

Decarceration Nation Episode 72

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Joshua Hoe

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Hello and welcome to Episode 72 of the decarceration nation podcast, a podcast about radically reimagining America's criminal justice system. I'm Josh Hoe, among other things, I'm formerly incarcerated, a freelance writer, criminal justice reform advocate and the author of the book writing your own best story addiction and living hope.

We'll get to my interview with my good friend Romando Valarossa just in a minute, but first the news.

Happy Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Joel and I started the podcast on MLK on MLK Day for a reason. As I said, way back in Episode One, you would have to be willfully blind to walk into a prison or jail in the United States and not immediately see the structural racism. I started this podcast not to discuss the problems in prison, but to discuss the problem of prisons and race is one of the core problems of prisons and of prison policy. Our goal should be moving towards healing and away from a punishment system. Hoping that 2020 is finally the year when we truly start to become a decarceration Nation.

It's been a very busy year here in Michigan. Episode 71 of the podcasts was my discussion with our Lieutenant Governor, Senator Santana and our Chief Justice about the Michigan Joint Task Force on jail and pretrial incarceration. That podcast has already become number 10. Or sorry, I'm the number 10 most downloaded episode of the whole podcast. Well, this week, the task force released its final report including its 18 recommendations. I will include a link to the report in the show notes. We learned a lot about Michigan systems, a pre system pre-trial incarceration over the last year, and I'm really excited that hopefully a lot of this will quickly move to the legislator and quickly become law.

This reminds me, for the last several years we've had a lot of winds all over the country on criminal justice reform. We have seen crime decline and almost All major cities, we have seen violent crime decline in almost all major, almost all major cities. We have in fact seen criminal justice reform implemented in over 34 states, at the same time seen crime and recidivism decrease in every single one of them. Just this week, we heard that the Federal first step act had seen courts reduce over 2400 sentences, and over 7000 people were impacted by that law in the first year overall. But at the same time, we're starting to see a very organized backlash from the tabloid press, from prosecutors, and from certain law enforcement sources. They're saying we've gone too far, that they're starting to ask for tough on crime solutions, and they're asking for us to roll back reforms. We cannot roll back reforms or stop our movement now. This is a critical time for our movement to reform the punishment system. This means we are winning. We need to stay organized. We need to be ready to stand up in our communities and

meetings. We need to be ready to push back against tough on crime narratives in the press. And we need to be ready to remind our elected representatives that there is no going back.

One housekeeping note. In my first season, I put out 40 episodes last year I put out 31 episodes. I'm hoping to put out at least 25 episodes this year. I've already done several interviews at the National Network for justice, Great Lakes convening. I've done the interview you're going to be hearing today and a few other and I've got completed several other interviews to in late February I will even be heading to CPAC to interview several people on the right who are key supporters of criminal justice reform. I do want people to know that I will be spreading out the release of new episodes a bit more over the course of 2020. So it might not be every week. It might be every other week or every, you know, every couple of weeks, but there will be at least 25 episodes, maybe as many as 31. Again, we'll see what happens. Thanks so much for listening over the last couple of years. I'm really excited to start as season three.

Okay, let's finally get to my interview with Rimando Villarosa. The third, which I think you will agree is one of the most important interviews I've ever done.

My guest today is Romando, El Velarosso. So the third, but I have no always known him as Val. I've had a lot of people with a lot of credentials on the podcast before. But from where I'm looking at it, this person probably has as much credibility on the issues covered over the years in this podcast as anyone I've ever had on. Val was a veteran who served in Vietnam, but he also recently returned from 44 years incarcerated here in Michigan. Welcome to the decarceration nation podcasts, Val.

Romando Valorossa

Thank you. So that's the first the same person Question

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Joshua Hoe

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and feel free to answer it any way you want to. But how did you get from where you think you started in life to where you are now?

Romando Valeroso

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A lot of hard work. A lot of need to want to change, the necessity to change.

