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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people prisons criminal justice reform incarcerated jails impacted formerly incarcerated josh issue empathy crime cut hope important sentences messaged adult world incarceration continue

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Joshua B. Hoe

0:04

Hello and welcome to Episode 76 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 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 Michael Mendoza in just a second. But first, the news.

Obviously, there's not much news beyond COVID-19 right now is certainly impacted the criminal justice world. First, we saw stories about people closing off the visitation of prisons. And soon after, we started to see lists of best practices for protecting prisons from the virus or for protecting people the outside world from what could happen if the virus spread inside prisons. But as of right now, people in prison are not currently a risk to the general population around COVID-19 people going into prisons into jails are a risk to the people People who are currently in our prisons in jails, it's not the other way around. Once someone inside is infected, then the risk becomes two way. The most important thing to do at least until an infection reaches inside a prison is to reduce the influx of people into prisons. That means reducing the entry of newly incarcerated people, volunteers, visitors, or any non-essential personnel. It also means that it's critical everyone entering prisons is tested for fever, and for Cova 19 as soon as possible. New admission should be tested in quarantine until they've been clear or been symptom-free for long enough to ensure that they're disease-free. Everyone in prisons right now is radically vulnerable. They cannot self segregate. And once someone new and infected enters prison, everyone is at risk. So it's important to be incredibly careful now. I understand our heart might want different things, but the best thing for us to do is to Make sure that disease that the virus does not get into prisons and jails. We also have to stop the churn. And this mostly happens in jails. churn is the short term amount of people who are coming in and out of our jails every you know very quickly. Every single person who comes in and leaves both the jail population in the population of correctional officers puts everyone in danger and increases the risk of spreading the seeds. Some of the recommendations that make the most sense to me include halting the arrest of anyone for misdemeanors that do not put other human beings directly at risk. Release of as many people as possible on future appearance tickets after an arrest. This is not a really good time for cash bail or for detaining people. Unless it's absolutely essential. We need to make sure

that parole and probation agents should not be sending people back to a correctional facility on technical violations, at least for the duration of this crisis. We need to restrict or end visitation but if you were stricter end visitation, we should also increase phone time and make phone calls free. That's going to be the tough part of this but it's really important to allow people to have contact with their people back home. We need to waive medical co-pays and weightless for medical care inside prisons we need to find ways to increase capacity up. You know, in most places you just have nurses, you don't even have a doctor except for once a week. So we need to increase the capacity for care to happen. We need to reduce unnecessary crowding in jails and courtrooms and delay as many court procedures as soon as possible for as long as we can. We need to make sure that hand sanitizer available in prisons and jails and we need to be classified as contraband for the duration of the crisis. We also need to clean and disinfect shared spaces throughout prisons and jails using at you know, and if necessary, allow for supervised use of critical cleaners that are considered dangerous but necessary to clean up the potential spread of the virus, we need to reduce entry into prisons totally essential personnel and test and screen constantly at the highest level possible. As better tests become available, we need to make sure we're using those tests. And we're using them regularly on personnel that is entering into the prison. We need to institute humane quarantine procedures for all new entries. And for people who have been diagnosed with Cova 19. A LOOK our hearts like I said earlier want different things and you know, that is often in our loved one's best interests. The best thing we can do as long as a facility has no infected people is to keep us out of our prisons and jails who might be infected. And so it's really important. While it's not optimal for use in other ways to ensure that only you know that that the least amount of people go in and out of Princess impossible prisons and jails as possible, and that those people are as safe as possible when they go into jails or prisons. Once someone in the facility is infected, we need to have permission teachers in place of education to everyone in the facility including all the incarcerated people, in order to provide to prevent panic. You know, we need prisons are basically very germaphobic places and we need to make sure that everyone inside has a good understanding of what happens. Once someone becomes infected, we need to make sure as difficult as it is that our quarantine procedures are humane, we can't simply throw people who are sick, even maybe at risk of death in the solitary with no other kinds of care or no other kinds of support. It's not okay, and we need to think about this and take care of the people who are sick. Last but not least, I want to send my good wishes and thoughts to all of you and to your families and loved ones. I want to mention that I am not in any way shape or form a medical professional. These are the best practices that I've seen in very credible, different, different.

