would like to join, come and talk to Eric McGinnis and tell him why." Obviously, he would want to ask certain questions to make sure you're going to take it seriously, you will be committed. But, I mean, all that was, I think, more formality than anything else. It wasn't a real necessity, because the circumstances of Juvenile Halls, the way things operated, it's very unpredictable. One day you could be in this facility. The next day you could be transferred somewhere else. But he just wanted to make sure that you had some type of ability to be able to be creative, whether it was through writing or through acting. So there was no real recruitment effort or anything like that. It was just that the ones that were interested would just talk to Eric.

AOKI:

What were the classes or gatherings like?

WU:

It would be really fun. I can't think of a better word. It would be really fun, because we would be selected. I mean, the ones that were selected were pulled out of their rooms at different times, and we would go to the school library or sometimes to the chapel, where we would gather. And it was an opportunity for both genders to be in the same place at the same time without restrictions. I mean, there would still be certain expectations of us, like we couldn't go and do things that we weren't supposed to be doing, but because we were in jail, the girls and boys were segregated, you know how, kept in different housing units. So we would only see each other in passing, but this was an opportunity for us to actually sit in the same room and interact with one another. So, I mean, all of us that were part of Troubled Souls, we always looked forward to it, not just for the girls, but it was also because it was a really carefree, nonjudgmental, easygoing place to be. The space was there for us. So we didn't have guard in there, just like monitoring our every move or anything like that.

AOKI:

So this play that you describe with the three guys, that sounds really beautiful. Do you remember the stories that you told for the different milestones in your life?

WU:

Yeah, I mean, I remember mine. I don't remember the other two, unfortunately, because it was so long ago. But with mine, I decided to be a little more creative with this, so I wrote in the form of a poem, and it was rather lengthy. I just started off from beginning to end, as far as where I was born, everything that I went through while I was growing up, up until the age of sixteen, and then seventeen, a year after incarceration, what my future was looking like, and certain things that I wanted to convey to my family, just apologizing to my parents for everything that I had done, and to my brother, and then just trying to remain optimistic and hopeful.

AOKI:

And how did the Sister approach you?

WU:

It was just random. She just said, "Hey, I really liked what I heard when you were on stage, and I just feel you have a tremendous talent with writing, and I wanted to ask you if you'll be interested in joining this new creative writing program that I'm going to be bringing into the facility." And I said, "Yeah."

AOKI:

How frequently did you meet?

WU:

It was twice a week. Wednesday evenings for about an hour and a half, and then Saturday mornings for about the same time.

AOKI:

Can you describe the structure a little bit, if there was a structure?

00:16:11

WU:

There really wasn't a structure. So for even to date with our IOW writing classes inside the facilities, there isn't a set structure about what needs to take place. There are only a few certain rules, which is don't ask students to write about their crimes because their cases are still pending and you don't want them to say anything that they may regret, and that was pretty much it.

Every teacher, including my own teacher Mark, would come in, they would tell us a little bit about what they were going through or what was occurring in their lives, ask us to go ahead and share anything that we may want to. And after that, they would give us a writing prompt, and it would be different every single week, and it wouldn't be required for us to write on that specific prompt. It was given to those that didn't really know what else to write about, but if there were other things going on in our lives and our cases or whatever it was that we wanted to just be able to vent, we were open to do that as well. So there are numerous occasions when we will be given a writing prompt, but I wouldn't write about it at all. I would just write about whatever else I felt like I needed to get out of my system. So from what I know, I mean, even today, covering more than forty weekly writing classes—initially it started with just three writing classes, now we have over forty weekly—every one of the instructors or facilitators have pretty much followed that same format, where they just go in, they talk to the kids, engage them in a bit of dialogue, given them a writing prompt, and then give them time to write it and then share it with the rest of the class at the end of it.

AOKI:

So Duane and Mark are the two instructors at this point, is that correct?

WU:

Yes. There was another one, her name is Karen Hunt, who began teaching one of the girls' units. I don't remember exactly when that took place. It may have started the same time Mark started teaching us, but I don't remember when. The three of them are considered our original teachers.

AOKI:

Have you had conversations with Mark about his take on it and what his experience is like starting that process?

WU:

I never really had to ask him, because he ended up writing a book called True Notebooks, and that was about his entire experience teaching these creative writing classes. So years later, about five years later, I was at Folsom State Prison. It was about 2002, I believe, or 2001. And I received a letter from Mark in the mail with this consent to—he made a request for me to sign this consent form allowing some of the works that I had created in his class to be published. So I was like, "Oh, okay." I had no other information other than that, that he was just going to put together a collection of writings from his students. He ended up writing about everything that he experienced—

AOKI:

Oh, wow.

00:19:51

WU:

—which was great, because I was actually one of the characters in his book. So I never had to ask him what his take was, because I was able to read it through his own words. So it has actually unofficial become something of IOW bible. It's something that many teachers to date read years ago that really motivated them and inspire them to sign on as volunteer teachers themselves through our organization. So years later after I was released from incarceration, it really shocked me that a lot of people knew me because of Mark's book. So, like, when I visited the IOW offices for the first time with Sister Janet, pretty much everybody that was there knew me already. They're like, "Oh, my god, you're Jimmy Wu." It was surreal to me, like, "Yeah, I guess this is different. People know me. I don't know you, but you read about me and know a lot of things that I have gone through." So it was really cool.

Then I found out later on that it was such an amazing book that it was implemented in certain colleges' and universities' curriculum. So I started receiving letters in the mail, really pleasantly and surprisingly, because I didn't expect anything like that. But people were writing me to offer their support, so that's another thing that I'm always going to be grateful to Mark for.

AOKI:

So this is the second year that you're at Central Juvenile Hall, is that correct?

WU:

Yes. It was about a year and a half, because I was there for almost two years. One month shy of my second year in Juvenile Hall is when I was sentenced to fifteen years, eight months, and two strikes, and then transferred to the L.A. County Jail with the adults for about two, three weeks before I was transferred to prison.

AOKI:

So can we talk a little bit about that transition period?

00:22:04 00:25:04 00:26:18 00:28:56 00:31:46 00:33:01 00:35:33 00:37:55 00:39:23 00:42:02 00:43:39 00:46:39 00:48:26 00:50:29 00:52:16 00:54:43 00:56:39 00:59:09 01:00:50 01:03:17 01:05:34 01:06:57 01:09:17 01:10:58 01:13:04 01:15:02 01:17:05 01:18:40 01:20:49 01:23:32 01:24:59 01:26:37 01:28:22 01:32:21 01:33:21 01:35:21 01:36:49

WU:

Sure. Well, I mean, going from Juvenile Hall to county itself was extremely intimidating, because I was surrounded by those that were my age. We were all kids. All I knew of the adults was what I saw going to court with them. Because, like I think I mentioned already, we would go on the same bus, but we would be put in our own cages as separated from the adults. So I didn't really know what to expect when it was my turn to be transferred to the county jail system for adults. It was about eight p.m. on—I forgot what day, but it was about eight p.m. when I was called to go to the gym, because that's where all the kids went where the sheriffs would then go and put us in restraints before taking us to the transporting vehicles. And then I was taken to the—what do you call it? I don't know if it's the processing or reception, or whatever it was called, but I was put there so that they can process me into the county jail system.

So because I was someone else coming out of Juvenile Hall, I was wearing an orange jumpsuit that says "Central Juvenile Hall" on it. That automatically let all the guards know that I was a minor coming—I mean, now I was an adult. I just turned eighteen. I was someone coming from a Juvenile Hall. So they separated me most of the time through the processing phase. After I was given my wristband with my name, my county jail number, that's when I changed into the blue outfit that they provide in the country jails. So from then I was no longer just a juvenile. Now I was just another adult. They put me into a cell in, I believe it was the—they called them modules or pods or blocks. So I was put in 2600. That was just the name of it. Just like in Juvenile Hall they had housing units with using alphabet, I guess, because it

would be like Unit KL is where I was. There was Unit MN, E, F, G, H, so on and so forth. Now we were in these new housing units, and they used numbers instead. So I was in 2600. It was about eleven, twelve o'clock already by the time I went in, so the lights were pretty much dimmed, and it was dark and it was terrifying because I had no idea what was going to happen. I went in and I was passing by all these rows of cells with open bars and several men just staring at me. I'm like, "Okay, well, here we go." So they finally put me into my cell. As soon as I walked in, there was someone that started asking me questions where I was coming from, what I was arrested for, and, I guess, just trying to get to know me a little bit. So I was answering these questions, and then this guy told me that when I had to use the bathroom, I needed to sit down to use the bathroom, and I didn't like that at all, because I felt that maybe that was a test of manhood or something. So I told him, "No. If you want to piss while sitting down, then that's your problem. But I'm definitely not going to be the one doing that." I really got offended by it and started using a lot of curse words and thought that maybe, again, that he was testing me. So I thought that I would be getting into my first fight.

When he knew that this was how I was taking his advice. He went on to clarify that he didn't mean anything by it. He was just explaining that I should sit down, because I was sharing a toilet with five other men, and out of respect for one another, we all should sit down when urinating so it wouldn't splash onto the seat. So I was like, "Oh, okay, now it's starting to make sense." So that's one of the first lessons I learned immediately. Later on, there were other things, such as when we were given our food trays. Because we wouldn't go to the dining hall, the food would be brought to us in our cells, that if anybody had their food on the floor, don't walk over the food, because things may fall off of the shoe or whatever it was. So there were people that didn't understand that, that later on got beat up because people thought that they were disrespected when someone would walk over their food. So those were some of the things I quickly got a grasp on and knew what I should do and what I should do. Respect was held in the highest regard. That came before anything else. Everybody demanded respect from everyone else, and at the same time you had to earn your respect as well.

So two weeks after that, I was transferred to Delano State Prison. What happens after a person is sentenced to prison or just sentenced in general, they are transferred to a reception center. Back when I was sentenced, I believe there were only two or three: Chino Correctional Facility, Delano State Prison—no. Chino was Chino Institution for Men. Delano was Delano State Prison. Wasco State Prison was another reception yard. And I think later on they turned Tehachapi into a reception yard as well. But, anyway, I was sent to Delano State Prison in Central California, not too far from Fresno, around that area. I had to go and meet before a Classification Committee. So just to explain what that is, it's a couple of counselors. There is a prison sergeant, a lieutenant, it could go up to the captain or associate warden, where they all gather together and you meet. You go in front of them. Basically, they will determine how to classify your prison status, and that is when they'll ask you a bunch of questions such as the extent of your education, if you have any college education, if you have any high school education, and that will help them determine whether or not you need to go back to school or get on a school waiting list. If you have above a ninth-grade rating average, then you qualify for work placement, and they would put you on a work waiting list. And if you wanted to, you can also sign up for vocational trainings or sign up for Prison Industry Authorities, which was the highest-paying job, where you would work directly for—well, I don't even know how to explain it, now that I think about it. PIA is just what we knew it as, and it was Prison Industry Authorities, where they would do a lot of things such as manufacturing clothing for the rest of the inmates. Folsom Prison, the PIA that was available there was for making all of the California residents' license plates, so they were contracted by the DMV.

So, anyway, the Classification Committee would also start calculating the level of security that you were going to be placed at, and how they did that was they would compile a list of numbers, or they will compile a bunch of numbers, and it was you would be classified by the number that you were given. So, for instance, any number above 52 would be Level 4 Maximum Security. And how they would get to

that number is to see if you have any type of military background. Again your education would come into play. They look at the number of years you were sentenced to. I forgot exactly how they do that, but each year you were given x number of points, and ultimately that would come to the grand total of points that you had. So, for me, because I had fifteen years, eight months, because I did not have military experience, things added up to a number of 54. That was my total number of points, so I was sent to a Level Four. Once I heard that, I was really, really scared, because I was like, "Okay, well, most of the people that are on Level 4 yards are doing life sentences. Most of them have committed a murder or extremely violent and serious offenses." Although my crimes were considered serious and violent, I really didn't hurt anybody. Because I took someone by gunpoint, it was a violent crime. I had a firearm, and because of the initial kidnapping charge, that was later reduced to false imprisonment, that was considered serious as well. So I was sent at the age of eighteen to my first general population prison, and there were over 1,000 grown men on the prison yard that I was sent to. I was the youngest of all of the men that were there, and I was the physically smallest. I was a baby. But I had the great fortune of being embraced by my fellow Asians, because now I was in prison and everything was racially segregated. Other Asians would come and they would start getting to know me, but one of the first things they wanted to make sure was that I wasn't in for a sex crime or I wasn't a snitch, because those are not really allowed on general population yards. They don't get themselves, but they are targeted. They become victims of stabbings or severe beatings. So they wanted to make sure that I didn't commit a sex crime and that I wasn't a snitch. And how they would do that is they would ask for my AOJ, which is Abstract of Judgment, that would state what I was incarcerated for, or also my LSS, which is Legal Status Summary, so that would also indicate what I was incarcerated for, what I was convicted of.

Once we cleared that, then I was okay to be on the prison yard with them. They started teaching me how to do my time. They would teach me some of the rules about what I could and could not do, about the importance of going places on the yard with at least one or two other Asians. In case something happened to me, I would not be alone. I would have someone supporting me and backing me up. It would be a given that I would do the same for the rest of my Asian peers. So that was how my first six months in general population went. I had to become accustomed to the prison life. So I didn't have any tattoos on my body up until that point, but now that I was a prisoner, I looked around me and pretty much everybody had tattoos. There were maybe 10 percent of inmates that did not have any tattoos, but everybody else did. So I felt like I, number one, really appreciated art, I liked looking at art, and, secondly, I felt that maybe if I got more tattoos maybe it would toughen up my look and make me appear more hardened.

