

AMANDA WOOG: This is going to be about you and your experience. I have the notebook out, one, I have just a small script for the beginning to say who we are and where we are and when this is being filmed and that kind of thing. I think that's sort of been the oral history tradition.

DOUGLAS SMITH: Okay.

WOOG: Have folks do that. Then from there I'll probably just ask you to tell us about yourself. Where you were born, those kinds of questions just to sort of get started.

SMITH: Right.

WOOG: Part of why I have this, like a pen ready is just, you might touch on something, I might try to guide it a little bit but for the most part, I don't want to talk very much, and I want you to do the talking, so I might—If you say something that I think we might want to go back to, I might write a note and say you mentioned this, let's go back and tell me about, whatever. But generally like open-ended questions that can just get you going and give you guidance a little bit.

SMITH: Right.

WOOG: We did kind of talk about, thematically, what the project is about. About deaths in custody obviously, and deaths in prison and jail. Some of the things that I'd like to touch upon are healthcare, and the experience of death in prison. Those are things like, hoping like kind of thematically we can talk about but not necessarily trying to lead you into specific questions about those things, if that makes sense.

SMITH: Okay. That sounds good.

WOOG: Okay.

SMITH: Yeah.

WOOG: We're going to try and keep with the narrative part of it as much as possible.

SMITH: Am I sitting in such a way that is—

MATTHEW GOSSAGE: It looks good as long as you're comfortable. You can look at Amanda for all the questions. Amanda will be asking questions. Yeah, feel free to take a break or let Amanda or I know if you want to take a break or pause or restate something.

SMITH: Sounds good.

WOOG: Okay.

SMITH: We'll just have a conversation.

WOOG: Yeah.

SMITH: Right.

GOSSAGE: I'm going to switch this fan off. Just let us know if you get hot or anything.

SMITH: Okay.

WOOG: Are you comfortable? Because we do have control over the thermostat. We were kind of tampering with it earlier.

SMITH: Right. Right now I am comfortable, yes.

WOOG: Okay, but let—Gabe had showed me where it was.

SMITH: Never turn off the fan on a formerly incarcerated person. I'm just saying, who's done time in a Texas prison—I'm joking.

WOOG: We do have A/C.

SMITH: Yes.

WOOG: I do know about, there's that program that sends fans to folks in prison. Do you know about that program?

SMITH: Well—

WOOG: I can't remember what it's called.

SMITH: Yes, I mean I think that they make funds available so someone who's indigent will be able to obtain a fan.

WOOG: Yeah.

SMITH: Right. Fans are absolutely critical.

WOOG: Yeah, and have the right to have access to them.

SMITH: Otherwise you don't have access, but I mean it's not survivable without a fan so everyone would have a fan, even if you—I think some of the exceptions, and the really important exceptions are like if you're in transfer facility. So a transfer facility, you're often there up to about two years. There are 10 buildings. They're metal siding and they pack about 100 people into a dormitory setting. I believe it was 54 bunks so 108 people, all sort of in a bunk along a wall.

In the center, you'll have day room. Right in view of the picket is the shower, so there's really just zero privacy. You can live there for up to 18 months of your life. The only fan available are the fans that are provided by the unit, so they'll have maybe one industrial fan, at least in the unit where I was, it was one industrial fan. They ultimately put in two and in order to keep at least some level of circulation. I'm not sure words can describe what that felt like in there.

I mean that's not a lot of circulation for that large of a space and the temperatures are—there's no thermostat, you just know that this is hotter than you've probably ever experienced. So I remember, to give an example, you'd be sitting at one of the day room tables, and the day room tables are so hot, you have to lay down a towel in order to sort of be comfortable at the table.

I remember like we'll be playing chess or something like that and just reaching across to pick up a piece, you're dripping sweat on the pieces. It's another reason for having the towel, yeah. So that's an important exception for the lack of a fan because that's a long, long period in someone's life. I remember, one of the ways that the prison system alleviated this, they were trying to alleviate this, is that maybe once or twice a day they would bring around barrels of ice water.

Okay, so it's a 2,000 person unit in these metal buildings on either side of a cement pathway that they call "the bowling alley" because it ran the entire length of the unit, on either side. So basically the crews would start on one of the unit and begin to work their way towards the other end of the unit going into each building with the ice. They didn't have enough ice makers to make enough ice for that many people, so by the time they would reach our building, it was lukewarm water. That was their way of alleviating things, so—Yeah, fans are absolutely critical. Yeah.

WOOG: I have a follow-up question to that.

SMITH: Sure.

WOOG: But I'm going to quickly just say who we are, where we are—

SMITH: Okay.

WOOG: Today is Saturday, May 13th and we're here in Austin, Texas, with Douglas Smith. This is Amanda Woog. I'm doing the interviewing, and Matt Gossage is doing the video recording. We're doing this interview as part of a collaborative project between the Texas After Violence Project and the Texas Justice Initiative.

GOSSAGE: I'm just going to move the microphone—

WOOG: Okay.

SMITH: It's a little low.

GOSSAGE: It actually isn't in the shot, just—

SMITH: Felt like I was going to head butt it.

GOSSAGE: It looks close but it's very far away in the camera.

WOOG: I want to return to what you were kind of, the picture you were painting.

SMITH: Right.

WOOG: Maybe we can start just from the beginning. You can talk about yourself, and where you're from, yeah.

SMITH: Yeah. Well, I was born in New Jersey. My parents had grown up on either end of Philadelphia on the New Jersey side. My father grew up on the waterfront in Camden and my mom grew up a few blocks from the Delaware River in Palmyra, which is on the north side of Philadelphia. My dad was the Ben Franklin Bridge, my mom was the Betsy Ross Bridge, right. We kind of moved all over. My dad was somewhat restless in his career, and so he changed jobs pretty much every two years. We moved, New Jersey, three different places in New York. Iowa, then Austin, all before I was in second grade so I was pretty used to moving.

WOOG: Do you remember what brought your family to Austin?

SMITH: My dad had a sales position for a signal company, like the red-light camera. Not red-light cameras—signals. traffic signals. They had changed their location to Austin and so from Iowa, we relocated to Austin, and they were able to buy their first home. We got a little 1,600 square foot, four-bedroom in northwest Austin. I pass it every so often. Life was pretty good, yeah. Austin, my

mom fell in love with Austin, and my dad kept on changing jobs but we just stopped moving. I ended up going to, moved closer into Austin later.

Graduated from Anderson High School, went to the air force, then came back to go to St. Edward's University. That's kind of where—my dad had gone to St. Edward's late in life. He got tired of being restless and decided to get his degree in his 40s, and so that was the university where he went, so I decided to go there as well. Then I got my master's in social work at UT. My parents were very much informed by the Kennedy era, and War on Poverty and so on. Even though they themselves weren't very politically involved, that was the language of our household, so going into a more progressive type field was just—felt like a foregone conclusion, felt like the most natural thing in the world.

WOOG: What made you decide to get into the air force, and how long did you serve?

SMITH: Oh, so—well I wasn't a particularly good student in high school. My parents had divorced when I was 12 and we went through a little bit of upheaval in the household, and I just kind of lost all motivation and that went on for a long time, so I just never really developed many academic skills. I remember I graduated high school, I was still working at a movie theater for \$4 an hour and going to ACC and not going to class.