I've seen them in a bunch of publications and I'll include all of the different best practices lists in the show notes. So that everyone can look at them and vet them for themselves. I am in, you know, I am getting updates on what's happening in the MDC, and they have seems like they are being very proactive. Hopefully, that is correct. So, again, I just want to say that, you know, I really hope that everyone is doing okay, through this crisis. I know it's very trying. And I know that social separation is very hard for a lot of people, especially formerly incarcerated people. And so, you know, I'm hoping that everyone will be kind to each other over the next couple of weeks and find ways to interact with each other, maybe not in person, but over the phone or

through the internet, or, you know, in any way that they possibly can. Now, let's get to my interview with Michael Mendoza. After being sentenced as a juvenile to adult prisons, thanks to California Bill 260, after 17 years of incarceration, Michael Mendoza was paroled in 2014. Michael has worked as a case manager at the Center for juvenile detention Justice obtained a BA in political science, and served as the policy associated cut 50 before moving on and working his way to becoming the policy director at the anti-recidivism coalition. And now Michael is returned to cut 50 as the National Director. Welcome to the decarceration nation podcast, Michael.

Michael Mendoza

Hi, Joshua. Thank you for having me.

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Joshua B. Hoe

7:19

Oh, my pleasure. I always ask the same first question. I think in your case, this will be an interesting response. I hope you're comfortable with talking about this. But how did you get from where you started to where you are now as the National Director for a major criminal justice reform organization?

Michael Mendoza

You're right, that's even a daunting answer for me to even think of, but usually, they're a little simpler. I know. That's my whole life story there. Josh. Wait a minute. You know, in retrospect, when I think about being 15 and being arrested and been convicted as an adult and basically told that I was going to spend the rest of my life in prison. At that point in time, there was no hope for me. I never thought I'd ever get out of that situation. In fact, that became my life, right an exile somebody who was not wanted by society, somebody who was considered a super predator and a monster. But yeah, I was 15. And now fast forward to being the national director of an organization called cut 50 that prioritizes people who are leading from an impact perspective, people who are leading from an impact perspective to make a change and to empower people to be a part of the solutions. I myself asked that. I myself asked that question. All the time, how did I get here? And really, there's a lot of different pieces to this story that really provides me a lot of motivation today. One, which is, I wouldn't be here if it weren't for people who, who believed that one, there's a broken system, a broken prison system that did not know how to deal with kids who were making poor decisions. And they never gave up. And they changed the law by passing a bill that gave me the opportunity to prove that I was no longer that 15-year-old kid anymore. That was the first most important change in my life. That allowed me to be here today. The other thing that I would point to is the fact that kids still have the ability to mature and grow and so quite honestly jobs. There was a maturity process that I experienced even while I was in prison when I didn't have the necessary resources to focus on root rotation, although I didn't have the comfort and the safety that people would need to focus on what they should do to improve situations. I was more worried about protecting myself to

avoid violence. And if I did, again to violence, to make sure that it wasn't the end of my life. So despite those circumstances, I believe it's the ability that people in society believe it's the ability that our communities have to share their messages of hope and inspiration, through advocacy, and policy that eventually caught my attention and thousands of other people's attention who were incarcerated to Listen to say people still believe in us out there. People want to do better and do good.

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Joshua B. Hoe

11:06

Yeah, for sure. And, and so in a lot of ways you are a beneficiary of the same kind of work you're trying to do now trying to, you know, enact legislation to create change for people inside, for folks who, you know, and I imagine most of the people including myself, who are listening, you know, we've never, we weren't sentenced as, as juveniles. Can you talk about being sentenced as an adult when you're only 15? And kind of like, what people should know about that whole problem?

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Michael Mendoza

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Yeah, thank you for that question. Josh. I you know, when it comes to age, I just want to make one thing clear. When it comes to the prison system age doesn't matter. But I will say that being tried as an adult and 15 and being sent to adult prisons. The part that does matter is that there are no age-appropriate services for youth or for children that are entering into the adult criminal justice system. And what that does is that my first experience in adult prison on that first day, walking onto the yard with a bunch of older men around me, was my first experience where a riot kicked off. And the only thing that I can worry about is, who am I supposed to follow? How am I supposed to protect myself when everybody either has a knife or a weapon, and I'm just barely getting into the reception center of a prison for the very first time on my 17th birthday. And so I'm trying to paint a picture here that in adult prisons that have it existed for decades now. I have never been set up to provide the age-appropriate services that any child or young adult would need. In fact, it does require it does the exact opposite. It provides the tools that young people need to learn how to defend themselves and to learn how to read negative body language, just to ensure that they stay out of the way of violence. And so it teaches you really negative tools and techniques that have nothing to do with how to learn about, you know, therapeutic services that can help you make better decisions or gain better insights as to why at such a young age, did you make such a decision? So those are the real negative impacts that prison conditions have on young people. But again, I don't want to dismiss that age doesn't matter in these circumstances because people who weren't young adults or children when they were sent to adult prison, still also need the same resources still also need the same opportunities and even for them, it is lacking.