So I decided to get tattoos, and originally I wanted to get it like just scattered all over my body. My cellmate was a Japanese man that was convicted of murder who was sentenced to, I believe, twenty-five years to life, and he actually was quite a tattoo artist. So he gave me suggestions that if I wanted to get tattoos that I should get some, the collage, instead of scattered tattoos here and there, because, he said, I would be looking like a walking billboard. So I started thinking, "You know what? He's on to something. He's right." So I started putting together ideas in my head about what I wanted to get, and I ended up getting quite a few tattoos, and it was more or less like a collage. So I think it made me feel a little more confident that I was not going to appear as vulnerable as just a little boy that was in prison, that, if anything, I was a criminal as well, just like everybody else around me. That was the façade that I took on. I started to walk like everybody else, with my head held high, with kind of a very confident stroll. Deep down, though, I knew I was still a kid. I was still trying to adjust and transition into, I guess, my new adult life, and I was having difficulties with that for a while. I would go into the cell with my—we referred to roommates as cellies, because we share a cell. So I would, like, kid around a lot with my cellie, but that would often lead to him verbally reprimanding me to grow up and not act like that, that that was going to get me in trouble and if I carry that attitude out into the prison yard, people will think that I was a punk or—you know. But I was just trying to be myself, because, again, I was only eighteen years old and still a kid. So I would resort back to just writing about certain things, and then I would just

have to put on a very hardened exterior for everyone else to see every time I was outside of the comforts of my cell. So that's how life was for me for about a year and a half on the Level 4 yard that I was at.

How they transfer inmates now is if something comes up where there's going to be changes occurring inside the facility and they need to relocate inmates, then you will go to the same level security prison somewhere else. However, they also transferred inmates according to, again, their points. What you do is every year every inmate goes before the committee again for the annual hearing, the classification hearing. If an inmate did well that first year without getting any type of write-ups, didn't get into trouble in any way, their points would reduce. If they did get in trouble, their points would increase. I think it was either six points or eight points a year. I forget which number it was. Because I didn't really get into much trouble that first year and a half, my points were reduced so that I was able to be transferred to a Level 3, borderline medium maximum security prison. I was relocated to Wasco State Prison, not too far from Delano, maybe forty-five minutes to an hour away from that area, from that facility, and I went to my Level 3 medium maximum security prison, was there for about two and a half half years, then I was transferred again to Folsom State Prison in Northern California, not far from Sacramento. Folsom State Prison has a very colorful and rich history because it's one of the first three prisons ever built in California. There was Folsom, San Quentin, and Alcatraz. So the reputation that Folsom has is very intimidating, very terrifying. There were a lot of murders that took place at Folsom. And when I found out I was going there, I was extremely nervous, because even though I had gone from a Level 4 to a Level 3, these were more modern prisons, with solid doors that opened and closed automatically with a push of a button from the guards that worked in the control booth in each housing unit. Folsom was more open bars where it resembled the county jail cells I was at, only now it was for those that were in prison serving a significant number of years if, again, not for the rest of their lives.

So I went to Folsom State Prison. We had to go through the processing again. They had to assign us beds in certain cells in certain housing units. When I left the reception—not the reception, they call it Receiving and Release, R and R, where they process all incoming, outgoing inmates, I walked out and immediately looked at nothing but—they looked like animals peering out through the prison bars. It kind of resembles a zoo, because there's just nothing—there's constant noise because it's open bars. There's no privacy whatsoever. People can look right into the cells. The inmates would look right back out. And then I looked up. I say I looked up because I'd never seen so many men behind so many cell doors in my life. It was five tiers, five storeys, with about maybe thirty to forty cells in a row on each tier. So it was nothing but these—it looked like animals that were just peering out at me. So I was extremely nervous, and I remembered hearing some of the stories of Folsom where people used to get thrown off the tiers and they would just fall to their deaths.

So when I looked up, one of the things that really caught my attention were cable wires that had been put there so that it would be harder for someone to get thrown off. It would still be doable because there would still be enough room for someone to fit in between the cable wires, because they weren't put close together, but I guess they felt that that would be enough to prevent people from getting thrown. But, anyway, so I was like, okay, everywhere else I've been was nothing compared to this. This was really prison. Didn't know what to expect. As I spent more time at Folsom State Prison, I really grew to appreciate it and grew to enjoy it. It became, of all the prisons I've ever been at, my favorite. And even though it has such a horrifying past, there are positive things going to a setting like that. Because of its past, because of its history, the guards really respect inmates more than any other modernized prisons. They know that at the end of the day, the inmates are the ones that run the prison. The guards are there to ensure certain things are happening on a day-to-day basis and they are there to help prevent people from getting into fights or stabbings or trying to prevent murders or whatever else from taking place and other additional illegal activities. But at the end of the day, they knew that the entire prison was run by the inmates, because it was maybe a ratio of ten inmates to every one guard and they knew that they had to show a certain level of respect for their own safety, because we were dealing with people, inmates

that were capable of doing really bad things. So every time the guards would talk to us, there would be a certain amount of respect. They wouldn't be patronizing, they wouldn't be condescending or anything like that. I experienced that from some of the other prisons I had been at, where the guards would really take on a really demeaning tone in addressing us, but at Folsom is where they really treated us as if we were just other fellow human beings. So it was really refreshing for me.

I was at Folsom State Prison for about three years before I was transferred to my final prison that I would be at, which was Avenal State Prison. It was once again back in Central California. Up until Avenal, I had always been in the cell living environment where it was just me and one other person in my cell. And the crazy thing about being in a cell is when a person first goes into jail, it's extremely disorienting. It's really uncomfortable. It's really something that we hate because it's something that makes us feel like trapped animals. But later on through the years, we actually welcomed that cell because it's our home. We are always out on the yard or in the dayrooms and we're surrounded by nothing but—I mean other, not nothing, but just around other inmates, and at the end of the day we enjoy going back into the comforts of our own cell where we have as much privacy as one can expect to have in prison. So when I was transferred to Avenal, it was a dorm living environment. So I walked into Avenal, they gave me my housing, the building I was going to be housed in and my bunk number. It was no longer a cell number; it was a bunk number. So when I walked in, I just felt like there's no way I can—because I have four and a half years left to serve, there was no way I can do four years of my life in a dorm environment, because everywhere I looked, it was just row upon row of bunk beds. It literally felt as if we were in a warehouse.

So I remember that I walked into this dorm, and I approached one of the Asians that I saw and I asked him if there was anyone that needed to be removed from the yard, meaning I was going to go and attack someone that if they were incarcerated for a sex offense or they were a snitch, I wanted to attack them so that I would be sent to administrative segregation, back into a cell, and from there I would request a transfer back to a cell living environment. Regardless of how it may increase my time inside or how it would affect my points or anything else, I didn't care about that. I just felt that I can't, I cannot be in a dorm. So this Asian kid that I was talking to—I call him a kid because he was in his early twenties or—yeah, he was in his early twenties. He was like, "You know, Jimmy, it's not going to be bad. I understand how you feel, but give it some time. Just give it a couple of weeks. If you really don't like it, then, okay, we'll think of something that maybe will help you get transferred back to a cell-based (unclear). Just give it a shot." So I gave that some thought, and I said, "Okay, you know what? He's probably right. I can't knock it till I try it, right?" So I ended up giving it a shot, and I ended up staying there for the rest of my time, which was four and a half years. I should mention that this final transition, transfer, was extremely difficult for me, because it also took place at a time when I thought I was going to be losing my brother, my younger brother, who has Duchenne muscular dystrophy. In 2005, in February of 2005, while I was still at Folsom State Prison, my counselor called me into the office and said that I needed to call my mom because something had happened. So I needed to call them as soon as possible. So as I rushed to one of the pay phones, I made a collect call to my mom, and she just basically told me that my brother had caught a cold that turned into a severe case of pneumonia, and he was in the ICU. The doctors were really pessimistic about his condition and really felt that my brother wasn't going to be able to overcome this bout with pneumonia, and they said it was because one of his lungs was on the verge of collapsing, it was just too full of liquid, and his heart rate was up, and they just really couldn't think of anything that would be able to save his life.

So at this time my brother was laying in bed. He was already pretty much nearly completely paralyzed. He only had movement abilities left in his hands and his neck up. That was it. He was completely confined to a wheelchair, and he was laying in bed now. He had a tube inserted through his throat to help him breathe, so he was on a respirator. He wasn't able to talk. And it was the most devastating news I had ever heard. Even at my time of sentencing when the gavel came down and I knew that I was

going to be spending a significant amount of time away from my family, nothing broke my heart the way it did when I heard that my brother was on basically what they were considering his deathbed. So I made daily phone calls to my parents whenever I was able to for the next week or two, to get updates about my brother, and they continued telling me the same thing, that it didn't look good. My mom finally asked me if I felt that we should request a TCL, a temporary community leave, meaning that if authorized by the prison, my family had an option of paying guards overtime to escort me from the prison, take me to the hospital my brother was at so I could see him one last time before taking me back to the prison. They would have to cover all expenses, the overtime pay for the officers, the gas, everything.

So my mom asked me if that was something I wanted to consider. I told my mom, "If it's about money, then let's not worry about money. We can always make that back. It's about me seeing my brother for what can be the last time, so absolutely, yes, we need to put in this request." So she agreed, put in the request. About a day later, I was called back into my counselor's office, and she told me that, unfortunately, my request was denied. They felt that I still had too many years to serve. Because of my association, not my direct affiliation, but my association with the gang that was there, the Red Door gang, they felt that it was too much of a risk for the officers. So they would not authorize this. So, obviously, I was heartbroken to be given that news. They gave me what they call a 128-B, informative chrono, and that's basically just to document everything that's taking place with all inmates and whatever's going on. So they gave me a chrono, and I remember looking at it and reading that—they really make it extremely professional and formal, like on approximately whatever time on this date, Inmate Wu, and then my California Department of Corrections prison number, appeared before so-and-so correctional counselor, etc., etc. And I was reading this chrono, and then it was just saying everything that had taken place the last few days about my mom calling to inform the counselor that my brother was in the hospital and, on top of that, that my grandmother had passed away that same time. So my parents didn't tell me that my grandmother passed away. I had to read about that in the chrono. So I was shocked, like, "This has to be a typo. What is this?" I got on the phone again, and I said, "So I just got this piece of paper. Did something happen to Grandma?"

And that's when they said, "Yeah." In the very same hospital at around the same time that my brother was taken there, my grandma, who was on my dad's side, who was about in her late eighties, early nineties, I don't remember, she had passed away at the same time. So for my poor father, he was rushing between different floors of the hospital saying goodbye to his mother, while rushing back to spend time with his son that was dying. So this was all just overwhelming for me, and I remember going back into my prison cell and then, for one of the few times, really started thinking about suicide, because I felt that if my brother was not going to be around when I came home, then there was no point for me to continue living. I told my parents when I got sentenced there was only two things—fifteen years and eight months, 85 percent of that, thirteen and a half years was what I was going to be doing. I told them that there were only two things I really hoped for when I came home, and that was that, number one, my cocker spaniel, my dog, would still be alive, because I loved that dog, and, secondly, that my brother was still going to be alive. And because I was arrested when he was five years old, and they were saying that those with Duchenne muscular dystrophy have an average life expectancy of only twenty-five years, thirteen years away adding on to his five years would put us at eighteen years. So I was really hoping that he would live up to the average life expectancy.

So about in 2003, 2004, one of my hopes was taken away from me when my dog got run over by a car. So there was only one thing left, and that was my brother, and now that he was in this condition I just felt like, "Okay, if he's not going to make it, then I'm not going to make it either." So I did the only thing that I could do, given the circumstances and in that environment, which is to just write, write, write. And I remember writing some of the most difficult letters, the most painful, difficult letters I've ever had to write in my entire life, to Mark, my writing teacher, Mark Salzman. Every one of the pages

was drenched with my tears. They were just gushing out of my eyes as I was writing. I was basically pleading with Mark to please rush to my brother's bedside and tell him things I desperately needed for him to hear while he still could, and that was just how sorry I was for not being the brother that I was supposed to be for him and that I vowed that if I was able to make it out of there, that I would try my very best to live in his honor, to just do my best to help prevent other people from going through what I was going through, what I was feeling. So I sent these letters out, and the moment Mark received them, he immediately went to my brother's bedside, and he was there with my mom and he was just telling my brother everything I needed him to hear. So that's what I was taking place when I found out that on top of all that, I was going to be transferred to Avenal State Prison and that was going to be a dorm living environment. Every transition, every transfer to prisons is already a bit nerve-wracking because once any inmate is at a prison for a good amount of time, they kind of establish themselves amongst other inmates, their reputation and skills. Every time you go to another prison, then you're a nobody, you're completely new, and the process, you have to repeat the cycle, the process of making sure people were not going to think that you were going to be an easy victim or a target.