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I was on the scroll down the case when I went to prison when I got convicted and went to prison. And one thing I learned during my period of time in prison that I want to return to society if I ever did return, I didn't want to be the same individual I was when I came out as I was when I went in. So it became necessary for me to make a lot of changes in my life. Most of that came through education. I knew I needed to educate myself a lot better though. Being a high school,

graduate and thinking I know it all. I didn't really know anything so I endeavor to further my education trade program that would be would assist me when I got out multiple creative skills. And I endeavored into the law as a court jailhouse lawyer became a prison legal writer. What I did for like 43 years more for personal legal services for 12 of those years as a legal writer for 18 years. And so that was my really my monitor changing.

Joshua Hoe

So, you said you graduate from high school pretty soon after that. I assume you probably went to Vietnam. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Romando Valeroso

Yeah, I graduate from high school, and two weeks later and listen to the military. Dear so go like most junctures I wanted to get away from home I wanted to be grown. I wanted to do things my way. So I just On the military gives my parents wishes, especially my mom's wishes. And two years after joining the military ended up in Southeast Asian Vietnam I end up spending two tours of duty there. The first was when my division went the second time I volunteered to go back which was very foolish because it ended in the Russians ahead of retired from the military. But the service did me will give me a lot of regiment and my life. Amber booger first time really I can say that build a potter someday they were really worthwhile. So I enjoyed the military quite truthfully.

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Joshua Hoe

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And so you came home and then pretty soon after, I assume is when things kind of went wrong is that

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Romando Valeroso

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yes, I came home and I was having a lot of problems had no idea what your problems were. At a time nobody knew with any PTSD, or anything else. And so we thought we would just happen, we would have mental that with a thought, which was true in a sense. But in order to deal with my problems, I turned to drugs. My drug of choice was heroin. And I dwelled into it first as a means of escaping the trauma that was going through call myself going through. And before I knew it, I had a habit. And really, I was really going down dead productive Lord of my life at that point in time.

Joshua Hoe

So, I guess it's not surprising that a large percentage of people who've been in the armed services end up incarcerated I think it's 15% of the total population of people in prison right now. Do you have any thoughts or insights aside from a man PTSD is obviously One reason why but you have any kind of lot you know, having been in Chi in a war zone and dealing with it yourself

you kind of can you kind of give some insight into how or why this is happening and maybe ways that we could deal with it better?

Romando Valeroso

Well, when you go to the military, they strip you down and they make you what they want you to be and what you what they do they make you into a killer make into a person that all you enjoy doing most is is committing wrong against other people. And you go to war is designed to kill. So you go there and that's the warlike person will steal your soul if you're not careful. And when you come back, nobody stepped up. Nobody sets you down and tells you said look, the war's over with you in a free society. Now we're going to debrief you, and just the way things go now no one takes time to do that. I left Vietnam on a Wednesday, I get back home on a Tuesday because of the time zones, and was eating dinner at my sister dinner table with the same combat fatigues I hand blessing upon my fingers are smelling like just dirt. No one ever told me that the war was over with that I was safe now. And so I reacted the same way I read it in bed. You woke up on me and I didn't see you. We had a problem. Things scared me. They scare me even now. So it's taken time medium to deal with that situation, even now, 50 years later, and I'm still dealing with that. So someone needs to take the time to sit down the same with a trained guru to go into combat. Somebody needs to sit down and train you on how to run a society. And no one does that.

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Joshua Hoe

Speaker 1

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Which is sort of similar in a lot of ways to what happens I think when you come home from incarceration as well? Exactly, it's the same, it's the same. There are two different names. It's the same. When I first was going to go to prison, my dad, in a moment of kind of clarity said, You know, I think it's going to be a lot like when I was in boot camp when you first get there, that they'll be things that are worse or whatever, but then that he thought it would be pretty similar. And I've talked to several other people who felt there were similarities. Did you feel like the kind of the way it was regimented, and kind of the top-down stuff was similar at all, between President the military,

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Romando Valeroso

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it was, to me it was the same, as I say, two different two different places, to different names, but everything was the same. I would, when I'm with the military, it was like breaking down a brick, you're down to promote you, you kind of prison into the same thing. And now when I say real, when I went into prison, the prison was a lot better than what it is now. But still, remote with the same we're going to move you into kind of individually you should be we're going to make you a better individual. We're going to take away that criminal mindset that you have, and they do that best crippling you. And in like I say, and that's exactly what they do.