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Joshua B. Hoe

14:17

When you first got arrested and first started going through the system, you were kind of coming up in a very different time than we have now. Do you remember the ways things were different kind of in you know, the 90s?

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Michael Mendoza

14:30

Yeah, the 90s were crazy. Let me tell you, Josh. I grew up in Southern California, you know, in Orange County. And please don't let the Orange County vibes fool you. It's not just surfers and served as the lamps. Exactly. Unfortunately, Orange County's really close to the border. I mean, so you have a lot of people migrated to different countries including people like my father. migrated from Mexico at that time. And it was a real culture shock for him something that he didn't know how to handle. And I didn't know how to handle that kind of friction between what I'm seeing my dad tried to instill in me, there is cultural heritage versus what I was seeing in the rest of the world. And it was really it was there was a lot of gang violence in my neighborhood where I was born and raised. And most of the kids that I hung out with, I went to elementary school with I went to, you know, first and second-grade school with them. But unfortunately, we got involved in, you know, gangs and the lifestyle that we bought into knowing now that they were actual allies. But then also, you know, it was in the mid-90s, where we had President Clinton and we had this really negative narrative because of the Crime bill because of the fear-mongering politics that our community was being fed in terms of kids who were 14 or 15 are super predators. They're monsters that can make crimes if they're in gangs. And that's how I was labeled. You know, I was labeled a super predator, I was considered a monster at 15 because of my participation in a gang-related crime. And, you know, I never wanted to diminish, you know, any crime that really hurts the community or somebody's life. But the way we deal with that kind of decision over young people's lives who are really young and don't know the consequences or who make irrational decisions, based on one thing that we always miss, which is the trauma that they grow up and walk through and see before even crime happens. And there were no supports for kids at that age during the mid-90s. So you have fear-mongering politics, you have proposition 21. That was passed in the mid-90s, which actually lowered the age from 16, all the way to 14, where California was able to try a child as an adult. And so there was a really negative stereotype for any kid that was either involved in gangs, or committed crimes even didn't matter what kind of crime but they were labeled these monsters that from this today, I still feel the negative impacts of that label that I still carry. So the 90s were tough times not only within the poor community but even, you know, through politics and through the negative stereotypes. It wasn't easy for people of color, especially for somebody like myself being Mexican American

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Joshua B. Hoe

18:00

So one of my core positions in my own activism is that as a movement, if we want to reduce mass incarceration, we have to address redemption for people beyond low level and non violent crimes. When I engage in conversations with people across the country about reform, I

frequently hear things like, you know, leopards don't change their spots, you know, since both you and I have to great extent changed our spots, what would you say to these people?

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Michael Mendoza

18:28

You know, one of the things I would say, Josh, to people who believe that a person will never change is to challenge those people to actually go inside of a prison and meet the people that they think will never change. Understand the circumstances that they're in which most of the time are very hopeless, provide no inspiration. In a very violent when you look at a human Being who in most cases are being punished for a long period of time, or for the rest of their lives separated from all they know. I think that's an experience that anybody, I think that's an experience that I would challenge anybody to get proximate to, to understand that people do have the ability to change, and they do like you and me, Josh, for a very important reason. And that's love. Yeah, I know. It sounds cheesy. Yeah, I know. It's like, well, that's subjective. That's, I mean, come on, how's love going to change somebody? And I say that because, for about 10 years after my incarceration, I hated the world. I hated the world for sending me to prison at 15 for the rest of my life. And I would have continued to have hated the world. And I would have continued to hate the world. Had it not been for people to show me what real love looks like the love that inspired me to change. Love that, that showed me that we are all human beings and the decision I made impacted not just one human being but so many other people that it took love. It took love from a survivor of a violent crime who, who held her son in her arms as he was shot in the chest and neck and died in her arms, be it because of love and her strength she came in to share that story with people like me, who were in there for similar circumstances. Certainly, that's a really powerful story. And I have to say that because, you know, sometimes there may be circumstances where people won't change. And that's because they don't have a reason to because they believe that people don't believe in them. And unfortunately, that will that's what prison does prison. Maybe believe that the rest of the entire world has just thrown you away. They hate you, and they never want anything to do with you. At the end of the day, we're human beings that desire to be loved, desire to be needed, desire to have a purpose. And it's going to be the people out there that need to help in history. And it's going to take the people in our communities to help share that love and to give that hope and inspire change.