So I had a lot of stress on me, a huge burden on my shoulders when I got transferred to Avenal State Prison. As I was getting somewhat used to the dorm living environment the first few days that I was at Avenal, that's when the doctors told my parents that there was last solution that they can try to help save my brother's life, and that was to perform a tracheostomy, where they would perform an incision in my brother's throat, attach a respirator to it, but the risks that came with that operation would be that he may never regain his ability to talk and he may very well not be able to ever eat again. He would have to get a G-tube inserted as well so liquids could be fed to him directly. So I don't know how they were able to communicate with my brother, because this entire time, all these days, this week or two, he had a tube in his throat helping him breathe. So his mouth was open the entire time, and so he wasn't able to talk, but he was somehow able to tell them or message to them that if he was able to remain alive and be with us, then, yeah, he would do whatever it took, regardless of the risks. So they operated on him, the procedure was a success, so it did save his life. He later on did go into rehab, where he did regain full abilities to both talk and eat, so that was a huge miracle and it was a huge blessing to us.

On June 28th of 2009 is when I was finally released from prison, and my brother was there to welcome me back. I was picked up by my girlfriend that I met while I was still incarcerated, about a year and a half, two years prior to my release, and it was through a mutual friend. So she and I got to know each other very well through phone calls, through letters. She came to visit me whenever she was able to. So she picked me up the morning of June 28th, and we went to a gas station because she was brought up Buddhist and believed that there were going to be evil spirits following me, so she wanted me to change out of my prison clothes into clothes that she was bringing and to also douse myself with a gallon of water to wash away all the evil spirits. She preferred that I actually do it before entering her car, but I told her that there was no way that I could do that because then I would probably get rearrested for indecent exposure, and I would go right back in. (laughs) So she said, "Okay, we don't want that to happen." So the most that she would be willing to do was to take me to a nearby gas station, and for me to go use the public restroom and to do it there. So she drove me to the gas station, and I remember she parked at one of the pumps because she needed to get some gas anyway, and I started taking my first free walk in the free world after thirteen and a half years to the public restroom. I remember getting out of that car and I was already extremely overwhelmed just from that drive from the prison to the gas station, because that was my first time riding in the front seat of a car without any type of restraints or shackles. The entire time, I mean, for thirteen and a half years I was in the back of an escorted armed transportation vehicle. So this was my first ride in the free world, so I was already really overwhelmed. I thought it all surreal.

Then when I was walking from the car to the restroom, I had this very irrational fear that the cars that were parked there at the pumps, they were somehow going to just run me over. Even though there was

no one behind the wheel, I thought that they were going to somehow turn on and just run me over, because it had been so long since I had been around cars. So I rushed to the restroom. I hurried up and did what I needed to do and ran out of there, left the clothes in the restroom, and rushed back to my girlfriend's car. I told her, "Okay, just get me out of here. Get me out of here." She was completely, like, bewildered, like, what was going on? Why was I acting so frantic? I told her, "I just need to get out of here." So it was about a three-and-a-half-hour drive from the prison back to Los Angeles, and when we got home, I mean came back to L.A., it was a lot earlier than the dinner that we were going to have with my family. So my girlfriend was like, "Well, we have several hours to kill. Is there anything you want to do in particular?" I was like, "You know what? There actually is. I want to go someplace now I've always wondered about," and it was this place I've only seen on commercials on TV and seen advertisements for in newspapers and magazines. She was like, "Oh, okay. Where's this place?" And I'm sure she was thinking it was going to be something extremely fascinating and amazing. I was like, "I want us to go to a Walmart." So it was like the thing I really wanted, go to Walmart. I'd never been to a Walmart.

So she's like, "Okay. That's different, but, okay, we'll go to a Walmart." So she drove me to a Walmart in Pasadena, and when I walked through the front doors through the entrance, I remember just completely freezing in my tracks. My girlfriend kept walking ahead of me, thinking I was right behind her, and it took her several moments before she realized that I was frozen in place. So she came back, and she's like, "Come on. Let's go. Are you okay?" I'm like, "Just give me a moment." My senses were on complete overload at that point because everything I saw was just so bright and colorful and vivid. They were no longer just the dark grays of prison that I had become accustomed to. Even clothing itself, everybody was wearing colorful, colorful clothing, the bright pinks and oranges, the pastel colors, every color imaginable. And the sounds of people's laughter, of the drone of chatter, all these things were just so completely foreign and new to me. The senses—excuse me, a sense of food, of perfume, these were all things that were completely new, so I was just stuck there. The one thing I really remember that stood out to me was movement itself. In prison, I used to always—when I later on started giving presentations, I would refer to prison as a fishbowl, because every inmate could only go from one place to another before going right back to where they started from, and they were always under observation. Someone was always watching them, and because of that, there was really nowhere to go. People in prison move somewhat slowly and in slow motion because there's no hurry. We have nothing but time. Out in the free world, everybody is on fast-forward. They're always rushing from one place to another. So the movement of people just going by me, it was a little too much for me to feel comfortable with.

So, anyway, later on, she started taking me through the rows of Walmart, and I was just blown away that here I was in this supermarket, in this shopping center—I don't know what to call it—like it's not a supermarket, but in this shopping thing, in this store, right? I was able to basically purchase anything I wanted from all these shelves. And the TVs were something that were completely new to me when I went walking through the electronics section, because the TVs inside prison are more like the older TVs with the huge bubble backs, and here were these flat-screen TVs, extremely thin, extremely vivid and bright, and I was just completely mesmerized by all of it. But, anyway, we ended up leaving Walmart and later joined my family at one of their favorite restaurants. It was called the Fashion Ranch in the Santa Anita Fashion Park, really close to Arcadia. I remember walking into the restaurant, and they were seated towards the back of the restaurant, and I embraced my family members. After we all sat down, the waitress came by to take our drink orders. Now, the waitress was a young, attractive woman, and when she asked me what I wanted to drink or what I would like to order to drink, I remember my eyes remained glued on the menu that I was holding and I ignored her. So she asked me again, "Excuse me, sir, is there anything you'd like to drink?" And I just ignored her. So my dad was just like, "Okay, well, let's just give him a margarita." So she says, "Okay." After our drinks were served, a few moments later the waitress came back, and it was time to take our dinner orders, our meal orders. So everybody placed their orders. When it was my turn and she asked what I would like to eat, I ignored her, and she asked

me again, and I continued to ignore her, to make eye contact, nothing. So my dad ordered me a prime rib, and then after our meals were served, we enjoyed it, and that was it. That was my first day out.

Weeks later, I was at my dad's house with my mom, and my parents were like, "You know, Jimmy, we're really, really happy that you're home, but at the same time, we're a little worried, and so we want to talk to you about something." I was like, "Oh, okay, sure. What? What's going on?" They were like, "Well, we are worried that something may have happened to you while you were away all those years. We can't even imagine the things that you must have seen, things that you had to witness, things that you possibly had to do, and it's fine if you don't want to share it with us, but at the very least, we want you to be able to talk about it, and if you need counseling, that's fine. Don't be ashamed about that." So I was looking at them a little perplexed, and I was like, "Okay. Well, thank you. There's nothing wrong with me, but I appreciate your concern." I was like, "Is there any reason why you would even bring that up though?" So with complete looks of concern on their faces, they were like, "Yeah. Do you remember the night you came home and we went to the restaurant?" I said, "Yeah. I really liked it. It was a great, great meal." They're like, "Well, we're just, like, worried because you didn't even know how to order anything. You couldn't order anything to drink. You couldn't order anything to eat. You were just staring at the menu."

I took that in, and I was quiet for a few minutes trying to process it, and then I told them, "Okay, you know, I want you guys to think about something. For you, for everyone that was there other than me, doing something as trivial as ordering off of a menu is really normal, because you've been doing it your entire lives. I want you to think about that first dinner for me, though. For thirteen and a half years, nobody ever asked me what I wanted to eat. Nobody ever asked me what I wanted to drink. I was given what I was going to eat or drink, and my only option was whether I wanted to eat it or drink it or not, and that was it. That was all." I said, "On top of that, we never had a menu. There was no menu. So when I look at the menu, I don't know what to order. There are too many options. And, lastly, for all those years I was away, the only interaction I had with a woman was correctional guards or those that worked in the medical department, and it was only when I needed something from them. So there was no casual chitchat conversations, anything like that. So here was a young, attractive girl asking me what I wanted to eat or drink." When I was sharing that with them, their looks of concern turned into looks of shame and embarrassment because—and they even told me, "Oh, wow. We're so sorry. We didn't realize. We didn't know." So I was like, "Okay, you know. That's fine." I share that a lot during some of my presentations because it offers a lesson on perspectives, right, on perception as well, because oftentimes we encounter people that may be saying or doing things that we don't completely understand, and we form incorrect conclusions about why they're saying or doing certain things, instead of simply asking them, "Hey, I'm kind of curious, why did you do that or why did you say that?" Sometimes we should do that instead of just jumping to our own conclusions.

But, anyway, that was when I first came home. I immediately registered and enrolled into Mt. San Antonio College, a community college in the city of Walnut. I was living with my mom in West Covina at that time, so that was the closest community college for me. The reason I did that was because I was always fascinated and intrigued by college. I had never gone to college, and I wanted to test it out for myself, and on top of that, I wanted to prove to myself and everyone else that even though I was probably going to be at least ten years older than the rest of my classmates, the rest of the students, that I still had it within me to compete with them. So I took two noncredit courses, excelled at both of them, and then I was, like, satisfied with that. Then I started thinking that since I was now thirty years old, that I needed to try to catch up to those that were my own age, that were the same age as me, I should say, and they all had their bank accounts, they had jobs, they had homes, families. Here I was, a person with absolutely nothing. I was at home with my mom, and I didn't have anything else going for me. So I started filling out applications, looking for work wherever I was able to. I would be somewhat creative with my résumé. I would list everything, all the jobs I worked at when I was incarcerated, but I wouldn't

reveal that I was an inmate. I would make it seem like I was maybe a civilian that went into the prisons to work.

So I remember that I did get called in for an interview or two, and people would be like, "Oh, so a lot of your work experience was inside jail. Do you mind explaining that?" I'm like, "Yeah, I used to go and work in jail." (laughs) I would leave it at that, leave it extremely open-ended and generalized. It did lead to, "Okay, well, all we need is your background check to come back in," and I never got a call back after that. Every application I filled out, if it did go unnoticed, I'd be lucky to get called in for an interview, but most people would notice that I did check the "yes," I was convicted of a felony. So I never got many calls for an interview. It was only through close family and friends that I was able to find part-time work here or there. My very first job was working as an assistant in a music store owned by my mom's friend from church, and my duties were to basically schedule appointments for students and their musical instructors, as well as trying to sell musical equipment, and that was it, working very few hours at eight dollars an hour. That didn't really help much at all, but it was a start. Then I went to selling knives door-to-door, and it was basically a scam. It turned out to be a scam, so I lost money instead of making money by doing that. About a year and a half later, about a year and a half after I came home, I finally got my first real job, and that was through my uncle, who worked at a freight forwarding company doing import and export shipments. He knew a general manager at a separate freight forwarding company who was looking for someone to work as an ocean export agent, processing all shipments that were leaving—not all, but like shipments leaving the United States going to different countries via ocean vessels.

So my uncle asked me if I would be interested in doing that, and at that time I was just looking for any and all work, so I said, "Yeah, anything is good." I went in for an interview. About a week later, I got called to be given the offer, so I was ecstatic, like, "Oh, my god. I actually feel like I have a real job." When I went to work the first day, I guess I can say that was when I already kind of had a feeling that maybe this wasn't the proper decision for me, and I say that because the drive itself was horrible. It was a fifty-five-mile drive, so it took me about two hours to get from West Covina to the City of El Segundo right next to LAX where the office was. By the time I got there, I was already half exhausted. And the work itself was one that I completely did not understand. It took me a while to really get it. I remember every time the phone rang, I would really get nervous because I was working import, export, a lot of—there was a lot of things that had to go through Homeland Security and Customs. Here I was, a person with a criminal background, and I was terrified that at any given moment, one of the phone calls would be about me, informing my general manager that I was not supposed to be working there, I had to be let go, or whatever, whatever. So I started getting really paranoid, to the point where I finally decided that I needed to go and get this off my chest. Instead of anyone hearing about me through a phone call, I would rather them hear it from me directly so that at least I can offer an explanation. I asked my general manager if I could speak with him, and he said, "Yes, come on in."

So I sat down and I told him that I had gotten myself into a lot of trouble when I was younger when I was about sixteen, and I did not reveal that I was on high-control parole for three years, that I was out now, and I was on parole where I had to report to my parole officer twice a month. I didn't reveal any of those things. I just felt at the very least I needed him to know that I did have a criminal background. He surprised me by saying, "You know, thank you for telling me, but you don't have to worry about that here. We're not going to worry about that. We're not going to let you go because of that. So thank you for sharing." So I thought, "Wow, this guy is extremely understanding." It turned out to be a curse more than a blessing, because throughout my months—and I was there for about a total of a year and a half before I finally resigned—throughout my time working there, there were several people that ended up joining the company after me. They were all given bonuses and raises. I never did. I remained exactly where I started, so then it became quite clear to me that maybe my general manager felt that, "Wow, this guy has a criminal history." The economy right now is crap, because I came home at the worst time

imaginable with the new depression that we were experiencing. “What are the odds of him leaving? I can keep him here for his current pay, his starting pay, and he’s not going to go anywhere. He would be a fool to leave. He’s not going to find work anywhere else.” Plus, I didn’t have any type of college degrees at all. So I was completely miserable the entire time I was working there, and it was even more difficult for me, because my family was involved. My uncle was the one that helped get me the job. So it wasn’t just going to be easy for me to say, “I don’t want to work here anymore. I’m just going to leave.” I had to think about my uncle’s relationship with the general manager.