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Joshua Hoe

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So you said that you became a legal writer and started working as a jailhouse lawyer. How did that start for you?

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Romando Valeroso

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When I went to prison, I had a lawyer who told me I'd be home by Christmas and went to prison. I got convicted, and in September, he took me home by Christmas. So I thought I'd be home and Christmas. Will that Christmas pass and nothing happened? No more than some lawyer telling my parents they needed more money. He needed this amount of money to do something. So before I knew it, my people were in debt, trying to get me out of prison. And when I got the person that had nothing, nothing but a desire to come home again And so I set out going to the rural library. And I had no idea what I was doing. And I didn't have a problem asking and so people will tell me and it became very confusing. So I just sit out one day to make I made up my mind I'm gonna learn this stuff. And book up through must go to law library just to study I studied and learn how to study to do legal work. And I did that for a while and I got accepted into a bar project with one of the first which was the first program of its kind in under states where inmates were actually trained by lawyers to be legal assistance. It was a program set up and sponsored by the young lawyers six interstate by Michigan. And I'm proud to have been a part of that I was in the first group of 10 people to be involved in that and that was Their program for like 13 years. And it really helped me and that's how I started working on my case. And I have a love of the law, I believe in the law doesn't always work, but I believe in it. It news a lot of refining our admit to that. But then again, there's not a lot of people to do it to know that. But I just enjoy law and I enjoy doing legal work. And I became a legal writer. When the program was when the power project was closed down, but in VLC and the young lawyer, section can no longer sponsor it. We took them to court. I say we number of inmates we got together collectively and took them to court. And the Federal Court ruled in our favor the men in the Department of Corrections instead of another program. Good was similar to prison legal services to help inmates. This came about the legal writer's program and was involved in the net for 19 years.

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Joshua Hoe

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So for people who haven't who listened to this and haven't been to prison, they've definitely heard what I had to say about it. So what would you want people to know after? I mean, I doubt they'll be very few people who have done as much time as you have on this podcast again, so, I'm sure that's a big question. What do you should do in prison? But what do you want them to know about prison or what you know, for the experience?

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Romando Valeroso

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The one thing I would tell anybody in prison is no place to be somebody. You could have a million dollars. You could be to you could be Michigan's most known individual. You go to prison. I could be the poorest individual our order \$50 bill for goods if that was the limit. It is you

can order but \$50 doesn't make any difference. Prison is the most horrible, disgusting dehumanizing place I've ever seen, I've ever experienced. And people who people have to understand that when you in prison, you are alone. People will in my experience for just the main people will tell you how much they care about you what they're going to do for you How much is going to be there, etc, etc. But when the doors closed, truth be told you are by yourself. You are all by yourself. And people walked in Christian yards every day, wearing this mask of I don't care. It doesn't mean anything and at nighttime, when the lights are out. You hit a snip wasn't Christ in a people because it hurts being in prison. It hurts Being alone in that desolate place and is dehumanizing. It was still every day that you've got it will take you will steal your soul and lead to being nothing. dislike prison, and perhaps we need prisons, but there has to be a limit to what goes on in a prison. You know, no one will ever stop the flow of violence in prison. You will never stop drugs in prison. You will never stop violence in prison. Because it's their long to get to people you're going to have that unless you can unlock a person up in a sale 24 seven and never let them out. You all we're going to have that.

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Joshua Hoe

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So over the decades, how would you say like what were some of the most I mean, even in the three years I was in there a lot of changes. What would you say changed the most from when you went into when you went out when you In the prison I mean, I just remember like for me just like, even the food service changed, you know, from, you know, I guess right before I went in there were things like that have a salad bar when I came in, they got that out. And then right when I was about to leave, they went to privatized food.