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Joshua B. Hoe

21:28

Really good answer. So we were talking earlier about kind of the 90s and the tough on crime years and the idea of words like 'super predator' and stuff like that. And I know this frustrates some people when I talk about it, but there is symbolic importance to having a sitting president publicly Connect himself to criminal justice reform, and I know a lot of us to disagree with a lot of the things the President does, but he's had several formerly incarcerated people invited the State of the Union he's Several Whitehouse events, where he turned the microphone over to people who were read just recently released from prison after the first step back passed. And now, you know, out of all the things he could have chosen, he chose to do a Superbowl ad featuring Alice Marie Johnson. So what are your thoughts here on the symbolic, if no other part

importance of a president giving so much attention to criminal justice reform? So here's what I would say to the people who were very upset with the President's Superbowl ad, that included Alice Marie Johnson, who was ecstatic about her freedom. And what I would say is that that message isn't for those who already believe in criminal justice reform. It's for the people that don't believe it's for the people that think that we should lock them up and throw away the key. It's really The people who think that it's okay to give somebody who is as young as I was a life sentence, that message for a message for the people that we need to educate with love and to help understand that punishment is not the answer that treatment and rehabilitation is. And the reason that's so important is that if we look back in the 90s, where we had a democratic president, who passed a crime bill that lowered the age and actually allowed California to try me as an adult at the age of 15, labeled as a super predator, that was under a democratic president, and now we have a Republican president, who is actually giving a different message, a positive one, to the right and to the left, that says we We need to work on criminal justice reform. We need to make some changes here. It can't express how the only thing I can think about after I saw that ad was, how am I now going to use this opportunity to talk to the right. And to talk to the left and say, This is a moment, we now have to come together and work on bold criminal justice reform. Because in the past, we haven't really been able to do bold reform because we don't either have the Republican votes. We don't have the Democratic votes. We don't have the votes necessary to make big changes. We need to do a two-thirds bill, we need to go to the ballot. No, no, we actually now have an opportunity to work with both sides, because now they have been given the go-ahead by the president in saying that we need to continue on criminal justice reform. And so For me, I look at it in the bigger picture. And will reiterate that and will reiterate that the most important thing about media is changing the narrative and changing the minds of the people who don't believe in criminal justice reform. Because at the end of the day, we want to create a community. Because at the end of the day, we want to create a community. We want to create a strong country that stands together on the issues that we can agree with because this world needs a strong leader. And so for those reasons, I see this as an important opportunity. Even though we disagree on 99% of all the other issues, you know, I can be just as angry being Mexican American, where I might have some my little cousins, or my nephews and niece's been separated from their families and being locked in cages, I wouldn't be the first one to be upset about that. And I am. And it doesn't excuse those things. But here's an issue that we can move the needle on because there are 2.2 million people currently incarcerated with no hope and are gonna eventually come home. So how do we want them to come home? How do we want to inspire them? Do we want to inspire them with the fun crime mid-90s message? Or do we want to inspire them with a message from Alice Marie Johnson, who served decades in prison and is now and is now home because of the work that organizations like cut 50 and many others were able to do to provide her that opportunity?

Joshua B. Hoe

I know in a state like where I live in Michigan, you know, it actually in a lot of ways benefits us because a Republican majority of both House and Senate pay attention to what the President

says and feel like they get some political cover on this issue where they may have been, you know, kind of felt obligated to oppose criminal justice reform before. I think you mentioned something earlier, that was really important, which is that there's a lot of people in the country on the other side, who maybe haven't heard the message or share a lot of the same values with us on this message. We never work together on these things. You know, I think all of those things are pretty important. And so I think I feel what you're saying, Are you anything else you want to say about bipartisanship?