So during this time, I started thinking that I wasn’t meant to go through everything I had to go through to work at this dead-end job, that I had a lot of dreams, a lot of goals. I’d always considered myself an ambitious fool without direction, because I always had these huge goals. I just didn’t know what I had to do, the necessary steps I had to take to acquire those goals, accomplish the goals. So I started really thinking about what was it that I can do with my life, other than this. Then I started thinking, well, the one thing I do have is thirteen and a half years of firsthand experiences of the flaws with our juvenile justice system in particular. How is it okay for someone who really isn’t a psychopath or really a bad person, but someone who has gone through a lot of things in his life, to end up sentenced to so many years in prison? What about all those guys I had met that were in prison that were just like me, but because they were unable to afford private attorneys, were sentenced to life in prison for the exact same crimes that I committed? And what about every single one of those kids I was with in Juvenile Hall, who had no idea the severity of their consequences or how much time they could potentially be sentenced to until after it was too late, after they already committed the crimes?

What about the schools that need to do something about that, where they are teaching kids in their sophomore year of high school how to have safe sex? At the same time, high school was a crossroads for many kids because some went there for the right reasons for academic purposes and to further their education, while others went more for a social life. What about all these things that I can really advocate on behalf of and to learn more about? So I started to get more involved whenever I had spare time, going to Loyola Law School in particular to learn about restorative justice, understanding that it was an alternative to our current justice system, our judicial system of just focusing on penalties and the amount of time we should send somebody away and still what the intended purpose of prison was originally, which was focus on rehabilitation and healing. So restorative justice really stood out to me because it was a concept that if committing a crime is inflicting hurt upon a person, a person’s family, their community, and then ultimately hurting the perpetrator themselves, then justice needs to be about healing for the victim or their family, their community, and also for the perpetrator. So I started going to Loyola Law School quite often, started coming back to InsideOUT Writers, because by then they had already established their alumni program, an extension of the writing program that was created in 1996, ’97. Now, the alumni program had six different components that was implemented: case management, a mentoring program, the life skills workshop, the weekly creative writing circles, cultural fieldtrips, as well as coming engagements.

So I start to learn more about IOW, trying to get involved a little more, going to our old office in Hollywood as often as I was able to, and started getting to really learn about nonprofit work, getting to know people. After a good amount of time learning about all these different things, I decided to have a conversation with my family. I told them that I was extremely grateful that I was able to work as a freight forwarder for about a year and a half, but I always felt that there was something more meaningful for me and that I would need their support, especially when it came to finances, because by then I had purchased a car and I had car payments. I was like, “I need you to please give me a chance to chase my dreams. All I ask is for one year, one year of your support, and if I can’t get to where I believe I can get to in a year, then, fine, I’ll just look for whatever job I can get and be satisfied with that, and that will be it.” So there was a lot of reluctance, a lot of hesitance, before my parents agreed to it. They said, “Okay, we’ll do it for a year.” So I quit my job, and it was the most liberating feeling ever to turn in my two-

weeks' notice, and I started really just going out and volunteering whenever I was able to with several different nonprofits, going to give presentations, specifically in college campuses through different professors I had been able to meet who really wanted me to go speak with their students. So I did that for a while, up until January or February of 2012. I went to the Loyola Marymount University campus, there was a conference taking place, so I went in as a guest. I wanted to learn about various topics, especially the ones that dealt with juvenile justice reform. One of my friends that I met after I came home, who happens to also be one of IOW's teachers, his name is Scott Budnick. He's the executive producer of Hangover Films, and he has quite a very impressive résumé of work experience, filmmaking experience because he does a lot of work with juveniles. He recently founded the Anti-Recidivism Coalition.

But, anyway, I met Scott through Facebook one day because he had also read True Notebooks that Mark Salzman wrote, and he and I got to know each other really well. But, anyway, I bring all that up because Scott Budnick was supposed to speak on this panel that I was really interested to learning about, and it was about juvenile justice reform. So I went to LMU, I was there, and for the first half of the conference up until lunchtime, everything was fine. During our lunch break, one of the facilitators of the conference, one of the coordinators came up to me and said, "Hey, Jimmy, so we want to ask you something, and it's okay if you say no, but we really think you should say yes." I'm like, "Okay." They're like, "Scott's not going to be able to make it today." So at that time, Scott was filming—I believe it was Project X or something. Anyway, he had a last-minute meeting that came up, and he was unable to make the conference. So the coordinator's like, "Yeah, Jimmy, we really think that you should fill in Scott's place, and you should speak on this panel, because who better to speak on juvenile justice reform than those that had been affected by it directly?" I'm like, "Oh, all right, well, I'm glad you said it's okay to say no, because I'm good. No, no, I don't want to." They're like, "What? Why?" I'm like, "I'm not ready for that. I mean, thank you for the opportunity, but I'm not ready."

Because the caliber of the audience and the people that were attending it, to me, was way too high. I wasn't ready for it. We had people that flew from all over the nation, from Washington, D.C. There were a lot of politicians. On this panel that Scott was supposed to be on was one of the most well-known restorative justice advocates, named Sujatha Baliga, who she lives in the Oakland Bay Area, and she has a huge following, and as well as the councilman, who is now congressman, Tony Cárdenas. They were going to be on the panel with Scott Budnick. So I said, "There's no way I'm going to be going up there with them. Who am I? I'm unemployed right now. I'm a formerly incarcerated person. I don't have those qualifications." They're like, "Well, that's where you're wrong. You do have those qualifications. You need to go up there. We'll give you some time to think about it, okay, and if you don't want to, then that's fine. But, again, we really think that you should." So then later on, a few more people came up to me, and they kept trying to persuade me, and then that's when I really started getting nervous, because I was like, "This is an incredible opportunity. Maybe it's time for me to just face my fears and just give it a shot." So I chain-smoked I don't know how many cigarettes, and then I finally said, "Okay, fine." I was initially extremely hungry and looking forward to lunch, but then I was no longer hungry, I lost my appetite completely, and then it was our time to go on to this panel.

I went up there, and I'm sitting directly in between Sujatha and Tony Cárdenas, and the moderator of our panel begins giving preliminary introductions of who the panelists are. And then I was just like, "Wow, mine's going to really suck compared these two individuals." So he introduced me as someone who was a fascinating young man, who had a very compelling and inspirational story to share, and who was a volunteer and advocate on behalf of several issues and organizations. So, anyway, when it came my turn to speak, I didn't really know what to say. So they told me in advance, "Just share your story. Tell them who you are. That's it. That's all. Don't say anything else. That's it. Let your story speak for itself." So I did just that, and I ended my part of the discussion by sharing something that had recently happened to me. About a week prior to this conference, I was on Facebook, and Facebook has this funny

thing of trying to suggest friends because it feels as if you know somebody and someone else knows someone, then, hey, you have a mutual friend, and you should add them as well. I was on Facebook late one night, and there was a person that popped up that Facebook suggested for me to become friends with. The name stood out, and I was like, "No way. No way it's this dude."

So I clicked on the name, looked at the profile photo, I was, "Yes, it is this guy." It was my other crime partner that ended up telling on us and pointing the finger at us, me and my other crime partner. I was just like, "Wow. Here I am, looking at you all these years later, looking at a picture of you." Throughout my years away, I would have to be honest and say that I sometimes I had fantasies of what I would do to this guy if I ever saw him again in person. I acknowledge that I was in prison all those years because of actions that I had taken, and I hold myself, held myself accountable, but at the same time, I really hated this individual. I resented him, because instead of a maximum of maybe nine years and mandatory release if I had been sentenced in Juvenile Court, because of his testimony against me, it really played a role in my case being transferred into the adult court system. So I really, really was bitter about that. And when I saw his picture on Facebook, the same fantasy, those fantasies that I had indulged in for all those years came right back, and I felt every emotion imaginable. There was a lot of anger, resentment, bitterness, hatred. And then I started thinking like, "What is the point of this?" I have an opportunity to track him down now, and if I really wanted to seek out revenge, then I probably could, but then what would happen afterwards? I would go right back in. Everything that I tried to do throughout even my time inside and after I got out would be for nothing. And on top of that, I would lose my family, this time forever. So I started getting extremely emotional, and I ended up clicking on the thing where I was able to send him a message, and I started typing up how I was feeling. So I basically told him that I was really shocked to see him on Facebook all these years later, and that I had to be honest and let him know that I really hated him for a very, very, very long time, and I told him why. I said, "This was the difference that—you know, because of your testimony, this is what happened. I was given two life sentences instead of just the maximum nine years." And on top of that, he had come home immediately afterwards. So I said, "I'm really glad that life was able to pick up for you pretty much right afterwards, but, for me, a lot changed. I grew up and grew older in prison. But I just want you to know I forgive you. There's no point for me to continue to hold on to any hatred or animosity towards you, because in doing so, I'm only going to keep on perpetuating these emotions I have. So there's no point. I mean, I just let it go once and for all, so I just wish you the best," and that's it. So I sent the message and that was it.

So, anyway, back to Loyola Marymount, the panel, that's how I ended my discussion, my presentation, because I was just sharing that a week ago this had happened, and because I was speaking about restorative justice, about healing, I felt that that was a story that really tied into the concept of healing, because we can't heal until we start forgiving. So that was my message, and by the end of it, I was in tears, because, again, it was just so raw, it just happened literally days ago. I was crying, and by the time I got done, I remember having a standing ovation. Everyone stood up, they applauded me, and I just can't really, really remember much else, because of all the emotions that were taking place.

But sitting in the audience that day was a man by the name of Julio Marcial that works as the program director of the California Wellness Foundation, and they at the California Wellness Foundation provide funding to nonprofits that are doing work that they really believe in. Theirs is more about violence prevention, intervention about gangs, and things like that. So Julio Marcial I had the opportunity to meet up in San Francisco at one of the violence prevention conferences up in San Francisco about a year or two years—no, I wouldn't even say that much, maybe months prior to the Loyola conference. He and I remained in contact after our initial encounter through emails. So he was in the audience that day, and as I was on this panel just pouring out my heart, he was on his phone texting people like Scott Budnick, some of his other contacts, saying, "We need to get a job for Jimmy doing this. This is what he was meant to do. I've never experienced anything like that." Because it was all improvised. I didn't have time to prepare anything. I just went up there and I just spoke, and I guess I had like really effective

results. So about a month later, Scott Budnick finished wrapping—again, I believe it was Project X, and he texted me, he said, "Hey, you doing anything this weekend? I'd like to take you to Ojai, because I need time to relax, and if you're up for it, come join me." I'm like, "All right. Cool." So we went to Ojai, and he just out of nowhere asked me, "You know, InsideOUT Writers, they're looking for a case manager. How do you feel about working as a case manager at IOW?" I said, "Are you freakin' kidding me? I would love to. I mean, that would be a dream come true."

He said, "Okay. We're going to start. We're going to start looking into this." I'm like, "Okay." I left Ojai happy but not really thinking much of it, because I figured a lot of people say things, but they never really do it, so whatever. A month after that, I got a call from our then alumni director Eliza Bray, asking if I would like to come in for an interview for the case manager position. I told her, "Of course I would." She's like, "Okay. Well, send me your cover letter and your résumé, and then we'll set your interview date." I'm like, "Okay." So I did that, came in, went to the old office in Hollywood for the interview. It lasted about two hours, and a lot of it had to deal with my complete understanding that if I was given this position, that I had to be very mindful that my personal relationships with a lot of people would change. As an official employee of InsideOUT Writers, sometimes people would probably be leaning on me for me to do certain things, if I become staff and I had more authority to make things happen. They really needed me to understand that I wouldn't be able to do that, that I have to treat everyone fairly. So I was like, "Oh, okay." But, anyway, the entire interview lasted about two hours, and then that was it.

A week or two later, I got a call from our office, and it was executive director, Wendy Killian, sharing great news, that after they had been able to discuss it internally, that they and the IOW board would love to welcome me to IOW as the first alum turned staff. So they gave me an offer, and so I was overjoyed. I hung up the phone, I started crying, I started like calling people, texting people. Then on May 21st, 2012, I began my first day of the several days that have followed since then as a case manager here at IOW. So that leads us to today.

AOKI:

Wow.

WU:

Yeah. That was pretty much it.

AOKI:

Oh, wow. Thank you so much for all of that. There are moments where I wanted to—

WU:

To jump in?

AOKI:

—jump in, but, I mean, you did this really beautiful job of kind of flowing through all of your experiences. One thing that really strikes me is you've entered new environments so many times in your life, right, and the way that you express sort of entering those communities is really intriguing to me, and one aspect of that that I sort of want to return to is just going back to when you were at Folsom and then Avenal and you were talking about the Asians sticking together. And Asians are a minority, right, in U.S. prison?

WU:

Mm-hmm.

AOKI:

If you can talk about that a little bit and describe—I know this is really like going back many years in terms of the stories that you've just told.

WU:

That's all right.

AOKI:

I want to pick up on a couple of areas, so to begin there.

WU:

Sure. So just the transition from Folsom to Avenal?

AOKI:

Yeah, and also your relationship. You said that people are segregated by race, right, in these prisons?

WU:

Yes.

AOKI:

So what that process is like of entering, finding your people, and then that's your community, right?