Romando Valeroso

That's been the biggest devil the devil was some of the biggest changes food service, medical services, trade programs. Education though were the four biggest changes I saw in VOC. And my time when I first went to prison back in 73. It was mandatory that if you came to prison, you're going to get educated on your middle education. You're going to get a GED, you're going to get that before you left him totally left in prison was you're going to have a mock-up of creating every kind of marketable trade you could think of. Now there is nothing you got guys. The job is so true in prison that God Makes a career. If they're doing four years they make a career of being in the GED program for four years before they can make \$4 and 50 cents for going to school. That's insane thinking. That's insane thinking. There is no trading program to speak of and know that they did have they're quickly taking them away. You know, you now a life where a person's terminal life sentence can't even get into a good create the program. You know, because the time he's doing it, so leave it to the people who are doing short term bits. And no people don't want to be involved in that. So no one goal so the program dies. Food Service and health services are nothing but a farce are no more than a word on a piece of paper because there is no proper medical service. And I'm a prime example of that. I left prison with glaucoma and no one told me and I lost my sight Because of improper medical care, so it's a prison. It's just horrible. And there was nothing different anybody? Nothing.

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Joshua Hoe

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Yeah. I wanted to talk a little bit more about when you came out and I remember you were working and all of a sudden your site just went. And it turns out, as you were just saying it has were related to untreated glaucoma. from when you were in prison. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Romando Valeroso

Yeah, that came out and which report has been the most enjoyable time in my life. I thought after 44 years of being in prison, I was finally free. So I came out, I immediately secured me a job wasn't a job I wanted, but it was a job and that's the most important thing that was to me was to have a job so I got me a job. And I had been noticing that I love to read them. Every So I'll be reading or writing. And all of a sudden a piece of paper our writing on or a page I was reading a big hole would appear in the middle of that page. And I didn't know what was going on are going to work on morning I got the bus and we'll walk into work and stepped out in front of a semi-truck and an older lady who was going to farmers market having to pull me back on the street and was yelling at me and I had no idea what happened. So I looked up and all the sandwiches, a big white sheet everything before me were just completely white and I lost my sight just like that. I finally get to the University of Michigan hospital and they told me to say you're blind. They checked everything out got my medical records and everything so you got glaucoma. When only thing department correction you treated me for a while I was in prison. It gave me operation for the cataract and my left eye and never did it. They would do right that because it costs too much. So they say when the left and the right ad gets better the left I was will treat it. But what they didn't tell me you got a black woman now. So I guess at the University of Michigan hospital, they tell me to push it in my eyes at 42. And I was just blind. And it took me a while to get my site back. Well, I'll never be able to see as I saw before, I'm still having problems. And this and that makes me very angry when I think about that. That someone is so inhumane to do, it will save money and literal hell go down the drain. It was a brother Joe help grounder join a new guy would have you going to spend an extra dollar to help you.

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Joshua Hoe

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I think that you had sort of experience with that too when you first got out and they kind of put you or placed you in an area that was Pretty we're pretty high risk going back not because you've done anything wrong, because where they released you. Could you talk about that a little bit?

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Romando Valeroso

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I had originally, I'm from New York and I had written the article back to New York. No, you gotta stay here. We're not going to be out of state parole, you gotta stay here. I lived on the west side of Detroit a number of streets and a new huddle street tour. And my appeal went out there and checked it out and came back and told me how bad they were. But that's what a parole me to.

And I get it. I couldn't understand that. Why would you put me and you see, I'm an addict, drug addict, and I'm a and I'm recovering every day and I believe no to our stuff programs? I know I'm recovering every day. So why would you put me in a higher risk crime drug-infested area, and that's what they did. And I lasted all the two-three days maybe. And I came out one day, I was at my granddaughter out and came out. And there are some people sitting in her house, and they got shotguns and they got rifles and they got dope on the table. And so I literally packed my stuff. It was on my way out of there. And we're just blessed and lucky enough to have people, no supporters that I was able to tell this to, who were able to make some phone calls and bring me to an arbor. And that was the best thing that could have happened to me. So yes, I don't know. I don't think that my best interests at heart. I don't think they had my best interests at heart. It was just like, well, you're leaving the prison system, you're doing a life sentence, go back out a few fails will bring you back. Well, I don't have any intentions of going back and pitching to getting myself involved or do myself get involved in anything like that. So