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Michael Mendoza

27:39

I mean, I agree. I agree, Josh. I think this is a critical moment that we do need to take in states like Michigan or other states that are that lean more to the right than the left that has more republicans and in seats than democrats because of nine times out of 10. Those are the states that need the most reform to be done. And it gives us an opportunity to have these conversations across the aisle and educate them on these issues and, and tell them our stories. And tell them what these experiences are like and, and aren't helpful when it's treated with punishment or whatever the issue may be in those states. This is a very important moment for us to look at it through a bipartisan lens, and change hearts and minds. Because if we don't have that opportunity, we won't be able to share these stories. We won't be able to have these conversations to enlighten people who would be opposed to even listen to it from the beginning. And so the fact that a sitting president is pretty much telling his caucus that you know it's okay to have these conversations. It's okay to reach across the aisle and discuss criminal justice reform and how we can deal with this issue from a human perspective. And so I think this is a critical moment and one that cut 50 has done well in terms of being bipartisan in moving in this space through that lens. Because at the end of the day, we want to change everybody's hearts and minds, to get where we need to be. And so

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Joshua B. Hoe

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we have this gigantic platform and like we were talking about the Superbowl ad with the president and Alice Marie Johnson. That really wasn't the only commercial There was also Anquan Bolden commercial, which was in a relationship with the NFL. What did you think about the importance of that, that second commercial?

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Michael Mendoza

29:46

I think it was amazing to see not only the player's coalition get involved with a very important message during the Superbowl about criminal justice reform, but the NFL as well with But the NFL, with their campaign to inspire change, I mean, we're talking about one of the biggest platforms. Yes, it's sports. But it's a sport that has a huge audience that can be impacted by such a powerful message. And, you know, the point of that is, the more people we can get to talk about criminal justice reform, and how we need to change it from punishment to treatment, and how we need to humanize the issue and restore dignity to not just people who are

incarcerated, but people who are impacted by crime. The more of that kind of messages we get on the biggest platforms can really help us change the narrative in a way that tells us you know, there's a problem in this problem needs to be in this problem. And this problem needs to reach as many people as possible They can understand that we need solutions. And actually, I'll just cut off to where it needs to reach as many people as possible.

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Joshua B. Hoe

31:10

Great. So we've gone through a pretty long period of this interview, and I forgot to say congrats on being named director at cut. 50. Can you talk a little bit about what that's meant to you and what you've been up to since you became director?

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Speaker 2

31:23

She has, you know, Thank you, Josh. I really appreciate it. You know, being the national director of cut 50 a bipartisan effort across the country on the biggest platform, one of the biggest platforms has not been easy. You know, I've been home for five years since I've been home I've been doing is just working, going to school and advocating for change. And sometimes it seems like those of us like you and me, Josh, we're consistently talking about this issue. Working on this issue. It can be traumatizing. You know, we're Consistently reliving experiences and telling stories and, you know, trying to fight the good fight. And it's not an easy fight. You know, it's a fight that takes a toll. It's a fight that still makes me feel like I have so much to prove to, to funders too, to the community to administrators to elected officials. There's just so much that we still need to do. Yet. I am so grateful to be in this position, working with people like you working with people like Sam Lewis from aaRC, like Glenn Martin like Esteban Nunez like Amica Mota and April Grayson, like so many people who have similar experiences as we do in this fight together. But what I will say is that I am also so grateful in my experience in this position to work with People who are not formally incarcerated, like Garen Haney, like Jessica Jackson, like Van Jones, like Scott Budnick, like Elizabeth Calvin, all of these amazing people that bring an important element to this fight is something that I'm really grateful for as well. And so, yes, it's a big challenge. Yes, there's a lot of work to do. But to be able to take advantage of a platform that normally Josh, and I'm pretty sure you would agree, without people that are here to support us, we'd never have this kind of platforms. We'd never be able to get into the white house before. We never would have had these opportunities that we do now because people believe in our leadership, Josh, and we need to just continue to build more leadership for formerly incarcerated people in these spaces. And that's just going to take you to know more of a commitment and part of with others to work together on common ground issues to make real change. And so it's been difficult but you know what? I'm talking to you right now, Josh, I'm talking about our passion and we're getting paid for it. So I'm happy all the way around.

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Joshua B. Hoe

34:17

Yeah. So speaking of talking about passion and doing the tough work and helping people become who are impacted, get a chance at the mic in the spotlight. Do you mind talking about one of the events that are coming up that I have a particularly strong attachment to, which is March 25? The Day of Empathy. Yes, I'd love to talk about the Day of Empathy. You know, I'll say one quick thing, before I talk about the day of empathy and it relates to the desert