01:41:18

WU:

Yeah. Well, I think that I can say that I never really made many friends in adult prison. They were my friends by default, as because we all have the same colored skin, right? So historically, I guess, just throughout time, prison has always been segregated by race, and that's because of the officers' doing. If anything, they would love to integrate races. But it's the inmates that prefer to stick amongst themselves. So when I first went to Juvenile Hall where everybody was integrated, it was hard for me to adapt to that, because I had grown up in a predominantly Asian community, so I didn't know much about different cultures. It was at Juvenile Hall that I started seeing how different people lived and the way they spoke with one another and just certain things, cultural differences. But when I went to adult prison, here I was barely getting to really accept everyone as just one and the same, as just those that were incarcerated, to now having to again go back to strictly nothing but Asians. So it was, I guess, a bit

confusing for me, even though I understood why. It was just like, well, I don't know why I can't just go and talk to other races or play sports with other races. Like, what's the harm in that? I know if something happens, like a prison racial riot breaks out, of course I know where I would have to stand. I would have to stand with the other Asians. But I don't understand why all these other rules are necessary.

So initially I was resistant to that, but it got pretty serious. My resistance got pretty serious to the point where my other Asian friends—I called them "friends," again, but by default—they would tell me, "Hey, Jimmy, you're going to need to stop that or we're going to have roll you off the yard," meaning that they would have to get rid of me, that I would probably get beat up and that I would have to be relocated or transferred somewhere else because that was just unacceptable behavior. In hindsight, they were looking out for me, because they didn't want any other race—let's say I don't understand what's going on with some of the Hispanics, and some of the Hispanics owe a lot of money to the black inmates. Well, if I'm seen a lot with the Hispanics a lot, then the blacks, let's say they are tired of being owed money that they are not being given, then they are probably going to have a riot or they're going to try go collect in whatever ways necessary. They didn't want me to get involved with that. I would just be somewhat of an innocent bystander that got caught up. So it was better for me to stick with my own people in our area to avoid the potential of that happening. So I understand it now, but at that time I didn't. I hope that that answers the question about that, right, about the race?

AOKI:

Mm-hmm.

WU:

So, now, the second part was my transition directly from Folsom to Avenal, was that it?

AOKI:

No, I was bringing that up as sort of a tie-in of entering new environments and having to find your place in these environments that are very structured in a certain way, right, and I'm curious about spending so much time and so many years of your life in this very structured environment where—like the very poignant stories you told about when you first came out, and just the perception and what you experienced on the outside was just so starkly different from being on the inside. To me it seemed like that race aspect of it must be pretty significant, right, but you have to sort of associate based on a structure that exists, and then once you're outside, you begin to develop where you fit in and trying to figure out for yourself what your community versus what's placed upon you. So I was just curious about that, your perspective.

01:45:15 01:47:04

WU:

Oh, okay. Yeah. I mean, one of the things I did start thinking about was how, especially in the—no, I can't say especially in the Asian culture, but in pretty much all different cultures, we tend to stick with our own, and it's really, I believe, detrimental and it hinders our ability to truly understand one another, and it prevents us from really embracing one another as just people, right, because we're all in somewhat of a sheltered life where we live in little bubbles. My parents and I were never physically affectionate, because it's just not as openly—I can't say acceptable. It's just not openly demonstrated than those, let's say, that are Hispanics or blacks or even white. They are always hugging and showing affection to one another. But for Asian parents, for the most part, they don't even really tell their kids they even love them. They hope that the kids know that they're busting their butts working and provided for their needs and trying to get them involved with the various activities and focusing on their education as a way for the kid to see that they do love them and care for them.

I never really hugged my parents until Juvenile Hall, and it was only because during our visits at the beginning and the end of every visit, we were given an opportunity to embrace our parents and for them to embrace us. For the first few weeks for our first few visits, my parents and I would just stand there awkwardly while everyone else was hugging. So it was like a month or two after my arrest and witnessing this physical displays of affection that we ended up hugging each other, and it felt good. It was new, but it felt good. And being able to say, "I love you" to one another. So that's when I started thinking, "You know what? We've been doing this wrong our entire lives, that there's richness. There's like so many different things to be learned from other cultures." So throughout my time away, I've always thought, like, how great it would be for me to finally come home and be able to make friends with all races. To be quite honest, I was tired of only hanging out with other Asians. It got boring. It was always the same things, and a lot of times I felt like, well, this is stupid. I hate that we have these prison politics, because I don't even care for this person much. But yet if something happens to him that I haven't backed him up and I get myself in trouble, that's so stupid. We should be able to embrace one another based on our own likes and dislikes. Why is it that just because he's Asian—but he's to me a complete idiot—I would have to, like, be involved with him.

So I was eager to finally come home and be able to make friends with anyone. Then I, unfortunately, got stuck—or not stuck—I took on a job working for an Asian freight forwarding company, so it was back to being around nothing but Asians, and this time it was my specific nationality, Taiwanese. So here they were, talking in our native tongue. I went, "Oh, my gosh, are you serious? Like this is not what I want out here. I don't want to go home and just spend four hours of my time in traffic only to be stuck in a Taiwanese company with my own people. I don't have time for anything else." So, needless to say, getting hired at IOW was extremely refreshing, really a breath of fresh air, because we have so many different cultures here at IOW, so many different races, so many different nationalities, personalities. So I'm definitely happy with that.

AOKI:

It seemed like there was so much more to your resistance to staying in that job that you had, and so this

makes absolute sense.

WU:

Yeah.

AOKI:

You've sort of mentioned the different aspects of the alumni program, and I know that the time is—are you okay with time?

WU:

We're fine.

AOKI:

Maybe you could talk a little bit more about each of those aspects. There's six different programs.

01:49:21 01:51:33 01:53:55 01:55:04 01:57:04 01:58:38

WU:

Absolutely, yeah. In 2009—coincidentally, it was the same year I came home—a group of our teachers, including Scott Budnick, got together with maybe a handful of formerly incarcerated students of IOWs, they had this retreat up in Big Bear, and started thinking, "We think it's time that there's an addition, an extension to InsideOUT Writers than just the writing program. Now that people are coming home, what are we going to do to help them out here? They can't go back in and take writing classes, so what can we do for them out here? What are some of the needs that they're going to have?"

So they started brainstorming together, creating this outline or this blueprint of what they envisioned the alumni program to be. They were able to obtain $250,000 as seed money for the alumni program, through one of the board of supervisors of L.A. County, and they hired two or three people to start

working on the alumni program. When I came home—again, this was during the alumni program's infancy—they didn't really have much to it at all. There was no foundation, no structure. Sister Janet and I walked into what was supposed to be the alumni classroom, and it was just like a storage room, boxes everywhere, a few computers lying against the wall, and that was it. So I was like, "Okay, well, this was great. I'm not coming back. There's nothing here for me." It wasn't until years later, after all these other things had already taken place in my life post-incarceration when I returned to IOW that I realized, "Wow, a lot has changed with the alumni program." They had then hired a new alumni program director, because I guess the first one didn't live up to expectations or didn't do as much as everyone initially hoped. What I now saw with the alumni program was really inspirational. You know that only about two years had passed, two, three years had passed since I visited IOW, and now they had all these new things. So they gave me a breakdown of what the alumni program now consisted of, and its foundation is case management services, where a case manager will meet with an alum and do the initial intake. That is when they will get to know each other. They'll be able to find out more about what the alum has gone through. For the record, we refer to formerly incarcerated students as an alum, because we consider them graduates of our writing program, since they are now released.

So the alum will then disclose what type of assistance that they're in need of, and the case manager will assist with short-term needs and long-term goals. Short-term needs is anything from housing referrals to substance abuse counseling referrals, to assistance with obtaining life documents, to helping provide transportation in the form of bus tokens or monthly tab cards to be used on the subway to anything in between, right? That's just short-term needs. Long-term goals is more along the lines of what are concrete steps or actions each alum wants to take to continue or to start taking necessary steps to ensure that they have better odds of living a productive and positive lifestyle. So, for the most part, it's about school placement and employment opportunities. School placement consists of filling out applications for FAFSA financial aid or whatever else is available. If they're in the foster care system, obviously they have more resources available and we would go fill out the necessary paperwork for that. Then we would help them with application and enrollment process for whatever college they select, or if they're still trying to get their GED or high school diploma, we'll assist with that process as well. For employment, we really can't do much, because we are our own nonprofit with limited funding, so we can't hire everybody like Homeboy Industries can, where they are able to hire and have people—their clients work on site. We can't do that, so we try to create the best employment opportunities available possible, and that includes creating essentially a résumé out of nothing, since many of our alums were kids and are sometimes still kids, so they don't have any real work experience. And we introduce them to the cover letter, because surprisingly—or I should say not surprisingly, they don't know what a cover letter is. Many of them have never even heard of one. So we introduce them to the concept of a cover letter and emphasize the importance of having one go with a résumé when submitting it to potential employers.

We help set up job search engine accounts, like Monster, Idealist, things like that, so that job openings will be emailed directly to them. We'll assist with opening an email account, help teach them how to use one properly. And if anything ever comes on to our desk, because we sometimes get job leads, we'll forward them on to the alums. Secondly comes our mentoring program, where we will do an assessment on each individual, each alum, and ask them what their interests and hobbies are, and then we will do our very best to go and find an adult role model in the community that matches, that has those same interests and hobbies so that the two of them can meet together. They'll be matched up, but they meet separately from the IOW office on their own time. It's a four-hour monthly minimum for a year and a half that we expect from both the mentee and the mentor. It's our hope that they will be able to explore their interests together and that our mentee will be able to find opportunities if that's something they're really passionate about.

So to illustrate, to offer an example, we've had alums that have been interested or intrigued by

filmmaking, so we've been able to match them up with those that are actually in film, whether it's for TV or on screen. We've matched them together, and it has led to certain gigs where our alums are featured on shows like Criminal Minds. So that's our mentoring program. We have a writing circle that takes place every Thursday between four-thirty and six o'clock. The writing circles are modeled after our writing program. It's just like the classes on the inside, only now they're out here. One difference, it's integrated genders. It's no longer girls on one side, boys on one side. Now we have boys and girls come together. Facilitators come to our office, they come in with their different teaching techniques, different life lesson plans, and it's an opportunity for young people to come together and know that they can talk about anything and everything, and just like the classes in there, everything is to be kept in confidence only to those that are here in this space at that time. It's not to be shared with anyone else. It offers an opportunity for them to engage in peer-to-peer support, because oftentimes they realize that sometimes, in comparison, incarceration was the easy part. Finding ways to succeed out here, that's the hard part. They talk to people out here that really don't understand anything that they're saying, because they never have the same experiences. Our alums are able to engage in these dialogues with one another and really understand, because they've all been in similar situations. So it's really helpful for them, and it's very therapeutic, so it's something that they all look forward to. It basically could be considered a staple of our alumni program.

We have life-skills workshops about once a month. We'll ask our alums certain topics that they're interested in learning about. It could be anything and everything. Then we'll find a professional to come in, the right professional to come in and facilitate that class. That's about once a month. We have community engagements because we believe in the importance of volunteering. Since IOW was essentially formed because of volunteers, so we want them to be able to understand the importance of volunteering, giving back whenever possible. We took from the community. It's time for us to give back to the community. So we will try to create as many speaking opportunities as possible for our alums, because we believe that the more their story is heard, the more opportunities can present itself, because it's all about networking. Oftentimes, in our case as formerly incarcerated individuals, it's not necessarily about what we know, it's about who we know that can lead to the right doors. In my case, I knew the right person at the right time. It was a chance encounter with the program director of the California Wellness Foundation, so that led to a series of other opportunities. We also want our young people, again, to give back to the community, so we try to think of different things that they've never done before, maybe spending a few hours at an animal shelter, or maybe spend a few hours at a children's hospital, at a homeless shelter. Maybe let's just go into impoverished communities and paint houses or do landscaping work for those that really would love to have something like that, and that can't afford it. So that's what we do with community engagements.

Lastly, our sixth and final component would be cultural fieldtrips, where we simply want them to be able to have a good time. So many of them, just like me, we lost our childhoods at a very, very young age, and so we want them to be able to go, relax, at least for a few hours, not a few days, but for them to go back to their home environments or whatever else that they are having difficulties with at home or in their own personal lives. So we ask them, again, "What is it that you want to do?" Sometimes they want to go to an amusement park because they haven't gone to one before, never been on a rollercoaster. So they're like, "Okay, well, let's go to Six Flags," which we have done. Some of them had never seen a horse, so we arranged for a horseback-riding day. And they were like, "Wow, I'd never seen a horse. Now I'm riding one." Others haven't been to a mountain, haven't seen snow, haven't gone snowboarding, so we spent three days up at Big Bear this past winter. So those are the things that we try to do for our alums, and obviously funding is currently given by private donors or from different foundations, like the California Wellness, but there's only so much that we can do. Funding is one of our most critical areas of need, because in order for anything, it takes money. So it takes a certain amount of money. So we do our very best with what we have. We definitely hope to expand as far and as wide as possible, but we need to really focus on what we are able to do in L.A. County first and foremost. It's

been four years. We have been able to build somewhat of a reputation for ourselves, but I know there's like a lot more that needs to be done. I, for one, am the only case manager right now. We definitely to bring in someone else, because I can't do it by myself. And I don't. Thank God for our alumni program director now, her name is Sherreeta White, who assists with a lot of the day-to-day case-by-case needs, but she shouldn't be doing those things either. She has her own set of tasks and responsibilities and duties. So, hopefully, one day we'll be able to be where we need to be as far as financially, so that we have enough people working on staff, and then we can continue to think of ways to expand further.