I was basically dropped from my classes by my instructor, and realized the summer after graduating that there were other people in my class who were moving on and doing things with their lives. I think I had seen a movie that was sort of glorifying the military, and my dad had been in the navy and all that. It just felt like something that I could do, maybe go get a trade, get some sort of direction.

I wish I knew about AmeriCorps at that time. Went into the air force, it actually did me a lot of good because I wasn't good academically, and I chose to go into the Spanish linguist vocational track, which was heavily academic, lots and lots of classroom time, more than, I would say more than 18 months of pure classroom time. So there's the Spanish language instruction, and then there's the intelligence school in San Angelo.

There was an imposed academic rigor to it. You had to show your study card. If you failed a class and your study card wasn't filled out, you would have to explain yourself to the commander, and no one wanted to have to explain themselves to the commander. It helped me develop academic skills so by the time I went into St. Edward's, the idea of not showing up to class, not showing up to class prepared, it sort of filled in the gap for me. That's when I began to excel.

WOOG: Were you based in Texas in your time in the air force?

SMITH: In the air force? No, it was the, the language school was in Monterey, California. I'm going to admit that that's entirely why I chose to be a Spanish linguist, was because I wanted to go spend eight, nine months of my life in Monterey, California and go to the beaches and be near Big Sur and all that. Then I did a little bit of time in San Angelo for the intelligence school. Then I was transferred to, of all places, Offutt Air Force Base, Omaha, Nebraska. Yes, which, yeah, Spanish linguist in Omaha, Nebraska, a lot of fun.

WOOG: How old were you when you came to St. Ed's?

SMITH: Oh, how old was I? Well, that was, it was January 1992, and I believe that I had just turned 22.

WOOG: You spent the next four years in Austin at St. Ed's?

SMITH: Well, I had received some academic credit from the air force, so it was two and a half years to finish my time at St. Ed's. I worked as, I went to work at the crisis hotline here in town as a—I just volunteered. I have a history of some mood disturbance and so I had experienced some suicidal thoughts in my life, particularly during college. Even though I was doing well academically, there's something about getting into sort of your late adolescence, early adulthood that it just sort of kicks in really hard.

And so as soon as I finished school, I just wanted to do something because of my own experience, so I volunteered at the crisis hotline. They immediately hired me as a trainer and I ultimately became their volunteer coordinator, training new counselors. Again, I just always gravitated towards those type of social work type roles. It was only a few years before I ultimately signed up at UT for the social work track.

WOOG: What was college like for you?

SMITH: College, it was a thrill to get As in courses. I mean I really enjoyed that, I didn't—I mean I really enjoyed that type of academic validation, which I had never received in [high school]. I loved St. Ed's because the classes were very small and there was an expectation that you were going to participate. I really loved the class discussions and I loved them even more in social work training. It was just, it was—The classes were a thrill to me. I was the guy on the front row and joined in every discussion and loved the group projects. It was a lot of fun for me.

When I got into the, when I got further along in my master's studies I went through another bout of depression, had to be hospitalized for a short while. I ended up rethinking how I was doing grad school. I decided that I would quit my part time job and just take on university, just research assistant jobs and things like that. That allowed me to do all manner of things, so I could join student groups and I could intern. I interned in so many different places that my computer password was "intern." It's not anymore, I just want to clarify that.

WOOG: What was one of the place where you interned?

SMITH: Center for Public Policy Priorities was one, yeah. I wrote reports on sort of, they were doing sort of a state of the state in terms of educational progress, and I got to write some of those reports.

WOOG: You also mentioned you loved the group projects. Are there any projects that stand out that you remember particularly enjoying?

SMITH: Yeah, I'm trying to think of one that stands out. I remember once, one of my professors created this project where we were head of a community group in a small size, small Texas community, maybe about 100,000 population, so relatively small compared to like Austin. We were trying to address various community needs and we had to, we developed like a healthcare model to work with indigent clients and things like that. It was all fictional but it was interesting to see ourselves in that role, actually sort of addressing community needs as a group. We began to see ourselves actually doing that out in the world.

WOOG: What do you think you liked the most about the experience in the school social work? It sounds like you loved it. What do you think it was that made you love it so much?

SMITH: Well, it was also, it was, I mean it was so super supportive. They were, the instructors gave lots and lots of positive feedback, so the more you'd get involved the more that you'd sort of hear the praise of instructors, which is pretty meaningful to someone who's maybe struggled academically in their past. I liked the friendships, given that I had a background that—I went through a tough time, middle school, high school. It was, to have a mental health issue plus all of the things that go along with parents that break up and things like that. It sort of makes you feel like an outsider. You walk into a highly, highly supportive and challenging environment like that, it

can, I don't know, it can really help to, help you to access some of your strengths that you didn't know were there.

WOOG: What did you do after your school social work?

SMITH: I began working for a Representative Elliott Naishtat. He hired me as a—He was a Chairman in his committee, or in the Human Services Committee, so that was right back before the full republican takeover of basically all elected—all state-wide elected offices, so we had a Democratic speaker at the time. Bob Bullock had just died, so they had a republican Lieutenant Governor.

It was Rick Perry had just taken over as governor when Bush went off and so it was Ratcliffe, and Ratcliffe was one of the, what they called one of the 51 percent republicans, where they looked at both parties and they figured out which of the parties they believe in, at least 51 percent.

Moderate republicans don't exist anymore. They've pretty much killed their own. I got to join a very progressive member of the legislature, who was interested in fighting poverty and fighting Draconian policies. It was, yeah, that was an amazing time, right? It was just right before sort of this conservative wave just overwhelmed Texas.

WOOG: Do you remember specifically any of the work that you did while you were with Representative Naishtat?

SMITH: Yeah. I worked on—Clinton and Congress had passed the Welfare Reform Act in '96 but Texas, anticipating that Act, had passed their own welfare reform in '95, so they received a waiver to basically do a program that was similar to what the feds had prescribed but with some variations from federal standards.

And so that waiver was going to terminate in 2001, and Texas was slated to have to revert to the federal standards, which would have caused us to miss some opportunities like what do you count as a work activity if someone has zero vocational skills or no GED? What do you count as work? Does working at eight bucks an hour at a dry-cleaners, does that count as work or does maybe going to get a GED or developing some vocational skills count as work?

We were able to make sure that we had a more expansive definition of what work meant. It was interesting because we actually tried to codify that and it was vetoed by Perry. We were part of the Father's Day massacre. Then we went to the Board of Human Services, that was back when there were 11 Human Services agencies.

We worked with them to pass it as a rule, so it was no surprise that in [2003], under Perry's leadership, they disbanded most Human Services agencies, including Department of Human Services, and rolled them into four agencies, and one umbrella agency with maximum control by the governor.

WOOG: What do you think made you decide to go into policy rather than direct services after being on the hotline and going to school for social work?

SMITH: I'll be honest. Because of some of my problems with mood, I was already starting to self-medicate. Even though I felt really supported in the school of social work, I was deeply troubled inside, and so I was beginning to sort of drink daily. I think I'd been drinking daily for a while but it was becoming more, I was becoming more dependent on it. A lot of my psychiatric issues were exacerbated by drinking and then vice versa.

