

Interview with Javier Reyes, Founder and CEO, Challenge II Change

Javier Reyes is the Founder and CEO of Challenge II Change, a non-profit organization that offers comprehensive pre-release and re-entry planning and resources necessary for successful transitions back into communities post-incarceration. Javier is a restorative justice practitioner, activist, and prison reform advocate who began fighting for improvements to the criminal legal system during his sixteen year-long federal incarceration. Javier values the humanity of all people and believes that involvement in the criminal legal system should not hinder a person from realizing their rights, fully participating in society, and living a life of dignity.

As an advocate for restorative justice and criminal justice reform, Javier works with officials and county prosecutors in Kane County, Illinois to assist with alternative programs that divert citizens of color away from incarceration. Javier is on the governing board for the Fully Free Campaign, a campaign to end the 1,189 permanent punishments in Illinois that restrict the rights of people with records after incarceration. Previously, as a Civic Leader for Chicago Votes, he assisted in the drafting of the organization's civic education curriculum and wrote the instructor's manual for the curriculum, which is currently taught throughout the Illinois Department of Corrections. Javier is currently a student at North Park University where he is working towards obtaining his master's degree in theological studies with an emphasis in restorative justice.

Javier Reyes was a speaker for the Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law's 2023 Symposium on Current Issues in Sentencing. He spoke on "The First Step Act at Five" panel. After the symposium, we interviewed Javier so his words could exist in the journal's written platform as well.

Q: How was your experience taking part in the Symposium?

A: I felt intimidated. Because you are sitting with scholars. You are in a prestigious school with students who are going to be lawyers and judges and prosecutors. And when you have been separated, and I mean separated in the sense of the law, where you only called the lawyer when you got in trouble. You only saw a prosecutor when you got in trouble. You only saw a judge when you got in trouble. So I'm like, I am not in trouble, yet I am surrounded by all these people. That was definitely fitting to where I am in life today.

Q: We were hoping you could give a broad overview of the services that Challenge II Change provides.

A: Okay. We do job readiness. We do resume writing. We do financial literacy. We do CVI, which is community violence intervention. We do a cognitive behavior program through other partners, and then through our pathway of partners, we are able to give folks mental health and substance abuse services. We also do parenting classes.

We do one thing that everyone laughed at me when I suggested it: etiquette classes. Everybody was like, "oh, what are you going to do, put a book on their head and make them walk straight and lift up their pinky finger?" I am like, "no." There is etiquette in emails. There is etiquette in conversations, business conversations, or even in friendship. Conversation is a part that was far removed in prison. There is no etiquette in prison, so this is a big part of being able to say things like good morning, or even just an introduction, like "hi, my name is Javier," or "hi, I'm with so and so," instead of just showing up and going, "yeah, what's up?" No, you introduce whoever you are with, and you kind-of make small talk. So we have wraparound services. We do an intake, or we find out what is missing—if it is educational components or if it is just a money situation or hardship. We try to identify what that person needs versus just putting everybody in the same box.

Q: If you could just talk a little bit more about your organization Challenge II Change, like the history and the goal of the organization?

A: Well, Challenge II Change started in 2007 when I was in Yazoo, Mississippi Federal Prison. Mr. Leroy Staley was the supervisor of recreation. He asked me, "have you done the best you can in life?" And that question just got to me. It made me reevaluate everything. That night, I went to sleep thinking about that question, and I woke up in the morning still thinking about it, and as I was brushing my teeth, I was looking in the mirror, and I was like holy crap! You know what? I have never been the best son. I have never been the best brother. I have never been the best father. I have never been the best community member. I was never even anyone's best friend. So I did not go to recreation for a whole week because I did not know how to answer Mr. Staley, and that question was really tearing me apart because words that I thought meant something did not really mean what I had thought.

Like the words love, loyalty, and respect were all words in my community, but they do not mean what they mean in general, to everyone. How can you be loyal to someone who says, "hey, here, sell these drugs," or, "here's this gun, go stand on this corner." They are having guys jump on you. How can you love someone who

you are only important to when they can get something out of you? But when you go to jail, you know you are not existing, or that love ends. But here we are still loving that lifestyle, still being loyal to that lifestyle. Even with all of the bad stuff that happens to us, we still gravitate to those words as having meanings associated with that life.