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Michael Mendoza

34:51

is that my experience of reentry was revolved around advocacy and civic engagement. And you'll be Before it's like what the hell? I mean, what is advocacy? What is civic engagement? Why is that important in civic engagement, whether it's a formerly incarcerated person or somebody impacted, that goes to the capital of their state, and meets with their representative and tells them how they feel about an issue? That's civic engagement. That's advocacy. And when I first learned about advocacy, when I first took my first meeting in the Capitol, to share my story with an elected official, it completely changed my life and gave me a different purpose, a new purpose upon reentry. that to this day has motivated me to continue to fight hard to continue to be pro-social in my community to make a change in that, and I share that with you because that is why I so strongly believe in art Empathy network and that they have empathy, our empathy network, which is, you know, the biggest grassroots network across the country, led by formerly incarcerated people in about 47 different states. And we can empower their leadership and their work within their states on the biggest day of the year, which is March 25, the day of empathy. And what it does is one, we not only help people advocate and gain the same experiences that are critical to reentry, but we empower them by helping them address their own issues within their state and provide the necessary resources that most organizations don't get because of the state they're in or the lack of resources around them. And so for us to be able to cut 50 to be able to provide not just the content have empathy, but a network across this country that can be plugged into resources and training to do their own good work in their own state. That's why I'm excited about this because it's going to build more leaders is going to lift more voices, using our platform on a national level, to spread the message of empathy and hope and dignity. And so that's why I'm really excited about that. I'm so glad, Josh, that you're going to be working with this again this year.

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Joshua B. Hoe

37:30

Yeah, this is my fourth out of four years. So I'm excited to I always tell the story that one of the first times I ever walked into a room after all of my being incarcerated, and feeling all the shame and not getting hired and all that kind of stuff of walking into a room and seeing a bunch of people who are formerly incarcerated, not just walking with dignity, not just, you know, wearing regular folks clothes, not just you know, doing you know, doing work. But getting up in front of legislators and prosecutors and judges, and they were and all of those people were listening to the, you know, the formerly incarcerated people and I, I just I'll never forget how powerful it was for me when I was still feeling a lot of shame right after coming back.

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Michael Mendoza

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Right. You know, what I would add to that is that, you know, it's not just to feel good. It's not just to have Miko and Josh feel good because they go and tell their stories. There's actual objective impact. You know, when we go in there, we, you know, we encourage the introduction of a bill that will, you know, change your sentencing or conditions, or we go in there, and we actually get an elected official to think about an issue differently, and they might end up voting yes, on a bill because of that conversation. So, and we've shown in the past three years during the day of empathy where there have been bills introduced, where there have been bills passed, where there have been movement, no concrete, objective, measurable movement, because of people like you, Josh and so many others who are putting in that good work, not just for a feel-good story, but for actual impact by impacted people. So, you know, I'm really excited about March 25th.

Joshua B. Hoe

Yeah. so what else should we know about what's happening at cut 50 right now?

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Michael Mendoza

39:28

Yeah, so, oh, a lot of things. Josh, you know, some of the things that I'm also really excited about at cut 50 revolve around dignity for incarcerated women, Dini for incarcerated workers.

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Joshua B. Hoe

39:42

So hold on. I've heard the 'Dignity for Incarcerated Women' campaign for several years that the 'Dignity for Incarcerated Workers' is new, right?

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Michael Mendoza

39:49

It is, and I'll actually I'll stop there before I get out to other state workers. So yes, dignity for incarcerated women. You know, I'm so excited about it this year. One cuz I'm not the one that's gonna be doing the work right? I'm not gonna be leading it. Why I'm excited is because we're actually developing the advisory board for Dini for incarcerated women. And on the advisory board, I have many of my sisters from across the country who leave their own organizations and do amazing work, who are going to be our advisors. And tell us you know about the policies in different states that need to be changed. They're going to help us get to, they're going to help us get from passing 10 bills in 10 different states, all-around women's issues of incarceration, where some states were shackling women, whether we're giving birth or not providing the right hygiene or the right amount of hygiene or even limiting hygiene. And so we want to make sure that we reach our goal of passing 20 bills in 20 different states and in fact And impacting more than 50% of the entire population of women they're currently incarcerated than we already have. And so when I look at, you know, Amy Poehler from can do or Sue Ellen from reinvents reentry,

you know, Gail from women who never give up, you know, Tony from Adele's house, Sarita from operation restoration until pika from the loan. I mean, I can go on and on and on not forget, you know, my sister from young women's fitness center Africa and in April, there are so many amazing women who are experts because of their lived experience, who should be leading these issues and who should be working on these issues. And you know, we have, we are grateful to pick a case and from the loan for starting this great work here at cut 50 and we're looking forward to offering that opportunity to another formerly incarcerated individual that can continue in their lives. leadership and provide the right expertise. So that's why I'm excited about dignity for incarcerated women, led by women who are formerly incarcerated. My sisters that I can't wait to work with.