I think I also realized how sort of emotionally troubled I was because I didn't really react well to moments when maybe I wasn't connecting with a client like during—I was fine on the phone

maybe doing peer counseling but in person, like if the client wasn't really sort of responding or if the client was giving me negative feedback, I wasn't responding in a really mature way. I realized that wasn't, I was realizing that I had some limitations.

I was also really getting charged politically, so there were two things going on and I'm finding that I'm getting involved in student groups that are more geared towards sort of fighting poverty, fighting the Welfare Reform Act, defending housing rights and things like that. That was also a thrill to me. I didn't really feel like I was missing anything, in fact, I felt like I was moving away from something that I wasn't very, wasn't particularly good at or I just didn't have some of the inner resources to do clinical practice, yeah.

WOOG: Were you with Representative Naishtat for the session or beyond the session?

SMITH: I worked through the '01 session. Then I went to work with Mike Villarreal, he was a sophomore representative from San Antonio at that time and I became his legislative director. I think that's when, working with Elliot Naishtat, he had a super high standard, he was constantly sort of checking in on your work and the office was, so the office was able to sort of maintain a really high standard. Working in the next office, I didn't get a lot of sort of daily check-ins. There wasn't a high sense of accountability.

I think that just sort of opened up the door for some of the more destructive ways that I was dealing with my emotional struggles that began to become more pronounced. The drinking was now daily, I was at least at a six pack a day. I was beginning to take benzodiazepines to help with anxiety attacks, I was beginning to have real panic attacks. I was able to sort of show up and I was able to do what appeared to be a good job, on the surface, but I was beginning my descent. I was there through the '03 session.

We did get one bill passed, something on early care and education. He got other bills passed but that was the one I really kind of spearheaded. I'm going to be honest, he was pretty happy to see me go. At that point, it was really just a mad rush to keep others from seeing what he caught a glimpse of. I still had the wherewithal to go and ask the UT school of social work if I could teach as an adjunct. I'm still doing my career even though I know in my heart of hearts that I'm descending. I taught classes, I went to work for another policy organization, Disability Rights, but it was called Advocacy Incorporated back then.

I began that sort of pattern that someone in that advanced stage of alcoholism goes through, where maybe you could work a year, possibly two. You look great at first but then people begin to see. I'm starting to change jobs a lot. By about '05, I had been asked to leave American Cancer Society, I was working on their state contracts. That's when the downward slide became more, it was like, it just went into hyper drive. Like it was just, I was flat out suicidal. I even began planning that.

WOOG: What, if any, kind of medical and mental healthcare were you receiving at that time?

SMITH: I was seeing a psychiatrist and so part of it is my fault. I heard someone say, and the addictionologists say that the two most dangerous initials to anyone trying to achieve recovery from substance abuse disorder are M.D. You go to a psychiatrist and you state your symptoms, you're going to get relief. One pill went to two pills, two pills to three pills, three pills to four pills.

I ended up having a whole medicine cabinet worth of different things, one of them highly addictive, one of them a sleep aid that was highly questionable, I think the FDA was looking at it, and when mixed with alcohol is extremely dangerous. Benzos mixed with alcohol, extremely dangerous. Mood stabilizers, antidepressants, everything. And so yeah, I was getting help, but part of it I can't completely blame on the M.D.s.

I also wasn't saying to them, "By the way, I'm drinking six, seven, sometimes eight beers a day. I hit a point in the day where I absolutely have to start, otherwise it starts to get ugly for me. Like I have to start drinking at 5 p.m." It was so strange because I was still so physically active. Like I would exercise and then drink. It was strange. I could show up to work and then drink. I could pick up my daughter and then drink.

Like I could do the things like in my mind you're supposed to do as a responsible adult that had to drink. It was doing no favors to the anxiety and the depression, it was just making it worse. Like I hit this point where I—I remember my wife at the time, we're no longer married, she was trying to get more clinical hours. She was also a social worker and she was trying to get more clinical hours working at Shoal Creek Hospital in the evenings and so I remember I'd be home with our daughter and drinking and watching our daughter. I'd put her to bed around eight.

I remember the weight of depression and just self-loathing was so crushing. I would walk back downstairs to get another beer but I'd end up just sitting down on the stairs. Like I couldn't even descend all the way down the stairs. I'd just lay there and say, "I can't do anymore."

WOOG: Did people closest to you at that point know what you were going through?

SMITH: I don't think anyone—I think my ex-wife was really miserable and unhappy, as you might imagine, living in an environment like that. I was still doing the things, I was still picking up the child and all that, she just doesn't really have a husband, you know? I don't think outside of that little household, there was no one saying, Wow, we're worried about Doug. Do you mind if I press pause and use the restroom really quick?

WOOG: No, not at all.

SMITH: Yes, okay. Sorry, we haven't even gotten to prison yet.

WOOG: I know. [TAPE CUTS]

SMITH: I'm going to be 50 in, not this December but the following. I want to do an Ironman before I'm 50.

WOOG: This is on your way to do a full Ironman?

SMITH: Yes. Yeah, yeah.

WOOG: Wow, that's incredible.

SMITH: Yeah.

WOOG: Where's your full one going to be? Do you know?

SMITH: I haven't decided yet. Yeah, there's, Wisconsin has one in September. It's got to be sort of—cool but not cold. There's one in the Woodlands in April but I can't imagine that humidity.

WOOG: Yeah.

SMITH: Right.

WOOG: Plus I find those kind of things, at least my friend who deal with marathons, sometimes they use it as an excuse to check out different places too. Like Wisconsin sounds more exotic than the Woodlands to me.

SMITH: Yeah, I'm with you on that one. Shall we just pick up or where do you—

WOOG: Is that okay?

SMITH: Yeah.

WOOG: I'll maybe, yeah, so we'll pick up kind of where we left off. I was going to —You were kind of talking about, I think your job was at the American Cancer Society, and your daughter, and your wife, so maybe if you could tell us your first experience with the police. Like when your health issues and your addiction issues kind of led to your first confrontation with law enforcement.

SMITH: Yes, so I'll try to, yeah—I can tell you that there was a suicide attempt in '05 and that's when I began to, I tried to stop drinking so much alcohol. I tried to cut—I admitted to my psychiatrist that the drinking is out of control, so he immediately stopped the benzodiazepines. The medical profession did respond appropriately when they had all of the information. I started trying to access like 12-step programming and things like that, but I was in a dire state, I can't underestimate that.

I was in a dire frame of mind. I was barely hanging on mentally, and thoughts of suicide. Now I've taken away the alcohol, now the benzos are gone, so I'm having to have to live within my own skin and that's about the last place I want to live. By January of '06, I was so sort of out of—feeling so out of control that it occurred to me that I was either going to commit suicide or I was going to need something to help me feel better. It was this, just thought came into my head, it was like it was just planted there.

That thought, I hadn't been nursing this thought, I hadn't been romancing it, it just hit my head. It just arose in my brain and that was that drugs would make me feel better. I remember I had done one of my clinical internships at the drug court and I remembered enough from that experience to know where the people I worked with had found their drugs.