So when I went to recreation—well, Mr. Staley actually sent a staff member to come and get me. And like, “hey, Staley said come to rec,” and I’m like, “I ain’t going,” and he’s like, “he said you were going to say this, so if you do not go, I am going to put you in the SHU,” which is a special housing unit. But he was just joking, and I am like, “whatever I will go.” So I went over there, and Mr. Staley’s like, “why are you not talking to me?” And I am like, “you have asked me a question that no one’s ever asked me before, and I did not know how to respond. I had to really, you know, think back to my childhood, and I could not find anything.” And he says, “you know what then? I’m going to challenge you to change.” So henceforth, Challenge II Change became a thing.

I wrote a curriculum with five different topics. The first topic was institutionalization, the second topic was healthy relationships, the third topic was family, the fourth one was personal responsibilities, and the final one was transformation. So this class just grew and grew and grew to having a waiting list. It even got accepted by the Bureau of Prisons. It was being taught in five different institutions. We were able to give guys a genuine class that was led by their peers—system-impacted people. It was an open dialogue. We were able to deal with issues that sometimes were hard to talk about, and that if no one called you on these topics, then you would continue to do it or engage in wrongful behavior. But we gave an opportunity to a lot of people like, “hey, listen, this is sometimes going to get very personal.”

We would always start the class with, “if there is anything going on in your unit that you would like to change, or maybe address someone in a respectful way, do it now.” And guys were like, “hey, on this day, you know I was waiting to get hot water, and this guy cut in front of me.” And he could respond like, “oh, I just wanted a little bit of hot water.” But he was not understanding that the people had been waiting like ten minutes for that hot water and that caused a stir in the unit. People felt like you were being disrespectful, and you cannot disrespect anybody in jail. So now this person has to react because you disrespected them. So they had space to have that conversation. The guy was like, “man, my bad. I just came from outside, and, you know, I just wanted to jump in the shower real quick.” And I was like, “okay, that still does not justify it.” He felt like if he told that story then that could suffice as to why he jumped the line. And we were like, no, everybody is in line for a reason, and this is how we do things here—you respect people where they are at and in their place, and you fall in line because everyone, I am sure, would want to just go run up there and grab some hot water real quick and go about their business. So he was like, “I did not know that, so I apologize to whoever I disrespected that day.” It just kind of snowballed. So Challenge II Change kind of snowballed, and I was able to go to different institutions to implement this program.

Q: Do you think it made a difference that you were someone who was in that same situation? You were a person who was incarcerated, and everyone that you were talking to, it was not like you were some outsider who did not have these experiences? Do you think that impacted how receptive people were to you? Or do you think that really helped propel your program?

A: Absolutely! I was a credible messenger. I was not someone that did not have lived experiences or I was not someone that could not relate to you. So when you had a group of men that you ate with, you played basketball with, you were in the education department with, they knew that when they sat down with you, they were not getting just some story or an empty “yeah, I got you” or “yeah, I’m going to look into that,” you know? It was credible. It was men helping men that were in the same situation to figure out that while certain things we do not always have the answer to, as a collective group of individuals who have different but almost similar lived experiences, we can kind of lift each other up in times of depression. It was a community thing. No one went through the Challenge II Change alone. No one went through anything by themselves.

Q: What happened after you left prison?

A: I had never done any of this business stuff before I got Challenge II Change registered. I got started on my 501(c)(3) status. I needed everything to be legit so that way I could present myself as a legitimate organization that someone could look up and find trustworthy. And then it just spiraled. We got our grant from IDA of \$475,000 for our first transitional housing project. We purchased the property, which we are doing a complete rehab to. We are addressing situations there that lead to, you know, suicide and that lead to homelessness. So I am addressing all of those issues just by opening this house.

At this house, we are not going to be like, “you need some place to sleep? Figure it out.” No, we would start with an evaluation—we have to do an evaluation. We have to find out what is missing. If you don’t know how to manage money, then obviously the first thing we want to do is connect you to some financial literacy and banking 101 training, and maybe start a pathway to home ownership. If it is mental health or substance abuse related, then we have our partners at Lighthouse that are going to be able to help you. We have different partners that do all of those things. So we would tailor a plan for the individual. And, of course, there is accountability. This person has to agree and sign a contract to do all of these things up front in order to be able to stay with us. So this is a program that, even outside of having this house, has worked. We find them housing everywhere; it could be Champagne, Chicago, Urbana. We take people and we run them through everything. I am super serious with them about not wasting my time because if you are not ready to do something different with your life, I know someone else that is.