AOKI:

So the last part of you that I'm interested in and I think we should cover is your experience coming into this role as a case manager and what that's meant to you. You've mentioned before, too, understanding what the kids needs, because you've gone through a lot of that. I wonder if—I really don't want to rush this process, so my suggestion would be to have one more session to cover that, but if you would prefer to do that today, I'm open to that as well, so let me just put that out for you.

WU:

Well, I think you're going to be back regardless, because you're going to meet with some of—so we can save that for—

AOKI:

Is that good?

WU:

Yeah, that's good.

AOKI:

Okay. Because I want to spend some time on that, because that's key.

WU:

Yeah, so let's do that. Let's set aside time, maybe when it's with Jessie or Quiana , and then we can speak on that directly.

AOKI:

Sure. Okay. (End of May 8, 2014 interview)

Session 3 (May 23, 2014)

AOKI:

Okay. This is Kyoko Aoki, I'm back at the InsideOUT Writers office in Los Angeles, California, with Jimmy Wu, who's the caseworker that we've been speaking with. This is session three of our interview. Thanks again for meeting with me. Last time we started talking about your involvement with InsideOUT Writers as the case manager, and you were describing a little bit about the programming that you offer, or the organization offers, to alumnis. But I wanted to go back just a little bit in time and have you describe, if any, the programs that existed while you were still incarcerated in the adult programs, whether it be arts programming, education, anything like that.

00:02:02

WU:

Well, for the adult prisons I was sent to, there wasn't anything like what InsideOUT Writers offers in the juvenile system. The adult prison system is much different where there's a different type of a bureaucracy when it comes to allowing volunteers to go in and provide some type of programming for the inmates. So I know that every prison has different policies, so it may be easier to go into certain prisons than others, but when I was in the penitentiaries, there wasn't really anything available. I think I previously mentioned that there was a classification process for every inmate that goes into prison, so it is during that time when they went before the Classification Committee that they will decide if they want to pursue any type of educational program that's available at that specific prison or if they would like to just start working in whatever capacity, whether it's in culinary or just doing any type of janitorial job or maybe working as an assistant in an office as a clerk.

So, for me, I was just basically working the entire time I was in the adult facilities. I wasn't involved with any type of other additional programming. I did take a Vocational Office service class, but that was pretty much it. I did meet with people, or actually I wrote letters with people from UC Berkeley that were actually able to go into San Quentin State Prison and they were doing some type of program. I'm not really familiar with what it exactly it was they were doing. Maybe it was offering some type of mentorship or things like that. But there was nothing else other that I was exposed to at least. And I know that, fast-forward to present day, that has changed somewhat. Ironwood State Prison, for example, and CRC, California Rehabilitation Center, I think that's the right name of it, in Norco, California, I believe the two facilities offer a college program. I can't say with absolutely certainty, but I know that one of them definitely has a college program where inmates that are performing well, that are not getting themselves in trouble, are able to take college classes. And I know that InsideOUT Writers has definitely started to target the adult prisons, so we are expanding into Chino State Prison. We already have one class at Ironwood State Prison, and we hope to take it further.

AOKI:

What type of jobs did you have?

00:04:09

WU:

Well, I started off working in the office with the lieutenant, with the sergeant, with the commander of the yard that I was at in Tehachapi State Prison. I worked there for about a half a year. Then I decided I wanted to go and work in the commissary, in the canteen, as they call it, so I was helping package the merchandise that inmates were buying, to have it delivered to them in administrative segregation as well as helping stock the store and assist with the sale of commissary to the general population inmates.

From there, I transferred to Wasco State Prison and, again, was working in office environment throughout my time there, which lasted about two years. After that, I went to Folsom State Prison. Again, it was more or less office work that I was doing there. I did work briefly for about two months in the kitchen, assisting with trash, and it was a horrible job. I had to wake up at three-thirty in the morning. That was my shift to go to start working. After breakfast, my job would be to make sure that the trash was being properly handled. So, obviously, I didn't find that enjoyable and was able to find a different job working in receiving-release, where we processed incoming and outgoing inmates. Then from Folsom, I went to Avenal State Prison, and for the rest of my time in prison, I worked as what they call a porter, which is just another term or name for janitor. So I was sweeping and mopping the floor of our building, helping with the distribution and handling of trash. So that was pretty much what I did throughout the remainder of my time in prison.

AOKI:

How much of the day did you spend working in these various—

WU:

It was different. For office jobs, it was like a regular job, eight hours at a time with a half-hour lunch break. And for the janitorial job, it was maybe thirty minutes a day, because there wasn't much that needed to be done. So I had a lot of spare time to myself, you know, working as a janitor. But the more, I guess, sophisticated job I had was, obviously, in an office setting, working for the associate warden at some points, working for the lieutenants and sergeants at other points.

AOKI:

So what did you do in the extra time that you had?

WU:

I spent a lot of time reading, actually. I was able to be sent books and other reading material, magazines, things of that nature. So my mentor and writing teacher, Mark Salzman, he made a point to always send me summer reading material. I used to clown with him, like, "Just because it's summer break for you guys out there, doesn't mean that I'm on vacation in here. It could be more than just the summer." But it was enjoyable. I had a lot of people send me books, and that's pretty much how I spent a lot of my time, reading and writing. Then it wasn't just that, though. I did indulge in just watching TV to pass time or going out to hang out with other inmates on the prison yard to work out, to play basketball. So, yeah.

AOKI:

And did you continue to write just for yourself, or were you writing letters to folks who were outside?

WU:

Initially, it was always just for myself. That was pretty much the extent of my writing. Later on, about a year and a half prior to my release, I actually got in touch with one of the main people that had made such a big impact on my life, Sister Janet Harris, the founder of InsideOUT Writers. I think it was my mom that somehow was able to track her down, locate her. She sent me Sister Janet's mailing address, so I wrote her a letter. She wrote back, and then she asked that I write some pieces for the Washington Post, because she had knew one of the producers for an online site called On Faith that is through the Washington Post. She said, "I want you to write something about what you're experiencing right now at this very moment in prison. What are your thoughts?" So I ended up writing with a specific topic, you know, a purpose, and, fortunately, it was good enough to get published. So that was when I started writing for others, really, not for myself anymore.

AOKI:

So you were just seeking opportunities through people who you knew on the outside to share your stories with?

WU:

Absolutely, absolutely. For being taught that we had a voice that needed to be heard, stories that need to be shared, but not having a direct way to get it out there, that was something that was always on the back of my mind. Like, why are we being taught this, why are people encouraging us to write, but where are we going to send our material anyway? So it definitely came back full circle for me later on. I can't say the same for everyone else that has been exposed to our creative writing classes through IOW, because we also—we encourage our students to write just to vent their frustrations, just to get everything that they're going through out of their system. By the end of the day, I know that many of them, they really do hope that they can become published one day, because there's nothing better than seeing your name in print on something that you worked so diligently and hard on to get published. So I was really fortunate to have that happen to me, and I can only hope that one day there will be substantial opportunities for every one of our students. For the time being, I know at IOW we try to give them that satisfaction because we encourage it. So we do have our own publications internally where we gather all of our students' writings and then we publish it ourselves. So that brings them a lot of joy. Every time we are able to show them a new copy of our In Depth—that's what it's called—and they see their own writings inside, they're so proud that it was selected to be published.

AOKI:

That's great. Do you still have some of the writing that you produced while you were on the inside?

WU:

I do. I would have to definitely have to dig through the cobwebs to go to get them, but I definitely do have copies of them available. They were something that I always—every one of my piece I wrote was something that really held value and meaning to me, so I made a point to always keep a copy, and I do have them stashed away in an envelope somewhere.

AOKI:

So I guess related to that, what was the transition like in preparing—like you knew that you were going to get out at a certain point, right?

WU:

Mm-hmm.

AOKI:

So what did the prison do, if anything, to sort of transition, helping—

WU:

Nothing.

AOKI:

Nothing.

00:12:08 00:13:29

WU:

Nothing. I mean, they have what they call reentry classes, and they do give inmates an option of whether or not they want to participate in these reentry workshops, where they will give you minimal information about what you can expect or what resources are available once you are released, right? But like I said, it's extremely minimal, and, to me, it made no sense. I think the classes are about three months long, so, for me, I felt like what's the point of me going to this workshop where it took me so long to adapt to this new world that was prison, three-month workshop isn't going to do nothing for me as far as really getting me ready and prepared for my release from prison into this new world. So I never signed up for it, and I know later on after I came home, other inmates that came home, they also told me that when they did take the workshops, it really didn't help them at all, because there is no way for us to realistically expect what we're going to encounter until we are released, because it's going to be different for everyone. Even though you tell people, "Okay, this is where you go. You go to the DMV to get your I.D. This is the process," well, just going to the DMV itself can be problematic for some people. They don't know how to get to the DMV. They don't have the concept of making appointments in advance. They don't know what they're supposed to bring with them, like we don't know.

So I, myself, I didn't take that opportunity. I decided not to take those classes. But that's pretty much the extent of it, unfortunately. That's why at some point it will be extremely helpful to state prisons, in particular in California, to allow those that have been formerly incarcerated and have been through the release process to go back in, because we are the ones that can really help get into the inmates' heads, like, "This is what you can expect. We went through this. It's going to be a huge shock, cultural shock, everything shock, because everything is going to be so new to you." And we want them to understand that it takes a certain amount of time for you to just basically walk down the street without being overcome with all these overwhelming emotions, because there's going to be sensory overload. You know that there's going to be a huge change in how you wake up in the mornings, and just to gather enough courage to walk outside your door. These are things they don't teach us. They just give us the bare essentials, like, "This is what you do when you get out. You need your I.D. You need to get a birth certificate to get your I.D." Okay, well, all of that is meaningless when we don't even know how emotionally draining it's going to be for us to just get there in the first place.

So, again, at some point I would hope that maybe the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation will allow those of us who have been formerly incarcerated in their own prisons to return. Right now it's just nearly impossible. We have to jump through so many hoops, so many hurdles, just with the hope that at some point the warden of each prison will give us an opportunity to go back.

AOKI:

You came back before realignment, right, in California? So they'd been working on ways to reduce the prison population in California.

WU:

Yeah.

AOKI:

Because I know that they're attempting to implement some changes in terms of the reentry process, but I think your time was a little bit before that.

WU:

It was actually during.

AOKI:

During?

00:14:57 00:16:41

WU:

During, yeah. I was caught in the middle of that where there was overcrowding issue that California was facing, and they were starting to send a lot of people there. They were doing mass transfers on inmates out of state to out-of-state private prisons. I was still incarcerated at that time, and I actually volunteered to be transferred out of state. I wanted to go to Arizona, because I was at Folsom State Prison at that time, and since my family lives in Los Angeles, and it took them seven hours to drive up to see me, I figured, "Well, what's the difference if you have to take seven hours to drive to Arizona, it's the same thing."

For me, I felt like I needed a change. I heard about all these great things that the private facilities were offering, even when it just came down to the food, that it was a lot better. I wanted to go and test it out, because daily life in prison becomes extremely stagnant and repetitive, so it gets boring very quickly. So I welcomed a new change. I wanted to go and experience this. So this is when Schwarzenegger was still governor of California, and I remember that I was already on my way, not literally on my way physically, but my name was already being put through the system to get permission to send me out of

state, and it was in the process already when Schwarzenegger was threatened to get sued by the California Correctional Peace Officers Association, the CCPOA, where they're saying, "You cannot send inmates into private facilities out of state because you're taking away our money." And that's what it came down to, right, because they wanted overcrowding in our prisons, because if there's overcrowding, there's probably—and this is all going to be speculation. This is just our own thoughts. There's nothing factually based on. But we felt that, "Okay, you want us to be confined in a very hostile, overcrowded environment, because that may lead to us getting into fights with one another, which may lead to you having to apply force to stop it, which will cause you to get more money for that. And then on top of that, because of the paperwork that's going to be involved, then guess what? You get to have overtime pay as well. So why would you want us to leave? Because now other agencies, private institutions are getting the money that you feel is deservingly yours." Because that's what we've become, we've become part of the money-making process.

So despite the inhumane conditions, overcrowding situation was ridiculous, where a cubicle, as we called them, I guess, in an open-dorm setting, because how it is, is like a large building, but then we have these cubicles inside the building on two different tiers, the bottom tier and the top tier. So cubicles that were originally designed for six to eight people were now holding at least sixteen, right? Some people were being double bunked, triple bunked in some cases. So, of course, you want people to be very uncomfortable and agitated at all times so that it can lead to a lot of problems. So that's how we gauged it. That's how we felt. That's why we felt the CCPOA was telling Schwarzenegger he can't do that. Schwarzenegger was trying to do us a favor, like, "You guys shouldn't live like this. If we need to send you out of state because we simply don't have the budget to build more prisons in California, then we need to do this to relieve some of that." But, yeah, it never happened, so, unfortunately, I was unable to go to Arizona. So that really killed my hopes and my chance of leaving. But like you mentioned in your question, yes, there is a lot of issues that have now been thrown out into the public spotlight, and there are certain measures being taken as far as trying to reduce overcrowding population and then also with focus on actual rehabilitation and reentry services to inmates prior to release. So I can't really speak on that much because I'm out here now. I've been out here about five years, so I don't really know what's available inside. All I can, say, speak on is what I witnessed out here, as a citizen.