And so, I drove out to that location and I flagged someone down and they got in my car and I told them that I just needed something. And they—I didn't even specify what it is that I wanted. He directed me to drive to a certain, to a housing project. I gave him money, he walked in, he came out and he pulled out a pipe. He put crack cocaine in that pipe and he smoked it, and then he put more in and he gave it to me.

For that moment, all my problems went away. And at that moment, I could think of little else. Yeah. For the next 18 months I could think of little else. It was every time I'd use, something worse would happen, like I'd miss a mortgage payment or I was late picking up my daughter. Just something bad would happen every single time I used, so I'd just hold on for like a month, I'd go to all these 12-step groups and things like that.

Finally, I just got desperate. I'd go to treatment programs. Once it came out that there was a drug problem too, that's when the alarm bells got sounded and my wife kicked me out. There was this idea that if I go to treatment, and things like that I could maybe, maybe sort of salvage that marriage. The thing is, it's like I could never get more than a month.

Like I'd try, like I'd really fight for it. I was very positive, I loved kind of like being honest and getting access to, going to groups and being around people who had suffered as well. Like, I'd get really excited but there would always just come some night when I was miserable and dark inside, and I'd go use again and something worse would happen.

When I realized the marriage wasn't going to work out, I'd lost the last of the professional jobs, I was basically just, I don't know, I don't even remember where I was working, but I lost the last of the professional jobs. I remember I was down to my last \$50. I had payday loans from whatever

temporary job that I was working. And I—this thought hit my head that if I walked into a bank and gave them a note, asked for \$500, I could get \$350 worth of crack, I could get a hotel room and then I could get \$100 worth of heroin, finish the crack, shoot the heroin and die.

That was my plan. I'm not a very good chemist because I guess heavy amounts of stimulants, heavy amounts of narcotics, I don't know, but I survived it. I ended up turning myself into the police, and so that was my first time in county jail, well, first time for any extended period.

WOOG: How long were you in jail that time?

SMITH: 26 days, yeah. It was bad because I admitted that I was suicidal. Yeah, I'd given this as testimony before at the capital, yeah. It's the idea that anyone would admit that they're suicidal inside of a county jail—it boggles my mind, like who would do that to themselves? Who would ever, ever ask for psychiatric help inside of a county jail? Like you are asking to be tortured. You're asking to be placed in isolation. You're asking to be stripped, placed in rubber rooms, strapped to chairs, placed in isolation next to people who are hallucinating and screaming at the walls. That's what you're asking for. Like who would ever admit that they're suicidal? I did, I made that mistake. It is probably one of the most traumatic experiences of my life. That was my first time in county jail.

WOOG: Which jail was that?

SMITH: Travis County jail, yeah.

WOOG: Was the whole time spent in isolation?

SMITH: No. I figured out what they were doing, and so after about three days, it felt like about three days, when the psychiatrist finally came, I said, "Oh, I'm doing fine, yeah. That must have been the crack binge. Yeah, I'm fine now," So they'd let me out and I got into another cell in isolation in a psych unit but I could at least leave the cell for a couple of hours and I could eat at tables with other human beings. A counselor would come by and I'd just tell her, "I'm doing fine, I'm doing fine." They ultimately sent me to a dormitory setting in general population.

WOOG: Were you provided with, you kind of described like the psychiatric care that you were given, but was there any medical care, was there a medical component?

SMITH: Yeah. So, they did—at Travis County, I did see a doctor. He basically, he went ahead and continued to prescribe the antidepressants. I don't think he switched them. He stopped my mood stabilizers and—yeah, so I do remember they charged you like \$10 per visit and then \$10 per prescription, so, like, it was, I think I had, I want to say I had two prescriptions, so every month you'd have to pay \$30, but I was only there for 26 days that time.

WOOG: Where did you go after the 26 days?

SMITH: My mom, inexplicably, she'd visited me and realized, it was an agonizing decision for her because she saw how quickly the descent was, and I just robbed a bank and who knows what the hell's going to happen if they let me go. But she went ahead and paid for an attorney, and the attorney negotiated with Travis County, or with the court that I could get a PR bond, I'd have to be on electronic monitor and I would have to go to my own treatment.

I had pretty much exhausted all resources at that point, but my mom paid \$3,000 for me to go to an intensive outpatient, so I did that. I was on electronic monitor for nine months. What's interesting is that after the intensive outpatient, I started looking for a job and I was able to find one. Like I worked—I didn't have to put that I had a criminal record because I was still pre-trial.

I admitted to the temporary firm that I was, my circumstance, but she said, "It's not going to come up so let's just not say anything." She placed me at this trade school where I could, for just a temporary assignment, to help place basically like medical assistants in jobs, like so calling medical facilities and trying to get people jobs. The director of the school ended up offering me a full-time position teaching like some of their required classes, not the medical component, but their other required classes.

I'm teaching at a trade school with an ankle monitor on my leg. I remember I even won "instructor of the quarter" working there, yeah. I wish I could say that was the end of my criminal justice experience but it isn't. It was like within weeks of me getting off the electronic monitor, I got on to deferred adjudication. They saw that I was, it was pretty clear that I was dealing with addiction and so they weren't wanting to sort of throw the book at me.

But I barely made it weeks after getting placed on probation. I don't know what it was. I think it, I'm going to tell you the truth. I think it was the reality that I'm able to start my life again. Like I think it was just the reality. I'm no longer going to be living with my mom. I'm able to actually pursue a career again.

I'm actually able to reintegrate with my daughter and start living a life and sort of going down that track again, and it freaked me out. I was just, I was still in a very vulnerable mental state and I ended up relapsing, and relapsed again, relapsed again. I became homeless. The Veteran's Administration offered me a placement and they tried to help me but ultimately it was like six, eight months later that I went on a, I just hit that zero point of desperation, "I need to get high or I need to die."

I used the last of my money. When I ran out, I realized that I could no longer go back to the VA facility so I was essentially homeless again. I just said, "That's it." That's when the crime was. I went on a one day crime spree. I walked into a convenience store. I pretended to have a gun. I pretended to point that gun. It was actually a highlighter marker.

I pretended to point that at the—or I did point that highlighter marker at that poor man's head. He opened the register and I pulled the money out. I made a beeline for the drug dealer, used that, ran out. Went to a motel at like, I don't know, it felt like two in the morning, I don't know what the time was, but I robbed her, that clerk. Then I used that, those drugs.

I think it was in the middle of the afternoon, I walked into another convenience store and did the same thing and bought more drugs. At that point, the man chased me out the door and he got my license plate. And so I had just enough time to go to the crack dealer. I drove and I saw that I was being followed by what looked like an unmarked police car. And so I jumped out of my car, ran to a ditch and jumped over a fence, and I used the rest of the crack.

I could hear helicopters going overhead and—I was, I remember trying to hang myself in that ditch, like on a tree. I didn't, it was like the tree was flimsy. I couldn't—I couldn't—I didn't have ropes or anything, I was using my jeans. It made it so my feet were still touching the ground and I just, I remember, was like, "This is just ridiculous." I was dying of thirst, like I had lost I think like—I remember when I got weighed in later, it looked as though I had lost 12 pounds in that just 24 hour period. I just had no water left. I put the jeans back on, jumped over the fence and went back to where my car was and that's where the police were.