We did not have resources though, so everything was out of pocket. So I was looking at my bank account. I was not working, but I had saved because when you are in prison, you can live off twenty-five dollars a month, right? You buy your ramen noodles, you make sure you have your two bars of soap, you buy your toothpaste, you know? You buy everything according to your use, so that you can

live. So out here, I am like, “okay, I do not need to be in the bar,” or, “I do not need to be eating at these fancy restaurants.” I buy simple things. I buy bacon, I buy eggs, I buy my bread, I buy my lunch meat, I buy tuna. They are like, “what do you eat tuna for?” I am like, “bro, tuna is delicious!” So I do not have those real big expenses. Now I live according to my means. I do not need Louis Vuitton shoes or belts, you know. The belt you are never going to see because your shirts cover it. I do not need those things, so I was able to save a lot of money, and now, to this day, I have been able to not have to work and focus on Challenge II Change and still be okay. It was never without worries, though, of whether I am going to be able to pay my rent if something happens or if I get sick. But it has been God’s work. So it has not been easy, but it has not been hard either, if that makes sense.

The hard part is that we are dealing with a lot of people who have years and years and years of trauma. A lot of people think that I am going to help this guy, but then, in a week or two weeks, they quit. Then I hear that the dude is a liar. I reply, “you knew that man. He has not been wanting to change for the past twenty years of his life.” Then they tell me, “well, man, I am not dealing with that.” I say, “well, okay, thank you, now give them to me,” and then I get them on track, and they are like, “how do you do it?” I am like man, it is patience, and you have to understand that no one wants to be in this situation. It takes listening to them, understanding their triggers, their traumas, and a lot of patience to figure out what will help. So just understanding all of these things, working with what Challenge II Change is developing, it really puts us in a position to be successful in helping people to understand that this is not a sprint, it is a marathon. No one—no one is patting you on your back, saying, “you did a good job!” or “you got the homeless guy in an apartment!” No one is doing that because they do not even know that homeless person, and some people really do not care if he has a home. But we still show up and do this work because it is important work.

Q: I was wondering if you could just speak a little bit about, especially for those who do not know and do not realize, how having a criminal record affects someone’s life post release.

A: There is an organization called Fully Free. They scrubbed the Illinois legislation, and they found over 1,000 laws that hinder people with a conviction. The top three are on housing, education, and work. If you have a felony conviction, you cannot even live in certain communities. The work component is also tricky to navigate. There are just so many barriers, like I go to apply for a job, and two other people apply. They do not have felonies, but I do. I check the box and guess what? I am not getting a call.

There are a lot of barriers that exist, but our organization is creating a table where we do not have to go and sit at anybody else’s table. If you come home and you have certain skills, we want to develop them more, and if you do not have certain skills, we want to provide them. We are doing a technology class starting this Saturday for people who want to learn technology basics, and we have Google executives who are going to be teaching this class. So now we have partners with this organization called Rise that is going to give technology training to people that

normally would not get it. We also want to identify kids with a passion for technology in our communities that do not ever get a chance to learn about it. Maybe there is someone who can play a video game and decode it and can figure out all of these tricks in the video game. So one time I asked this kid who was interested in video games, “have you tried coding?” They respond, “no.” But once they got started, it was insane. This guy, he never had any training, but he learned it so well and was able to go through the phases and do everything that he was asked to do.

Now we are going to have a computer class so that folks can learn technology for a job, so people will have an opportunity to veer off from factory work, or maybe driving a forklift, if they want to. We want to be able to give jobs that are sustainable, where people do not have to worry about living paycheck to paycheck. They can develop a career, go back to school, and finish if they want.

It is hard—it is super hard when you leave your community, and your community does not accept you back because of some of the politics that exist. So I say this to kind of just end it. When you go to jail, they say you are paying your debt to society. But what they do not tell you is that this debt comes with interest—interest that you will never be able to pay off in a job interview or if you get pulled over. But we hope that with programs like the ones that we offer, we can find ways to pay off that interest and help people be accepted back into the community.