AOKI:

So the prison wasn't offering any services, and so how did you begin to kind—I don't know if prepare yourself is the right word. But I thought about this when you were talking about the fact that you still have, like, a lot of your writing from prison. So just, I don't know, I'm just curious about how you started to orient yourself in terms of leaving and going into this new place.

WU:

I didn't. I didn't. I couldn't. Because everything—I already knew that when I came home, things were going to be a lot different. I didn't know what to expect. I actually thought that it was going to be nothing but tremendous joy, which there was, but at the same time there was also a lot of irrational fear. I mean, to me it was rational, but looking back in retrospect, it was irrational, where, like I shared

earlier, while my girlfriend picked me up, thinking that I was going to get hit by a car that was at a gas station getting gas pumped into it. These were some of the things I could never have imagined would happened to me. So there was really no preparation on my end. I just thought that I had these goals that I wanted to accomplish once I got out, but that was pretty much it. Everything was more or less just going with the flow, taking it as it came, and then trying to really wrap my mind around how I was feeling and how I was going to find a solution to whatever problem came my way. It was basically spontaneous. There was nothing that I was able to do to really prepare myself, because it goes back to say that I feel like even with whatever reentry classes are being provided to inmates, they're never really going to know how they're going to be feeling or what they're going to be doing until they come home.

AOKI:

Especially for folks who don't have family or a community that supports them and will take them in and sort of shape that.

WU:

Right. Exactly. In my case, this is speaking on someone that was away for over a decade, if you're talking to someone that's only expected to be away for about six months, that response is going to be much different, because not much time is going to pass before they come back home. So because I was away for thirteen and a half years, I didn't know what to expect. I was already out of touch with everything that was going on in the free world. All I had was my family members keeping me up to date on what was taking place in their personal lives, and what I saw of the world out here was what I saw on TV. That was pretty much it.

AOKI:

There's been extraordinary changes in the outside world in the last fifteen years, right?

WU:

Of course.

AOKI:

I mean, for example, computers, Internet, all of that.

WU:

Right, cell phones. There were no cell phones back then. They had this Zack Morris from Saved By The Bell, the cell phone, the big bricks, the large bricks. The iPhone, when we saw the commercial for them, we were like, "Oh, my god, is this real? Are they really able to do this now?" Yeah, technology has definitely become quite advanced throughout the years for sure.

AOKI:

You had mentioned, I think it was either in middle or high school, you had taken some typing classes.

WU:

In high school, yes.

AOKI:

So then once you were out, I don't know, can you just describe what it was like to come back to this world that seemed very different technologically?

00:23:28

WU:

Well, it was surreal, for sure. When I went into the Walmart for the first time on the day of my release, just the TVs themselves were quite, quite different. I grew up watching the old TVs with the bubble backs, and they were really heavy and large. Now they have plasma flat screen LCD, which is all these

vibrant colors, and they were so thin that it was quite shocking that so much—again, like that technology had advanced so much. So the Internet was something that I was briefly, briefly exposed to while I was still at Central Juvenile Hall. It was when Internet was barely starting to be released to the public. I say "released" because who knows how long it's been around. So I was briefly introduced to it through the computer lab that was at Central Juvenile Hall. But then being able to come home and actually have full access to the Internet and to see how amazing it was for us to be able to obtain whatever information we needed with just a few clicks of a keyboard, it was definitely shocking, because gone were the days that we had to actually go and do hands-on research to get information. Going to the library, I mean, these libraries are empty now, for the most part. People are barely checking out any type of books. What's the point of checking out a book and actually having to read it when we could just look at it online? So that definitely was really different.

And then the technology in cars, that has been extremely advanced throughout the years. You know, the navigation systems, the push-to-start buttons, the remote start engine things, this is all like the future that we envisioned back in the eighties and nineties. It was really here. So I'm curious to see what's going to happen in the next twenty, thirty years from now.

AOKI:

So that's an interesting segue, so we can start talking a little bit more in detail about your role here at IOW. So when you were first hired, this was like your first office job, is that correct?

WU:

No.

AOKI:

No. Oh, I guess you were doing clerical work, okay.

WU:

I actually worked as a freight forwarder, right, so I was already in an office.

AOKI:

Okay. So that was when you were first transitioning into using the technology that we have today and the sort of structured life in an office.

WU:

Right.

AOKI:

So can you—I don't know if you have anything to say about that, but what that feels like to have that sort of structure and work as the main part of your day, I guess.

00:26:06

WU:

Well, I think it was normal, because, again, I did have the opportunity to work in office environments, even if it was in prison where there was structure. There was a hierarchy, I mean, and it was definitely enforced, because we were inmates working with civilians that came in to work inside the prison. So I already understood some of the office etiquette and the politics, because I had worked several years inside office environments. So transitioning from a locked-up, I mean from incarcerated, like a prison institution to a job in a company out in the free world, there wasn't much of a difference at all. The only difference there was, was that I had to keep my past secret from my coworkers, from my colleagues, because I felt that if I shared my past with them, it would somehow make me inferior to them. I think I already mentioned that the only person I did really open up to about that was my general manager at that job, who at first, like I said, seemed to be really understanding, but then I think really took that and used that to his advantage to keep me working at minimal pay with the crazy hours I have without any type of bonuses or promotions.

But from that job to InsideOUT Writers was definitely a breath of fresh air, because now my path was something I could embrace, and it turned into one of my strengths. It was no longer something that I had to be ashamed about.

AOKI:

So tell me about your first days here, or not here physically because you were in a different location, but what was it like the first few weeks that you started working here?

WU:

It was great. It was great. To be able to know that every single one of my colleagues supported me and believed in me, I had nothing to hide from them, it was amazing the amount of patience my direct supervisor, who is no longer here with us, Liza Bray, who was our former program director, the patience she displayed in training me and teaching me, I mean, those are things I'm never going to forget. I really felt valued that every day I came, people were happy to see me, and I was happy to be here. It was like that old saying that if you find a job you love, you're never going to work another day in your life. That's how I felt when I first started. I can honestly say that two years later I still feel that way.

AOKI:

You're very lucky.

WU:

Yes, I am. I am very fortunate.

AOKI:

Wow. Okay. So can you describe what your tasks were at the beginning and then sort of progressing to today, like how that's changed, if—

WU:

Well, the first two weeks was just intensive training, understanding how to create intake folders for the alums, understanding how to get the alum that I would be meeting with to open up during the intake process, being introduced to all of our community partners, how to go and present IOW effectively, how to do the pitch in both the thirty-second version and then the lengthier five-minute version. These are all things I was being trained to do. Just being introduced to everybody, both alums, board members, community partners of IOW, anyone that was associated with IOW, that was how I spent the first month or two of my time at InsideOUT Writers. And obviously just trying to do whatever paperwork I was able to, making several mistakes along the way, and then having to realize, "Okay, this is how I messed up, and then how do I prevent this from happening again?" Those were just like anyone else at any new job. Fast-forward to present day two years later, that is not a problem at all anymore. None of those things are a problem. Now we have different problems we are focused on, as far as how do we get more people in the community to partner up with IOW to provide better resources for our alums, to learn about the best practices, what works, what doesn't work. So it's definitely been a great learning experience for me personally, just being able to work here and understanding when I first came in, having this notion that I was going to come and save the world and change people lives. That's not my job. My job is to provide as much assistance as possible to those that are ready. Because at the end of the day, we aren't here to save anybody's life. We're here to lend them a hand in helping them save their own lives. I mean, it's definitely changed a lot for me, as far as the perspective I have with the work that I do.

AOKI:

Wow. That's a very important distinction.

00:30:58 00:32:49

WU:

Yeah, definitely. I think that's something that a lot of people that get into social work—that's a transition that they will ultimately go through themselves and the conclusion they'll draw on their own as well. Everyone wants to help. Even with our own volunteers at IOW, they come in thinking, "Yes, I'm going to save someone's life." But, no, you're not. You're not going to save their life. You're going to help them save their lives just by providing the best advice and guidance possible. But at the end of the day, no matter how much advice you give them, it's up to them whether or not they'll really listen to your advice and apply it. But you can't do more than that. At first for me, like when I first started, seeing the high levels of success that we had with our alums that joined our program after I got hired, just to see how they were progressing, it was like, "Yes, I am saving their lives." It continued to enable me to think that's what my job was, but it wasn't until I started seeing a lot of them fall back and they recidivated or started going back into former lifestyles. It was something I had to come to terms with. At first I felt like I wasn't doing my job right. There's something wrong. Maybe this isn't my calling. Maybe I'm not built for this. And I felt a lot of heartache over it, and I would just like wrap my mind over what went wrong. Like, I could have done this, I should have done that, what went wrong? Why didn't this person succeed?

It was after several situations like that where I finally realized, after talking to some of the people that I have now in my life that have been doing this a lot longer, they're like, "Jimmy, you're not doing

anything wrong." They would ask me, "Are you doing this for them? Are you doing that for them?" And as long as I said yes to all of them, they're like, "You're not doing anything wrong. They're just not ready." And that's when I was like, "Oh, okay." So it's always case by case. You can't come in to this and think everyone is going to be reacting the same way to what we're offering them. That's not real. But, unfortunately, a lot of people do come in with those expectations, and it does lead to a lot of burnout because they feel emotionally drained, like I'm not fit for this. But you have to understand your population, and so I do now. Instead of coming in based off of my own perspectives and my perception of what this person and I are going through, I take a moment to really think about what this individual is going through and try to see from their lives, from understanding their background, like what kind of community, what kind of home are they going to? Those are things I never took into account, because I always thought, hey, maybe they had places to go home to, like I had my mom's house to go home to a safe environment. And I really started to look at how that was not the case for most of them, that they were here with us, and, yes, we would see the best of them while they were with us, but the moment they left our office, everything went out the window with them because they had to go back to their abusive families or this gang-infested community where going to bed at night with helicopters flying overhead and gunshots was the norm. These are all things that people really don't think about.

So, like I said, it's just been a huge wakeup call for me, and it makes me realize I can only do so much for every single person. I don't really overanalyze the situations and come down hard on myself anymore, because I know that it's not—I'm doing the best that I can and that's all that every single one of us can do, do the best we can at all times.

AOKI:

So what does that process look like when you first meet one of the alumnis and you start to get to know them? Is there an intake, and can you describe that process a little bit?

00:34:59 00:36:36

WU:

Absolutely. So when the alum first comes in, usually we would have already spoken over the phone, because what we do is we schedule appointments and we figure out what day and time works best for both us here at IOW and also for the alum. If they're a minor, obviously we need their parents to come with them, or we prefer for them to, so that the parents can understand what it is that we do here, and then also sign some paperwork. So if it's during the initial meeting in person, what I always do is I open up about myself. I tell them, "Before I even ask you any questions, I just want to share a little bit about myself." So I share with them what I went through as a young person, of my incarceration history. Initially when the alum comes, a lot of them are sometimes apprehensive and they're, like, really guarded. But the moment I start opening up about myself, that's when all of their walls start disappearing, and they're like, "Oh, wow. So this is someone that actually went through what I've gone through, if not more." And that is what I learned through Mark way back in 1996 in the writing classes when he first met us, how he just didn't ask us anything, he just shared a lot of intimate moments and details of his own life. And that's how I learned to establish trust, because in order for us to really reach out and touch the heart of others, we need to act and speak out from our own heart, right? So that's what

I try to do, and that's really helpful.

Of course, it's not always 100 percent going to be that way because there are some individuals that even are really well guarded, and so regardless of what I'm sharing with them, they're like, "Oh, okay." But then it's still like pulling teeth trying to extract information from them. But for the most part, it really does put them at ease when I share my history, and then when we go into the questions, then they're a lot more comfortable speaking openly. But, again, that's case by case. We're talking about the ones that are over eighteen. And then the minors, sometimes the minors, they don't want to say too much in front of their family, in front of their parents, and we do ask them a few sensitive questions, as far as what they were incarcerated for. Their medical history is something that we also ask. We definitely make sure that they understand that everything is kept extremely confidential. As the case manager, if they are on my caseload, I tell them that everything they share with me stays with me. It doesn't leave this office. The door is always closed when we're having our discussions. And I tell them that, "Whatever you want to share with anyone else is your business, but it's never going to come from me. If there's a particular issue that you're going through that I can't help you with, I do have to go to my direct supervisor, or my program director Sherreeta White to ask, to seek her advice and expertise about what is the best way to provide a solution to this problem." If she can't help, then we do have to go to our executive director, but that's the extent of it. No one else in the office, in our classroom will ever know anything about them. Yeah, so that's pretty much how our intake process works.