WOOG: And so you were booked in jail—

SMITH: Yes.

WOOG: —Immediately after.

SMITH: Yes, mm-hmm. And I did not tell them that I was suicidal.

WOOG: How long were you in jail then?

SMITH: That's the last freedom that I would have for five years, eight months. There was no opportunity for PR bonds or any type of bond. Yeah, I was in. They put me in the, because it was charged as aggravated robbery, they put me in the violent, the area for violent offenses. So that means that I had an actual cell, I wasn't in a dorm, so I was in a cell. It was strange because it was like, I just, like my life was over.

I remember, like I'm not sure how to, like how do you exist at this point? I remember like just trying to meditate. Just like, How do I stop my brain from working? How do I stop experiencing a sense of being alive or being sort of part of existence? It's strange, I don't know if it was sort of, some sort of divine force or what have you, but of all the places they would have put me, they put me in the cell block that was served by a volunteer who was a meditation instructor and came twice a week, twice a week for three hour meditations, like readings and meditations and things like that. I basically spent my county jail time doing meditation, yoga. I did, I started like reading the bible because it's like you're just sort of accessing faith, a different way of looking at yourself, you know?

WOOG: Had you ever meditated before that?

SMITH: Well, I'd been sort of in and out of the 12-step, so yeah, I'd been sort of exposed to different types of meditation. 12-steps has some level of meditation in it but I don't think I'd experienced meditation on this level, where you can literally turn your mind off. You're not doing it but just by concentrating on the breath, you're—this constant barrage of thoughts begins to cease and it's like you wind up with a glassy sea inside, yeah.

WOOG: What, if any, were your interactions like with other people when you were in jail?

SMITH: When I was—

WOOG: —Or prison. The jail.

SMITH: Yeah, in the jail? I think there was also something about knowing that your life was over. I wanted to be social, I didn't want to be alone, I wanted to be social. Every time I was out of the cell, I would just sort of talk to people. I tried to sort of connect with people, yeah. I remember I found this one guy, he was there for whatever stint in jail.

He was interested in the meditation and the 12-step, so we'd do the meditation classes together. Then he and I would do like 12-step readings in the evening. We would pray together, and so other people would come and pray with us. Yeah, that was weird. That was my first exposure to sort of some of the more positive elements of that type of community. I'm not saying anything nice about county jail, I'm saying the community that arises in those circumstances can be very positive.

WOOG: What were the people like who were also incarcerated in jail? Age or health-wise or—

SMITH: Yeah, I remember one of the guys that I befriended, he had grown up in pretty extreme poverty in Brenham, Texas. I think all of his brothers, sort of in and out of jail and prison. He had this volatile relationship and it was always handled through violence. He's just this constant string of domestic violence charges. He himself, I remember talking to him, like he was maybe five years younger than me but it kind of felt like I was talking to a 16-year-old.

There was this, I don't know—putting aside what it is that he did to his partner, there was this strange innocence about him that is hard to describe. Education level must not have been more than maybe about seventh grade. I've come to find out that that's about the average inside of

prison. There's a lot of people who should have gone to MIT inside of prison and jail but on average, it's in around seventh grade.

WOOG: At what point did you end up in TDCJ?

SMITH: About four months into the county jail stint, I accepted a plea agreement of 15 years. The prosecutor, she was experiencing some level of benevolence at that moment because she decided to drop the, she agreed to let the judge drop the affirmative finding of a deadly weapon because I wasn't actually using a real, like I was using a highlighter. I've never known anyone in prison that received that grace. If you pretend to have a weapon, it's a weapon. If the victim suspects it's a weapon, it's a weapon. Aggravated robbery is what you're going to get. So, it was pretty remarkable that I got a 15 year non-agg sentence, which means that I would be eligible for parole at 25 percent of flat time, good time, work time. Four months in, I got that deal and I was transferred to TDCJ three weeks later.

WOOG: Which unit were you?

SMITH: I was the Holliday Unit. Holliday Unit is one of these facilities built in like the 1990s during the big prison building boom. It was both Bush and Clinton, both signed these crime acts that carried like these huge funds to states to handle all of their social issues through hiring police officers and building prisons. Texas dove in, grabbed a hold of those funds, and they built them all over the state.

The units built in the '90s, those transfer facilities, they were intended to — Because they anticipated this huge influx of people, so the transfer facilities were intended as two year holding units before you'd get classified for, what we'd call in prison like the red brick unit. They're not all made of red brick, but that's what we called them, the red brick units. That sort of connotes your permanent unit of assignment.

WOOG: The non-transfer facilities?

SMITH: Exactly, right.

WOOG: Is Holliday a transfer facility?

SMITH: Holliday is a transfer, yeah. I can tell you, Gurney's another one. There's several of them across the state. They're identical, like they've got this, it's tin buildings all the way down, nearly, I guess it felt like about a quarter mile, maybe even more, long pathway, and tin buildings on either side. They called the walkway the bowling alley, yeah.

WOOG: You told the story earlier about the ice being brought down the bowling alley, and how it would be lukewarm water by the time it got to the last building.

SMITH: Yeah. It was just they—It was clear to me that there was very, very little concern about the health and welfare of the individuals inside of those cell blocks. One of the stories I'm going to share with you, I've never actually said out loud because I have a lot of shame about it. The summer was so unspeakably hot. I mean you're in an environment, it's magnifying the heat outside.

It would have been cooler to be outside of the unit. It was just an oven, so they're cooking us in an oven with just a fan, an industrial fan. At night, the only way in which you're going to sleep is, because of the sound and the circulation of that fan, like that's the only way that you don't go crazy. I was a healthy man, so I didn't have a chronic illness, I didn't have heart disease.

I was still taking antidepressants, which make you experience heat in a—I don't know exactly how to say it, but they make you experience heat in an amplified way. You needed that fan. I remember we got this one guy into the block. He was claiming to sort of represent the whites. That was, a lot of it was all fictitious. Prison's different now, like if you go to a regular primary unit of assignment, things have sort of changed.

There were law suits against the prison system. There's usually an officer close to most of the cell blocks, so this idea that you have to sort of affiliate, white, black, Latino, and be ready to sort of handle up and support your race and things like that, a lot of these people were just sort of freshly back into prison so they're trying to sort of impose the culture that they had learned.

This guy walked in, and he's this massive man. You're not supposed to admit your gang affiliation because you could get put into administration segmentation, but he was claiming to represent [a white gang]. He set up a tattoo shop, so he ran two wires, he had somehow found into the one outlet that was powering the fan. He ran two wires, and ran it all across the bunks.

No one's allowed to say anything, otherwise it's going to create this tension, white, black, Hispanic are all going to go after each other, so—He sets up this tattoo shop. He gets barely into the tattoo and blows the breaker, right. He blew the breaker of the fan that was making it so it was half way tolerable in this inhuman environment.