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Joshua Hoe

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and you also I think probably the longest battle you fought since you got back I think it took over a year for you to get your identification And I know that's going to be a tough story to explain, but it could you could I think it's important for people to hear the challenges that people go through when they come back. And I mean, this is an incredible story in my opinion,

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Romando Valeroso

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more than your normal channels. I mean, I was how was doing wrong on the streets? I accept that I own that. And I had used an alias to aliases at one point. And when I went to prison you could walk into any councils drugstore or what have you and get an idea for \$3 you get a state idea but it's what they call a state ID now so I had this idea when I get the person to avoid prosecution I do to state ID they put a false name on it and they log it in well what they fingerprint him in my fingerprints came back. No, that's not you will know who you are Mr. Butler also, but I go to, to get to the earliest now. Our brackets. So for 44 years now, I'm trying to get this off and nothing happens. I get to the streets finally get paroled on April 10, 2018. I go immediately go to Secretary of State's office they tell me about an idea. I had no idea what a state ID was my new but I go down and I tell them I'm politically Id just begins my problems. You have a purse a tip? No, you have released papers. I couldn't release papers. Okay, we've got to pick your ID here. What is this false idea? We got a false ID here. What's this? Will that work? We need a person if we wanted these two names. Okay, well, here's a person typically Okay, you get a purse difficult for this name here, but we don't have a picture ID for it. But you get a birth certificate for this box name. So for 18 months, I've fought to get my name changed to where it was supposed to be. I actually had to go to court for equity. file a motion, a petition to have my name changed to my name. And then democracy takes and tells me that I am in a Social Security Office corporate and then tells me says, we're going to give you a new ID card. I said, I'm in a social security card, spelled your name, and I spelled it and I wrote it out, boom. They sent it back to me misspelled. So Didn't they tell me that was mouthful? I said that one

type of the cards, I don't pack them up, I gave you my name. Well, guess what you give it to them they put a card to see I spent like a spokesman spell for somebody else build it wrong, but still failed on me. So I had to wait another three weeks to get a new social security card. By the time I got it. Now I can't get an ID card because I don't have a social security card to get the proof to prove to the secretary of state that that's acting muscles recruiting number. So for 18 months the battle I've been fighting and I just got my state I did, and I'm the happiest man, I didn't vote it. I am the happiest man in the face of the earth just to be able to have done that. And that's interesting too.

Joshua Hoe

I know, I put out a picture of you going to vote for the first time, and it got a huge response from all over the place and lots of people were sending you good wishes and congratulations. And I just want to, you know, you know, what did it feel like to have gone to vote for the first time in 44 years? It was.

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Romando Valeroso

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It was very exhilarating. You know you hear about people talking about your right to vote and stuff like this. I actually felt that for the first time. I came up in the era of the 60s when people were dying and stuff to get people to vote, you know, fighting for the right to vote. So for the first time, after 44 years of being able to vote, I could feel that I feel very, very good, and I was going to vote They could have been voting for dog catcher. I was going to vote. I was going to reserve my right to vote. And a young lady named Kate summers she took me down and she was asking me what you're going to do Val, I'm going to vote and we went in and I was just, I was just overjoyed. I was totally overjoyed. It felt good. And now I'm waiting for November. Yeah, we got big that we got a big one coming up. That's right.

Joshua Hoe

So you are a pretty respected jailhouse lawyer. I suspect you want to continue that work when you came back out? Yes. And so you've had some struggles kind of trying to get worked in that field. What can you talk about your experiences there?