After that, after the folder or file has been created for them, we also outline what's going to be taking place in their action plan, what their needs are, what their goals are, how we are going to hold each other accountable, how the case manager is going to be held accountable to fulfill his end of the duties to help acquire certain needs or fulfill certain goals, but then the alum also acknowledges that, "Look, I need to do this part." Because we always tell them very clearly, "We're not going to do everything for you. We can't. That defeats the purpose. We want you to learn as many essential and critical skills as you possibly can so that you are able to fully utilize them in your own life so that you can spread your wings and fly, once you're ready. But at the same time, we are never going to say, 'Okay, we're done with you. Goodbye.' You are part of this and you are always going to be part of this. What we are talking about is the three to six months we really want to focus on helping develop essential life lessons, skills that you will need, and then once you are working, once you are in school, just come back and say hello every now and then when you're able to. If we have any special events, you're going to be welcome to them. We want you to come around." So it makes them understand InsideOUT Writers is truly different from other programs, because once they are done, they are done. Every person that comes in, they have a certain time frame, they have to move on to the next individual at some point. But with us, no, we'll always keep your case file on hand. If we need to reopen it like five years down the line because you need assistance with something else, that's not going to be a problem. We're going to be here to do it. So it really makes them understand that this place is different. And I always emphasize that although it's called an alumni program, you're coming to the alumni family. So we really try to embrace them fully and provide that sense of family here.

AOKI:

That's very nice. So you had mentioned, I think, during our last meeting that when you were interviewing for this position, several other people who were interviewing you, and maybe the director of the board, had made comment about your role in this position and how you may be getting different kinds of requests and that type of thing. Can you speak a little bit more about that aspect now that you

are in this position and whether your relationship with your—do you call them alumni or do you—I mean, you probably call them—

WU:

The other people I work with?

AOKI:

Yes. Or the youth I guess?

WU:

Yeah, alumni.

AOKI:

I don't know, any challenges that you'd face around that issue.

00:40:28 00:41:57 laughs

WU:

Oh, constantly, constantly. It's been nonstop since the day I got hired, and it will continue to be this way. But it's like anyone that will be put in a situation like mine, as far as with the work, people trust me because they have a personal relationship with me. Sometimes they'll be frustrated that certain things aren't going a certain way, as far as with the organization. I can tell them, "Well, what are you talking to me about this for? I can help provide a bit of clarity about why there may be certain resistance to what you're proposing or whatever and why IOW as an organization may not think this is going to be a good idea, but you need to talk to other people about this."

I would refer them over to our alumni program director if it was something that was relative or it has something to do with our alumni program. I would direct them to Leslie Poston if it was something that

was taught, if they're talking about the classes inside our facilities. If it was just about like, let's say, partnering with other organizations or anything that had to deal with money, I would refer them over to our executive director. I would be like, "You can talk to me about his. You can vent your frustrations. I can provide whatever clarity to the best of my ability, but I can't go and tell you that this is going to happen or that's not going to happen, because it's above my pay grade. I'm not in a position to do that. If it's something about our resources with the alumni program, then that's something you can directly ask me." It's hard because we have, again, the sense of family or the family environment that we have here that we've embraced, it's like any other family, right? There's could be a lot of dysfunction. There could be great times. There could be really horrible times, where it's like family members are bickering with one another. Oftentimes I found myself caught right in between, where a certain family member—and I'm just saying that to make it easier. Instead of having of having to throw out board members or alumni or whoever, I'm saying that certain family members may not see eye-to-with other family members.

They're comfortable with me, so I hear things from both ends, and I'm like, "Okay, well, I think maybe, just like with 90 percent of any problems, maybe there's a lack of communication, right? We have to be able to communicate effectively, let go of our egos, let go of our pride, and really just have a heart-to-heart, and then we'll realize that we're actually talking about the same thing but just coming from different angles, different perspectives." So a lot of people have hard time with that, unfortunately. So I can say, as far as all the staff here at IOW, I probably have a more meaningful—I won't say "meaningful." Wrong word. I have a deeper relationship. I have more insight when it comes to how the alums may regard us as staff. So during staff meetings, I will share with my colleagues what I've experienced, if there's a certain situation, how like what the staff's perspective is regarding that situation, and I will—excuse me. I will share with the alum what the staff perspective is and then with the staff I will show them what the alum is, because I'm kind of sort of the hybrid. I'm an alum and I'm also staff. So it's been kind of tricky. My teammates, they really do tell me every now and then that they can't imagine how I do it, where I'm getting pulled in so many different directions. But I'm not getting myself caught up in the cobwebs of politics or anything like that, because I always have to be mindful of that. Certain things I say to anyone can come back, and they can really bite me in the ass, so I really don't want there to be anything that I say that really compromises my position here within the organization. So it's going to be an ongoing thing. There's no avoiding it. Everyone knows that, and I hear from everybody, like, "Damn, you're right there in the middle." I tell them, like, "Yeah, I am, and you guys aren't making it any easier for me."

And they're like, "Yeah, we know. We're sorry. But everyone loves you." I'm like, "Well, yeah, I love everyone back, but I just wish everyone else loved each other."

AOKI:

You're keeping all the balls in the air, yeah.

WU:

Exactly. So it's really interesting. For most of the other people that are part of this organization, it's more like cut and dried, black and white, like this is where we are, that's all. But for me, really there are a lot of gray areas. So I'm just doing everything to the best of my ability and hoping that I don't get myself caught up in anything needlessly or unnecessarily.

AOKI:

And do you go into the Juvenile Halls?

00:46:10

WU:

Yes, we do. We go into the Juvenile Halls to recruit for our alumni program. A lot of our students have heard of the alumni program, so we think it's more meaningful and personal if we, the ones that are working for the alumni program, actually go in and present ourselves to them and say, "Hey, so this is what we're going to do," and we give them in-depth details about how exactly we're going to help them. And that makes them excited, like, "I'm in here, I'm a part of this writing program, but that's not going to be the end of it. When I get out, these people are already here coming to see me telling me this is how they're going to help me." So it's, for me, really extremely surreal at times, because I was a resident of those detention facilities at some point and now I'm going in as a volunteer, so the first few times I went it, it was actually quite nerve-wracking, too, because I was like, "Well, this feels wrong." Most people want to just, like, get away and just keep going further and further away, but here I am, I'm going back. But it's been a great experience just to be able to go in and see some of the former staff members that were there when I was incarcerated, and then to see the joy in their face, like, "Oh, my god, you actually made it," because it's like so few success stories. So it really helps brighten their day when I see them, when they see me.

So I do now enjoy going back and just to provide just that little bit of hope to young people, to let them like, "You know, you guys really can't let this weigh you down too much, because if someone like me, if someone like the people that I know that have served over twenty years, have been able to make it out there and succeed, you guys can do it as well." They really need to hear that.

AOKI:

So I just see these schedules up behind you. So are those all the centers that you guys go into, or there are more?

WU:

Actually, yes. We have Central Juvenile Hall, we have Barry J. Nidorf and Sylmar. We have Los Padrinos. The alumni writing circles are what take place and the life skills workshops are what take place in our office. So as you can see on the calendars, it's every Thursday. Every Thursday we have something going on. We only have a few spots left for the remainder of the year, so you can see that there are a lot of people that definitely want to sign up and come in and facilitate one of the classes that we have here. So, yeah.

AOKI:

That's great. So those are the three centers. Then how often do you go in to do these presentations or—

WU:

Well, I usually go into Central Juvenile Hall. That is one of the facilities that we really target and focus on because of the high turnover rate at Central Juvenile Hall. Barry J. Nidorf is where they have what's called a compound where those that are juveniles being tried as adults get sent to, right? So we don't really target them for the alumni program because we have to look at things realistically. It might be quite some time for them to join us. So because we have acknowledged that, in the next month or two, we are actually going to be testing out a pilot project where we are able to get the probation clearance for a select few number of formerly incarcerated individuals to go into Barry J. Nidorf, into the compound, to not talk about the alumni program, but to help prepare them for prison, because we want to go in with a realistic approach. We're not going to go in with that "scared straight" crap that a lot of people do. That's not going to be helpful. We want them to go in, just like I shared throughout these interviews, what you are going to really be going through once you go to prison, about the Classification Committees, about the transferring, about the prison politics, because these are things that are really going to save their lives. And I mean that literally, where if they don't go in with the right mentality, the right attitude, they can be killed, because they are going into a very hostile environment. They're going to prison. So that's what we're going to be doing. But for the most part, I go to Central Juvenile Hall to throw out our alumni program, because those kids at Central Juvenile Hall are coming home really soon. At the very most, they may be gone for a year, but some are being directly released from that facility, some are going into probation camps or placement homes for only three to six months. So that's where we really want to target—excuse me, not "target." But that's where we really want to go and focus on the alumni program, because this is what they are going to be coming home to once they get out.

AOKI:

That makes a lot of sense. So that's a fascinating project that you are starting.

WU:

Yeah.

AOKI:

Are you going to be one of them?

WU:

I am going to be one of them. I am going to be one of them. I'm going to be helping facilitate there, yes.

AOKI:

Wow. That's really amazing. When does that start?

WU:

In the next month or two. We're just finalizing some of the details, but we've already been given the go-ahead from probation It's already been cleared. So now we're just really developing our lesson plan and what that's going to look like.

AOKI:

Is there a name for that?

WU:

No, not yet.

AOKI:

Still—

WU:

Still in the works, yeah.

AOKI:

Wow. So that sort of touches on just—I mean, it sounds like you're constantly thinking of new ways to approach this situation that you're in and obviously thinking of really great new programs. What's next for you? Are there other things?

WU:

For me personally?

AOKI:

Yeah.

WU:

Or for the organization?

AOKI:

For you personally.

WU:

Well, for me personally, I am actually starting my college education finally.

AOKI:

Oh, wow.

WU:

So I recently start my very first class. I decided to take just one class because I wanted to get my feet wet. I really wanted to see how much I can realistically do and accomplish working full-time. It was also, again, I'm extremely privileged. Not one day goes by without me realizing how fortunate I am to be able to work at such an amazing organization, because my colleagues here, they all support and believe in me, I mean in all ways imaginable, and they really want me—they were really the ones that motivated me to go back to college. They are supporting me in whatever ways possible so that even if I'm away from the office because of the class schedule, I'm not going to have to take my own time off. No pay is going to be deducted for me to be away, so they're able to support me in that regard. If I need to use the office, like the computer or anything, for anything school related to print my papers out, they don't have a problem with that. So I was really lucky, you know.

AOKI:

Wow. That's great.

00:52:09 00:54:18

WU:

So I'm in the middle of my first class, it will end June 2nd, and then for the fall semester, I think I'm going to probably attempt two classes to see how that goes. I'm never going to be a full-time student. I already know that. Without a doubt, that's going to be far too much, to be able to take three, four classes at a time. But if I'm able to take maybe two and maybe, maybe attempt to take three, then that's going to be it.

My personal goal academically is to eventually be able to say that I have a master's in social work. So that is my long-term goal. I don't know how long that's going to take. It might be ten years from now before that happens, but I figure, I'm already thirty-four years old. I'm going in as a first-year college student. Who cares if it takes me ten, fifteen years, as long as it happens eventually. The hope that many of my colleagues have expressed to me is that I maybe at some point, when I'm really qualified in all ways, that maybe I can become one of the directors here, and they really envision InsideOUT Writers to really be run solely by formerly incarcerated people, because that's the model that we're trying to create, that formerly incarcerated people have untapped potential. They have so many abilities to really be successful, and if we are trying to be our best to influence and persuade people to become more formerly incarcerated-friendly employers, then we definitely need to do it ourselves, which is why they hired me, as the prototype, and why we have, in turn, decided to hire some of our alums as interns and actually pay them. So that's what we're trying to do, and I think it's just a matter of time before people start really getting over the stigmas that are attached to our population. Because the Anti-Recidivism Coalition, I don't know if you've heard of them, but, like, they are something that really—they are a separate organization. I really try to embrace that as well. They already have their staff and, just like us at IOW, they have formerly incarcerated people on their payroll. Homeboy Industries is a prime example of where they hire everybody, but like I think I mentioned earlier that there's very little room for professional growth there, because they have such a large population that they're reaching out to and serving.

So we just definitely need more, because without a job, people aren't going to succeed. That's it. And recidivism, 70 percent, okay, let's stop focusing on building more and more prisons that are causing more and more of a budget deficit in California. Let's really start thinking about how we're going to help people when they come out. That's what the focus has to be on.

AOKI:

Right. Fabulous. Well, congratulations on going back to school.

WU:

Thank you. Thank you. I'm really excited. I'm enjoying it.

AOKI:

What's the class you're taking now?

WU:

It's just an English class, English 101, yeah. So it's going really well. It's an accelerated class, so instead of the standard four months, I only have two months to complete it, and that was something I didn't know when I registered for the class. So it definitely caught me by surprise. It's been extremely intensive, nonstop homework, and deadlines due on nearly a daily basis. But it's been extremely challenging. And I'm doing actually really well in the class, so I'm really hopeful that I will be able to get an A. Also it's helpful because if I'm able to get through this class with a great grade, then I should definitely be able to take on two classes, because it's pretty much the equivalent of .

AOKI:

The amount of work.

WU:

Exactly.

AOKI:

Great. Great. Well, anything else that you'd like to add?

WU:

No. I just think it's been a huge pleasure. I'm really hopeful that you are able to get all the information that you're looking for, to really transcribe all this and have it available for anyone that needs to hear directly from our population, the formerly incarcerated, about what has worked, what hasn't worked, what needs to be implemented to really provide great outcomes. So I'm hopeful that the rest of the interviews that you have with some of our people from InsideOUT Writers is really going to lead you to doing just that. So, I mean, there's nothing else I need to add. If there are any other further questions that come up later on, you know I'm here, and feel free to let me know and we can continue with the discussion.

AOKI:

Great. Well, thank you so much, Jimmy.

WU:

You're most welcome. You're most welcome. Thank you.