All right, so Texas Department of Criminal Justice isn't going to say, "Oh no, we've got people cooking in there and our fan, and our breaker is out." Like they don't act like that, that's not what they do. They say, "Oh, that's too bad. Hopefully, maintenance will get to it soon, but it Friday, and we'll tell them on Monday." Zero concern, it's inhuman conditions, and anyone, anyone who had any amount of preexisting health condition or was susceptible to heat or anything like that is in grave, grave danger.

None of the officers were in tune with the medical needs in that way, not on that level. We weren't people in their eyes, we weren't people that they would be concerned about on that level. Like no one loses sleep thinking, oh no, those are human beings in there and did I forget to turn on the vent? That's not how they think, right. What that person did by hooking up those wires was threatening people's lives.

We went through a miserable weekend. No one, no one died. We got early into the week, Tuesday, I think they finally came and fixed the breaker and the fan started to work again. They left, all the maintenance crew left, and within 10 minutes, that man had the wires back in, all right. Now I think we had gone a whole week, it was the weekend all ready, we went a whole week, and within 10 minutes, he had the wires back up.

So, I did the worst thing that I've ever done in prison. I talked to my bunkmate next to me. I said, "We've got to do something." I can't go up to him and tell him to stop, right? That's breaking rules that are—That's creating a dynamic that is extremely dangerous and volatile, right? My bunkmate next to me, it was weird because he was ingrained in prison rules. He had been in and out of prison his entire life and he was like, "Yeah, I think you got to do something."

Like I even prayed, "I got to do something." I did the worst thing you can do as an inmate and I went to tell the lieutenant. The lieutenant hears me, he thanks me. And then I go back to the unit and somehow that guy had taken his wires off and he'd cleared out his entire locker of all of the contraband and all of the stuff that they could find on him because I think someone suspected that someone was going to tell, right?

Four hours later, the officers walk in and they don't look in any other cell or excuse me any other bunk. They go directly to his bunk and do a search. So it basically says to everyone, all 108 people that someone snitched and they snitched on him, and it was someone in that cell block,

right? Then it was just a matter of who was it? The search began, and all the whites got together and they started to sort of go and gather all their intelligence.

Like, "Who did you see at lunchtime? Who did you see going to talk to officers?" Everyone goes to the desk to get like aspirins or what they call I-60s, they go to get the things that they need. It was they just had to sort of create a shortlist. Finally, my name came up on the shortlist, right?

I just, I looked at him, I didn't admit doing it but I told him what he's doing with the tattoo shop is dangerous, and it could be any one of us because I'm not the only one upset about it, right? He said, "Show me what you got from the lieutenant." And so I—because I did get aspirin.

I reached down underneath my bunk to pull out my whole thing and that's when he attacked me. My head hit the bunk, the metal, so I was almost immediately sort of knocked out because it was his fist against a metal—and I just stiffened, and he pulled me off the bunk and began to kick and—I just remember being kicked and kicked and kicked and kicked.

Somehow he stopped and it was weird, it was like in that state, then he went on the next person on his list. Like found this other guy and it was this other guy who was so much smaller than him. It was this old man, and I remember he, the man panicked. He screamed and ran to the door to get the attention of the guards, and Yogi attacked him and began attacking him.

And I remember I got up, I don't know how I did it, I got up and I just put myself between Yogi and the old man. It's like he just got stunned, Yogi's like, "What are you doing?" I'm like, "Whatever you're going to do, do to me." That's when the officers came in. I remember they put me in handcuffs, they put the old man in handcuffs, they put Yogi in handcuffs and we were all taken off in different locations.

The major came up to me to ask what I did, and he just chastised me for being a snitch, such a moment of shame, yeah. It's like I never even admitted that inside of prison, this is actually the first time I ever admitted it. Like I'm still afraid to this day that someone, if I tell someone formerly incarcerated, that I will destroy my reputation because I did that, right? If you take a step back, TDCJ created this environment.

They created an environment where you're putting human beings in ovens, right? When someone says that our lives are in danger, it's not just a matter of comfort. The only fan that we have doesn't work and you took an entire week to fix it and then it's compromised again. Everything about it said they just don't give a shit, right?

Even the way that the investigation was handled, it was like, Oh, we got a live one snitching. Let's go ahead and—It wasn't even, it's like they were so disconnected from the conditions. One of my friends did die of the heat. Like you look at all those natural cause deaths, I think those are the things that outrage me the most, that something gets to get coded as a natural cause, right. I'll never forget, the summer of 2011.

I was on to my regular unit. 2011 was the most brutal summer that I think most human beings alive today have every experienced, right? We would wake up in the morning barely able to breathe because of the fires so close by. Huntsville is surrounded by forest and we were barely able to breathe because of the smoke, right? Texas was on fire, literally on fire. The heat was so brutal.

Those old units, they were like ovens because it was all masonry. Two in the morning, you'd put your back up against the wall because you can't sleep, how can you sleep in that? You can't put your back against the wall because it's hot, the bricks are hot. You'd have to pour water on yourself, douse yourself and try to like put your fan in such a way that maybe you could get some evaporation. Maybe you could get five minutes of sleep.

I remember that was like the conditions we were in. It was in one of those brutal summers that a buddy of mine, who— By that point I was really active in like chapel programming. If it had, if it was something positive I was active in it. We did this group about—it was this chapel-based program about becoming better fathers, better men, better husbands, better servants, better employees, like men of character.

That language resonates with someone who's utterly destroyed themselves and been stripped away of all dignity, to become someone of character, right? I remember Nathan, Nathan Foster was his name. He was in my group. I remember we would, he was not that much older than I am. He was maybe two years older than me, he was just in his 40s, looked a little bit older. He missed the opportunity with his son.

I remember how crushing those conversations were with him because his son was already into prison, yeah. Nathan was talking about becoming a better man for his grandchildren at that point. I won't forget Nathan. The unit decides to have a lockdown in July. The unit—what they do is these are twice a year, TDCJ will lock down the entire unit and they will search the entire cell block for contraband.

Then while they're searching it, you're, the people living there have to sort of pack up all of their stuff. You've been into prison at that point, two, three, ten years, so you've got to put all of your belongings into a potato sack, pile up all of your bedding and somehow walk across the yard, like all the way across the yard to the gym in order for them to go through everything piece by piece, right, in July, after you've been sitting in your cell block for a week waiting for your cell block to come up, for it's your cell block's turn to have the lockdown.

There were men in those groups, they were like 70 years old, 70. Men with heart conditions, men with diabetes, having to carry their stuff, right, all across the yard in the summer heat. Then they came back, and Nathan was in that group. He was a young man but he was on medical care for heart issues, family history of heart issues. Probably didn't have the healthiest lifestyle in the world. He'd been in prison for 10 years so he's trying to take care of himself.

He goes, does the lockdown, he comes back, he's out of breath. The shakedown crew had taken his mattress, right? He's trying to unpack his stuff and he's calling to the officer, "They took my mattress." We're on lockdown. It's not like he can go down to the laundry facility when it's time to take a shower and say, "Listen, they took my mattress, can I get another one?" It might be days before he gets another mattress.

He's like, "You took my mattress." He's out of breath, he's tired, they've taken his mattress. The officer comes in and just completely berates him. Like, "Who do you think you are? This is a lockdown. We're having a lockdown. Don't you know there's a lockdown? How am I going to get you a mattress right now? You better live with this right now." That's what she said to him.