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Romando Valeroso

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Well, I wouldn't apply it for a couple of jobs. And one of them didn't come through because somebody had been hired already. The second job I had, I felt I had a really good chance said and they call me back down and say we want to hire you but we got a problem. I say Was that it's my age. And so I said this age discrimination, what's going on? No, no, no. But because I had attained the age of over 70 they feel I should be retiring as opposed to trying to work. And I'm thinking in my mindset, I'm thinking, well, that's kind of crazy to me. If somebody wants to work, why not let them work as long as they're able to do it? And they've got capable so don't know why not let them work? Because that's the way you send people into the system into the prison system. That's how you send people into criminal activities by denying them the right to

do something responsible. And I was actually just turned down but I mean, I was turned down for because of that. I was blessed and lucky enough to have a friend of mine who knew I wanted to work asked a friend of theirs if they'd be willing to hire me my situation to make calm me down. It was a dishwasher and I don't know the lady thought that I might turn a job down or what have you and she said, Well I don't want that I got a dishwasher so okay. So okay, I said yeah, is it a job with paid disappear check every week to see I want it. I just wanted to work and work that job for like 11 months before I lost my sight and it was a good job. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the work. I'd never done it before cuz I voted the kitchen was in prison. 44 years I do anything not to work in the kitchen. But I come out here and after one thing was open, so I accepted it. legal work is my first love. It'll always be the first thing I love to do. I don't know if I'm gonna find anything but anything In that area, I don't know. And I hope I keep hoping. Maybe something will show up. I don't know, you know, but I just hope I'm just hoping that's all I can do.

Joshua Hoe

Yeah, I think that's I know, I fought a lot of the same things. You know, I, I had a bunch of skills that when I came out, people weren't letting me use and it was very frustrating. Luckily, at some level, I started to it started to work out. So hopefully that'll be the same for you.

So, kind of broad-based questions again. So, after your experience inside, what are some things you would change like you think you would change immediately if you kind of had the power to change things in prison?

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Romando Valeroso

32:43

If I could change things in prison, it would be to make sure they were programming proper programming for inmates. And one of the most important things I think in education. Education is lacking in a prison system. Totally lacking And no one seemed to really care. The educators who work in the prison system, the GED teacher, de ba teachers, the teacher to come in some time or an occasional college program we may have they may have. And you only get three students in the class or it doesn't last long. You know, credit, they try to stress the importance of education, but nobody's getting it. Nobody's getting it and no, some, in some cases, I think I understand. As you know, inmates are easily frustrated when they think it took someone dangling the carrot before them, they're going to take it away. And this is what the system offers. Now, they will tell you, we're going to give you such and such and so somebody who really wants this and thirsty for knowledge, go at it. Only two weeks later said we're taking this program away. So I'm not getting involved in anything no more next week guys think so I would change that would change the way people do time in person. When I say due time, I don't believe I do not believe I integrated imagination. The longer print prison sentences to require I do not believe that by anyway. I think return from crack comes from the individual, a person has to want to change and the person has to want he has to want a change. And they had to have a reason to change. Threatening someone by saying if you do such a Pikachu would be the boss but again, I'm going to give you a ticket and gonna take 1010 days you're a good time. Okay, I'm gonna life sentence what I care about a good time. Do you see that? I don't watch Don't do

anything and mates. So I think there had to be a system set up where if you do a crime you come to prison. If you commit an armed robbery and you live in Lavonia, you get 10 years if you live in the southwest, Detroit you get 10 years you live in Bloomfield Hills Southfield, you get 10 years. That's what you do double to pay for the actual crime. Now if you mess up within that time, guess on you, they extend your time. Hate so new, and I think it makes me think people would see that more so than say armed robberies are is a floater, the light. So because you live in a certain geographical area, and you get your people might have funds, you might get probation, or you might get two years. I live in a number of scrutinies to the southwest side and notice that I don't have any money. My people on welfare, what have you, I get a light bit but I take I took \$3 and then hurt nobody, you may have to \$600,000 and beat somebody almost to death. You see, so I mean it. It doesn't equate to me. So I would think that needs to be changed. I really believe that needs to be changed. I think the attitude of prison guards needs to be changed. You get prison guards in prison now, who are prison guards serving as chaplains who and I'm not saying there's nothing wrong with that. But how do you take a guy who was on the yard today, writing tickets and turn them on when you started as a chaplain? Now when he sees something going wrong, does he act as a chaplain does he act as an officer is his first instinct to say you shouldn't do that Johnny or to slap the handcuffs on you right to a ticket, you see. So all things need to be changed food service, the whole deal. The whole prison system needs to be revamped. So there anything that you would you did a lot of legal work. Is there anything that you would?