Joshua B. Hoe

That's amazing. You talked about dignity for incarcerated workers to Is there something about that as well?

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Michael Mendoza

42:21

Yes, you know, so we work from a bipartisan angle and ensure that all of our bills have that bipartisan effort. And it's another one that I'm so happy. That is bipartisan in that signee for incarcerated workers, led by our state policy director, Esteban Munoz. It's really something that he worked in partnership with many organizations. But really, it's his passion, his commitment, his experience that is going to help us educate the legislature this year in California through a resolution, a resolution that says no slave wages should no longer exist. And people in prison are getting paid cents to the hour. And we need to address that issue in hopes to provide a livable wage that will allow people in prisons to fulfill their financial responsibilities like restitution, like child's services that will allow people who are currently incarcerated to take care of their financial responsibilities, like child support, like restitution, like their fines and fees. So many things that the state charges people who are currently incarcerated to financially fulfill those kinds of obligations. And so this is an opportunity to ensure that people even in prison who are working hard or who even are fighting fires next to firefighters, get paid livable wages. During their term of incarceration, so they can be financially responsible for their obligations, and also be financially prepared upon release. Where it would make it so much easier to transition with more resources than just \$200. So we're excited about that resolution.

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Joshua B. Hoe

44:21

Yeah, it's amazing. And really exciting. I think, you know, I mean, I've everyone I think has read about the problem with the people who, even some people who've died fighting the fires is incarcerated folks in California. And when they get out, they're not able to find employment as firefighters but at least in this world, they'd earn enough money that they could start to work on their re entry, etc. I'm starting to ask a new regular question this season. You know, the name of the podcast is decarceration nation and you know, given all your experience in prison, and if I

could give you a magic wand, aside from today, Eliminating prisons. What policy Do you think might make really big impact on decarceration?

You know, I can just go so many places that Josh is really not fair to just limited me to one thing.

Joshua B. Hoe

Well, do what you gotta do, what you gotta do man. But you know if it's not, you know, eliminated prisons you know I when I think about the criminal justice system I don't think it's not that I don't want to eliminate prisons it's the way everyone just answers that there'd be no purpose to the question.

Alright, let's let's get that out of the conversation because I don't Yeah, I don't want to put that in there, as well. Can you ask that conversation from your question?

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Speaker 1

45:50

Sir, I'm starting to ask a new question this this season, you know, the name of the podcast is decarceration Nation. So most people I think the first question I asked if they Say a little bit in prisons. But if you know that's not going to help us get any other solutions. So, if you had a magic wand, what policy Do you think might make? You know what rational policy that seems possible? Do you think could make the largest have the largest impact on decarceration? Right now?

I know you said one thing, but I'm gonna say two quick six, okay. Eliminating the death penalty and life sentences. I strongly believe that we really can achieve those two things. And why I point to incredibly long any human senses is because they actually do more harm than good. They don't provide any public safety. They don't get rid of the problem. And we actually do is when we have so many people on death row when we have so many people serving life sentences You're throwing human beings away in a situation that causes hopelessness and despair. And what do you think is going to happen to the other people that don't have a life without censuses? Or are on the death penalty and how that affects them? how it affects the communities? I mean, I hope you've seen Just Mercy Josh, if not, Oil Take you to watch it. But for

Joshua B. Hoe

...my friend, Andy is actually one of the people in the movie. So I was out there pretty, pretty early. You know, I don't know if you know this, but in that movie, that first scene where Brian walks in to meet the prisoners, all the people in that first scene are clients of Bryan Stevenson's like, Andy.

Michael Mendoza

Wow, that's amazing. You know, and those are the things that, you know, the public needs to see when they see a powerful movie such as Just Mercy with the message that, you know, these inhumane sentences do more harm than good. Good, you know, create overcrowding create, you know, more violence within the prison, don't lead to restoration don't need to hold don't need to change don't lead to things that our communities need that this system needs to change with. That's why we need to start with such harsh sentences that do more harm than good.