He's like, as much as he can control himself, he's trying to like advocate for himself. That's taken as being too belligerent, so she's heading off to go write him up, right? Nathan had a heart attack. He had a heart attack. People are calling out to the officer and they realize it's not joke, that he's not just being belligerent. The warden comes and tries to give him CPR but he's gone, Nathan's gone, right?

He didn't die of natural causes. That was pure negligence on the part of TDCJ. They created an environment where they put his health at risk, at grave risk. A lockdown in the middle of summer? 60, 70-year-old men, men with heart conditions, right? There was a bill that they tried to pass this session that said, "If you're going to do a lockdown in the summer months, make sure that that unit is air conditioned," right?

The bill never went anywhere but pretty reasonable standard. This is not a system that's really thinking day and night about how to protect the health of people under their care, right? I mean

that's ultimately what this is about. This whole idea of whether or not to put a/c in there is just a distraction, right?

The question is, how do you protect the health and wellbeing of the people who are incarcerated, because that is your constitutional duty. That's the only debate that we need to be having, right? This isn't a debate about a/c versus non-a/c, it's about how to protect people's health. What type of conditions have we created that put people's health at risk and how to we alleviate those conditions?

WOOG: Kind of going from that question, how do we alleviate these conditions? How does TDCJ alleviate, not just the conditions of confinement that contribute to death and crises but also in the midst of health crises or healthcare that's needed, how does TDCJ treat people?

SMITH: I'm trying to find sort of a thread on that because everyone, there's no one at TDCJ who's going to sort of claim that they're getting this fantastic medical, care, right? If you're on the chronic, if you have a chronic health condition, you've got a heart condition, diabetes and so on, they're constitutionally required to see you for your regular appointments, to give you your medication.

They contract with UTMB to do that so that is generally done. Is it a comfortable process? Is it a process that also contains an element of dignity? No, but people get their medical care. They have pill call twice a day where people can, who do receive medications, they can go to a central point in the unit and wait in line and get their meds.

If it's regular meds that they take daily that can't be sort of traded as contraband, then people can actually keep that medication on their person. If you need, if you have something like a staff infection or something like that but you're not on the chronic care case load, you can fill out a sick call slip and get in to see medical. It might take you a few days, and 10 people might get infected but yeah, you'll get in. Yes, there is medical care inside of TDCJ, yeah.

WOOG: What about, you described this all earlier, what kind of or if any medical care did you receive after that?

SMITH: I needed stitches. They took me to the infirmary and instead of stitches, they did a glue, so glued me up and bandaged me up and put me in protective custody because the guy had been claiming to represent the whites, so that could have meant Aryan Brotherhood in which case my life could be in danger, so they needed to put me in protective custody, which was kind of a form of isolation, for a little while. It turned out that he was just kind of like, he was sort of pretending, he wasn't representing anyone, he was claiming to. A little bit of investigation revealed that, and they moved him off the unit. Yeah, but they patched me up and sent me on my way.

WOOG: It sounds like you came to prison with an addiction.

SMITH: Yeah.

WOOG: How was your—and all the mental health issues as well—

SMITH: Yeah.

WOOG: How were those treated while you were in prison?

SMITH: I continued to get antidepressants. I had to go off the medications. It was actually in 2011. It was strange that given everything I experienced at Holliday Unit, in that inhuman environment, that they all of a sudden became worried about me being oversensitive to heat. It's

sort of ironic, right? Because I'd already, by that point I was what, two years or more in, but all of a sudden, they were concerned.

They made this list of everyone who had medications that created sensitivity to heat, and my name fell on the list. What they did was, they moved all of us out of the one cell block. There was a cell block that actually had windows, like you could, so like at night you could actually have circulation, things like that.

They took us out of there and they put us into the cell block without windows, right? It was this ancient cell block that faced into sort of an indoor courtyard that was covered at the top with like the panels you see in like a greenhouse, right?

Like they put me in a greenhouse, right, because they were concerned about my sensitivity to heat. This really did happen, I'm not making this up, right? That actually did happen. When I went to talk to the captain about it they're like, "Yeah, we put everyone with heat conditions there. It's a little cooler there." Like they said that to me, that it's cooler there.

WOOG: Do you know why they became concerned about people who had conditions that could exacerbate heat problems?

SMITH: It's basically, I think that, I want to say that the incident—It was actually on the Walls Unit. There's about 500 cells on the Walls Unit that are purely for real transit, not transfer but real transit, meaning, "We're not just holding you there, we're not going to hold you there for 18 months. We're literally just holding you in this cell for a couple weeks while we figure out where your next unit is." And so, there's about 500 of those cells.

Those people, the only time they can ever leave, they can leave their cell in the morning to go down to the shower, they go to their breakfast, lunch and dinner but the rest of the time they have to stay in the cell. They're in transit, so they don't have access to the normal commissary and things like that, so they can't go and request like the free fans and things like that.

My understanding, I wasn't in transit so I wasn't there, but my understanding is that one of the guys under those circumstances ended up having heat stroke or dying under those conditions, I think they said his blood temperature was like 109 when they finally found him. I believe that that was around the time that all units had to have some sort of policy.

Like they had to have a place where they were supposed to put people, and so they just, it's like these edicts come down on high and so the warden just says, Where's the coolest place we can put people? Right? —I'm not going to create a/c for you so what's the place that just seems the coolest? The place where they put me was darkest, so it must be coolest, right?

I realized that if my, there was not going to be grievance or anything like that that would get me out of that circumstance, so I decided to stop taking antidepressants, right? That was a horrible, horrible summer yeah. Because going off of antidepressants after having taken them for years is pretty nightmarish. I mean it's weird, like you're sort of walking and you'll turn, and it's like you can see sort of streaks of light and you feel dizzy and you're like that.

It's like all your neurotransmitters are misfiring. That's what it's like to live with it. It was either that or continue in that circumstance, so I needed to get off of the antidepressants. It took me about three months before I felt normal again. I stopped doing any sort of mental healthcare inside of TDCJ. As far as like, substance use treatment, I would go to the 12-step programming, so at least I had a community, a community of people who wanted to sort of be sober and in recovery, and we would work the steps and that's how I would do that.

There is substance use treatment inside, so it's more of like the therapeutic community model, not so where it's really looking at your criminogenic behaviors and thinking patterns. It is related

to drug and alcohol use and people who go through it tend to have slightly lower recidivism rates. They do have that but the only way you can get that is through a Parole Board vote.

Like it has to be, the Parole Board has to decide you're ready for release and then send you to that program prior to your release, right? You're not on any sort of substance use counselor's caseload during your time of incarceration, so I pretty much had to do it myself, right? When I got out of prison, I felt like I was on pretty good ground with my mental health, it had been a while since I had had a bout of depression.

I had taken advantage of all the 12-step programming, so I thought I was doing pretty well. After about a year out, then some of the mental health symptoms began to resurface, pretty badly. That was making it harder and harder to sort of stay sober. I was so ashamed of this I actually had to go back to getting medical care again. I was ashamed of that, can you believe that?