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Joshua Hoe

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you know, here's a great example when I was first arrested, I went and looked at the doc at once when I was in, in prison and I saw that there were like, one public defender had like 30 cases in a day. You know, as someone who's done a lot of legal work, are there kind of changes you would make in the actual trial and pre-trial process as well?

Romando Valeroso

Oh, yes. Most people talk about state-appointed attorneys I give those guys a lot of accolades. He's a store a state-appointed attorney. But he's a trained attorney. He may have had the same time to give you his job through the fourth hair to get his clan because john fuller was only had two clients and he's getting paid \$600,000 or \$300 an hour. You only get \$250 for this one case and you've got 35 cases so what is the biggest mistake I think they make the mistake they make in a bit I think they make the mistake they make they cases upon this date opponent attorney and they set all these hearing dates and stuff like that days apart and there's no way this guy's going to be able to accurately investigate. Do summary reports gather witnesses and everything else and no 24 hour period he can't do it. So what they usually do is say plead out man and if he pulled out because he knows you can, if you don't open a load to up is a pretty damn man prison and mercy to court. Once in a while, you get a state-appointed attorney who will go the extra mile. But as a rule of thumb, they can't. They don't and they can't. If he does, if we can travel an extra mile and he got all the cases now somebody's gonna file a grievance against him for negligence because he really hadn't had the time to do what he should do for the next guy.

So it's a bog down the system and they only have a certain amount of lawyers who take a do pro bono work. So this candle center proponent pro bono work you're just out there you just kick whatever can get caught whatever know whatever's left. And our time that's not good because some you got some attorneys who are good you got some who like I say they're just they're hoping to catch a case. hoping the judge will give me a case I just graduated from law school last week hope he'll give me a case is your first case and some murder case. You know, so always asked the same last question. What question Should I have asked but did not what's something you would like to talk about that I missed? If anything?

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Romando Valeroso

40:00

Family in prison. When I say family in prison one of the things that noticed in prison is how your breakup of the family unit when people need encouragement, husband and wives, mothers and fathers siblings, there's a breakage in that. And I had an aunt was to me, and I loved her dearly before she passed away. I think I was about 15 years in my in my bit. Adam had never seen her while I was in prison. So one day she came with my first time I'd seen her in 15 years and as I said, Come to come and see me you know you never come to see me over to Martin your best nephew. She says. If something happens to you there tell us. And this mentality is just what the mentality a lot of people are out of sight, out of mind. Whatever was the angle that's where this comes come from. If you in prison and you've been a lot of problems are finished greeting your people are worried about you and stuff like that. If you in prison number one, they're relieved. I don't have to worry about him tonight. He's in prison tonight in jail tonight. I gotta worry about him being shot tonight. But when they come to see you, they hate to leave you there because it hurts them when they leave you there. And then they figure what if anything happened to him why he did they'll call and let me know. You know, and other people had that meant you had to have that mentality. So I think there's a lot of breakup in the marriage family then too. I don't believe that prison is geared toward bringing family together. You know, an S show from the years and years of would think you'd be terrible. People come to prison. You could hug them Hey, how you doing and stuff like that. Now you go to prison, you hook someone account 123 Okay, that's enough. That's enough. hugging you. No Mama. 15 years as no hugging you want your visitor what now you're threatening you hold it hold your hand one more minute mo castle your visit you know so thing so I think family should be first should be the first thought that people think about you know the administration's no but no one cares about that anymore. And family breakup Verizon and Christian very family deteriorate so quickly and Christians people been a married man for like 1520 years come to prison a year 10 and marriages over when you know, the father never gets a chance to see their children. You know it's it just mind-boggling to me. And then a quick will come back on the streets and be normal. You know, go back unscrews not be normal. Who were who do I go to? Who did you come to often your people die? You can even go to a funeral hard. You may have who Does it mean is that you know john doe your mother died this morning Can I go to a funeral? No. You know if you got the money to pay guards to take you there in the paper that time off and to pay this and to pay that you can go but you know pay me with 35 cents a day. How do I get that kind of money used to be attached you know like years ago you go to him make a go to the inmate benefit firm and