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Joshua B. Hoe

48:24

That's a great answer. And I said, Andy, but I met David David Garlock who did time in Alabama and was one of Brian's clients. And he's actually one of the speaking roles in the movie, which is pretty cool. So I always ask me

Michael Mendoza

...not to interrupt Josh. But I just came to mind to me that you know why I say those two things is because even data now is showing where people who come home after serving in the last sentence have the lowest recidivism rates, and I challenge people to look at that and think about that. How is it that somebody with such extreme sentences after they come home can have the lowest recidivism rates with such inhumane, with such an inhumane experience and treatment? And I'll tell you thing, it wasn't because of prison. It wasn't because of the prison that people came home that way after such a long time. So what would you say was, you know, trying to boil that answer down to a short phrase is difficult. But I would say the reason I think that is, is because people will find hope, even in the deepest, darkest places, and hold on to that hope, and run with it and find their passion in it. And even in the darkest places, such as prison. You know, there is hope there is love. There is inspiration, there is passion. And that's what we need to build on when we can find it and help other people find it in order to just you know, continue to make our communities safer to change inhumane laws and to get to the place where we all want to be with a less punitive system and a system that prioritizes treatment and rehabilitation.

Joshua B. Hoe

Well, I always ask the same last question. What questions should I have asked that did not question were you hoping that I would put in there, but I left out.

Michael Mendoza

Oh, Josh, I mean, I was hoping he asked me. Actually, that's a good question. A lot of people say I did find that they're just I know, they're just, you know, I'm hoping that it's true. But I, you know, I think they're just being nice most of the time, but no, I don't think these are great questions. You know, I think one of the questions that I consistently get asked, is, you know, what's next, you know, what's next for you? What's next for the movement and I have plenty to

say on those issues. And I'm glad she didn't ask me that all those expecting it but while you just ask the question, so you know, yeah. You know, it's interesting when, you know, we're in a movement and we have these, you know, short term goals, these long term goals. You know, what is the next big thing? Honestly, for me what's next is just to continue to ensure that it's not just about passing a bill. But it's ensure that we follow through and implement these bills, make sure these bills are being implemented the way they're supposed to make sure that the people that are supposed to be impacted are receiving the opportunities in the hope through these policy changes, but most importantly, to provide other opportunities for people who are impacted by the system like myself because we need more leaders. We need more voices. We need to continue to change hearts and minds. So that's what's next for me, just to continue this good work, spread the message of hope, and be the example in a partner that many of us need in this space, so we can work together and not against each other. So that's what's next to me. And I'm looking forward. Great, Josh. I'm really glad to be in this work with you.

Joshua B. Hoe

And thanks so much for taking the time to do this.

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Michael Mendoza

52:27

Thank you, Josh. I really appreciate it. And, man, let's continue to do the good work.

Joshua B. Hoe

Absolutely, man. Have a great day. You too.

Michael Mendoza

Bye. Bye.

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Joshua B. Hoe

52:40

And now my take. It was great to talk with Michael on the eve of the fourth annual day of empathy on March 25. The day of empathy was created because cut 50 envision the criminal justice system that recognizes the humanity of the 2.2 million people currently behind bars in America and moves toward compassion and treatment rather than punishment and incarceration. with empathy, understanding, and love, we can together build the political will needed to rectify the damage caused by the incarceration industry on individuals, families in our society. Last week cut 50 was forced to make a tough decision because of Cova 19. They've decided to go from an in-person model to a virtual model for the fourth annual day of empathy, as I said on March 25. In most states, this means there will be a day of empathy event, and many of the exact same speakers will speak. This speaking will just happen over a zoom

conference line instead of in person. In Michigan, we will be having four panels a panel discussing our jails, Task Force recommendations and pending legislation to implement those recommendations. A panel about clean slate legislation pending passage in our Senate, a panel about a new bill to help protect pregnant incarcerated people and a panel to discuss criminal justice reform with survivors of crime. We have a ton of exciting speakers committed everyone from Chief Justice Bridget McCormick as one Thomas of crime survivors for Safety and Justice. There'll be plenty of members of Michigan's nation outside represented to including our very own member of the jail's Task Force, Monica Gaynor. All of these panels will be made available to everyone in real-time through zoom. And when we made available on the safe and just Michigan's Facebook Live account so that everyone can watch or participate. My understanding is that there will be this will be happening all over the country. In order to find your own event. All you need to do is open Google type in cut 50 just see UT five O is one word, click on dream core cut 50 and then click on the day of empathy. Finally, click on the little link that says find an event near you. I hope all of you will participate in this event closest to you. I've been this will be the fourth year of four that I will participate in the day of empathy and I find it a very powerful event. I hope everyone will pay attention, everyone will participate and everyone will find the event nearest to them.

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