borrow money? It was inmates' money to help inmates, they cut that out. They stopped that and that would have before was geared towards that. If something happened you had to go to a funeral you need to fast \$600 to me, it may have been before we loaned you that money. You might have to pay him back \$2 a month, but they loaned you the money now you can't do that anymore. Because the money is all centralized on one place and maintenance they can have a whole run it knows it all things I think needs to be changed?

Joshua Hoe

Well, Val, I can't tell you how much it's a real pleasure to have you on and to get to talk to you like this. Thank you so much.

Romando Valeroso

Thank you. I appreciate it. You know, just that. I like talking about prison, what things need to be done in present Georgia. One thing I really do enjoy. And so I appreciate the opportunity to just share my feelings, you know, about the prison system about prison in general.

Joshua Hoe

Thanks again.

Romando Valeroso

Thank you.

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Joshua Hoe

And now my take. First, I want to apologize the military makes them about 8% of our prison population, not 15%. That percentage is still very high and very disturbing. It means close to one out of every 10 people in prison served our country. My understanding is that a large percentage of those people also served in active combat roles. It's hard to imagine that these things are not related to each other

Now Romando Valeroso is at the heart of this podcast. Val did 44 years in a Michigan prison almost immediately after doing tours in Vietnam. Now, now that you've heard his voice and gotten to know him a bit, I hope you understand that his story is at the heart of mass incarceration at the heart of our punishment system, and at the heart of what the decarceration nation podcast is trying to do. He did an absurdly long sentence, he came back to almost nothing to no support to being placed in an apartment that was incredibly dangerous to himself into keeping him sober. He was turned without usable state identification, and to a society where everything he knew about communication and connection had changed drastically and was released to deal with the after-effects of decades of poor medical care that resulted in him

being beat be losing a large amount of his sight. So much so that even after he got a workable job he had to quit that job because he could no longer see and this was a preventable problem. All he needed to be done all that needed to happen was that he needed to be treated for his glaucoma while he was in prison, perhaps equally troubling to Val, after decades of working as a jailhouse lawyer, there were no jobs for him in legal services. And he tried. Everyone in prison knows that a lot of the best legal work that gets done is done with the help of incarcerated people. I think law firms should start thinking about creating positions for formerly incarcerated people with legal experience. Every law firm uses these jobs now to help recruit the next generation of lawyers from law schools. But wouldn't it be amazing if every firm had a dedicated position for formerly incarcerated people who excelled at the law while they were incarcerated? We all know the stories of people like terrorists Simmons or Shaun Hopwood or Hugo Mac, people who became lawyers or returned to the law after a criminal conviction. Shouldn't law firms be helping make sure more formerly incarcerated people follow this career path? I just want to think I just think it would make a huge difference. If law firms became invested in trying to help change the narrative and try to help people coming back find meaningful and important employment that can mean a change and a signal to everybody else who's still inside.

I want to thank Val one more time, even though he is a friend, I consider him an elder in my community, and really appreciate him sharing his story with me and with all of you.

As always, you can find the show notes or leave us a comment on decarceration Nation com. If you want to support the podcast directly, you can do so from patreon.com slash decarceration.nation and I want to take a second to thank our new patrons. Merry fussy fights odd cats and steam gassed, and dance love laugh which is a great name. Welcome aboard. And just a reminder, the January episode of DNX on Patreon is coming soon. You can also support us by leaving a five-star review from iTunes or like us on Stitcher Spotify. Special thanks to Andrew Stein who does the editing and post-production for me to Robert Alvarez who helps with the website and to Kate summers who is helping with our Instagram and Facebook pages. Make sure and add us on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook and share our posts across your network. Thanks so much for listening to the Decarceration Nation podcast. See you next time.