That's so strange. That's how much that experience shapes you, because I had a certain sense of pride of having gone off the meds and like, "Oh, I was doing all that stuff to myself, I didn't really have mental illness, it was all my bad thinking patterns, and now I'm on firm ground because my thinking patterns are good."

Then all of a sudden I've got depression again, massive levels of anxiety. I'm like, what did I do wrong? It's strange how that whole experience keeps you from really taking care of yourself. Like sort of understanding mental health and your mental health condition in a way that you can actually help yourself and be free from your own sort of self-shaming and stigma and all that.

I ultimately had to start finding, start cultivating my own supports. It was weird, I was like, at this point I was—like I'd seen, I guess I was just sick of shame, so I found, it was like I found a psychotherapist that is about as far from 12-step programming as you can get. I see a nurse practitioner, psychiatric nurse practitioner with an expertise in recovery, as opposed to a physician. Like I'm rejecting existing models, I'm getting to like carve out my own care, you know? Yeah.

WOOG: What was it like having your kind of educational and professional experience, and being in prison? Being a social worker while being an inmate, or did you think of yourself that way at all?

SMITH: Yeah, it was weird. I used to have a recurring dream that I was showing up to social work conferences in my prison whites, and I'd be hiding behind plants and stuff like that, just making sure people don't see me. Yeah, I did have a sense that at one point in my life I had a career, that I had gone through some level of academic rigor that maybe others hadn't experienced.

My father was sort of a hyper intellectual, so like even though I may not have a genius IQ, the way in which I expressed myself was really kind of informed by the way my father talked, so that was very different from the way a lot of people talked. I think part of it was, it took a little bit longer to form relationships, where people would trust me. I think one of the ways that, I think what helped me to sort of overcome this was, like I sincerely wanted to be part of community.

I sincerely admired the way that certain people had reshaped their own thinking, their own outlooks. I gravitated towards people like guys who were running bible studies on the run or my 12-step sponsor had been in prison for 25 years, so I liked the way he was, I liked their outlook. I liked what they had to sort of offer, and the positivity was very attractive to me.

I think me, sort of humbly seeking help, seeking guidance, seeking mentorship, it sort of broke down the walls. It was weird, it was almost like prison for me—I had such a horrific time in middle school. Parents divorced, first symptoms of depression and anxiety coming up. Not understanding it, the bullying and things like that, and how I just sort of isolated and all that.

For me, prison was sort of like being forced to relive all that, it's like you get a chance to do it over. I made friends, I cultivated community, I joined groups. I didn't think myself better than other people, usually I respected people. I loved people like I would love a brother, that was what we called, that's what I call my friends in prison is "brother," and that's what they call me, you know? Yeah, there was a divide, so I don't—I don't know, it was only a temporary divide.

WOOG: What happens to those relationships when you get out of prison and your brothers stay behind? In turn, your brothers get out and you stay behind?

SMITH: Yeah. The community is indescribable, and to walk away from the community is probably the single hardest thing about leaving prison. It's totally unexpected. You think it's going to be the happiest day of your life and those people are gone, I can't call them. I can write to them but I can't, I can't be there with them through this new challenge that I'm facing.

I can't hear, like I have to sort of imagine their voice but I can't hear their voice. Like I think of what they would say to me like in the moments when you're completely, when you're hitting nothing but closed doors with employment. There's no one going to hire you and you're starting to get discouraged.

There's this distinct sort of loving yet, "I'm not hearing your self-pity" type of—They would respond to that sort of attitude the way an older brother would respond to it. Then they would turn around and they would, how they would handle it is they would pray with you. They would try to sort of build you up spiritually, right? Like a real brother, right? So you leave prison and you don't have that brother with you anymore, you got to do it on your own.

Yeah, I miss them so, I miss them terribly, I miss them very, very much. But it's not the same. I can't recreate that community. Some of the guys have gone to get out, our circles aren't the same. Like that is to say like our lives are not in orbit in the way that they were before. We're Facebook friends and we give a big thumbs up when one of them gets engaged or we'll say something nice on their birthday. Yeah, the community, once you leave prison, the community sort of fades away, like that's not a part of your life anymore.

WOOG: I think of you as a community builder in a lot of ways. Part of what you said, it wouldn't surprise me that you built, that you have that kind of community.

SMITH: Yeah.

WOOG: Your experiences coming out of prison, how do you define community for yourself out of prison? What does it mean to you now? How have your experiences in prison kind of informed that or influence it?

SMITH: It's a tough question. It's been, that's a really hard thing to do to sort of find community, I mean after you leave. I've tried to, I got really excited about sort of this Formerly Incarcerated Movement. Then again, that's just not the same, that's a political movement and there are political currents. Sometimes it can be sort of highly supportive and sometimes it can be highly, highly destructive.

These political currents aren't sort of, these political currents of when people are getting involved in political activism, they can be very divisive, right? And so I found people within the community of people who have done time and were friends and support each other, but to think that a Formerly Incarcerated political movement can sort of feed your soul in that way, no. You need actually, you need resources outside of that to really help you to navigate it.

It's very, very, it can be fraught with toxicity or it can be transformative, it can be both of those things, right? I think I've sort of had to ... I've had to decide what community's going to look like for me, right? When I went back for psychiatric care, and how shameful that was, I noticed there

were people in my life whose message to me was one of like, "This isn't a moment of shame, this is a moment of triumph.

Look at everything you've done to try to sort of hold this together, and look at the way in which you're seeking help. Look at how you are staying grounded, that you are taking care of yourself. Look at that." I realized that that is the community. That's the community of friends and allies that help to free you from stigma and shame.

My support network, those are the people who help to sort of keep me on track and that allows me to sort of like ... I mean those people are within the Formerly Incarcerated Movement and they're also just my friends and family members, yeah. It also means that I have had to place an emotional distance between myself and those people who are still steeped in a shame-based way of looking at the world, at looking at mental illness, at looking at recovery, at looking at incarceration.

Like there is now an emotional distance between me and those people, right? That emotional— Those people, when I say "those people," some of them are my own family members. Some of them are people I work with, people at the capital, people in the Formerly Incarcerated Movement, so I have to be very discerning, right? There's so much at stake, there's so much at stake. Because I know where I go when things get really dark inside, right? It's too grave. I get to have a relationship with my daughter right now, so ... I've learned to create some pretty, I've learned to create some boundaries.

WOOG: Is there anything else that you want to share about your experience or go back to that we talked about?

SMITH: Yeah, I don't know. I'm trying to think. So much of this was about, this was about my story. I'm wondering if we've touched on life after violence, of being exposed to death and things like that. Could I say something about that?

WOOG: Absolutely, yeah.

SMITH: Yeah. I was based on the Walls Unit, that's where they placed me. It's called the Walls Unit because there are 30-foot walls all around it, right, 30-foot brick walls, but its actual name is the Huntsville Unit. It's the oldest unit in Texas. It was the first prison unit built after Texas, I think Texas was a state at that point. I'm going to have to go back and check my history books on that one. It's so old that in some of the industry shops, they made confederate uniforms.

WOOG: Wow.

SMITH: Yeah, that's how old it is.

WOOG: That's a legacy.

SMITH: Yeah. The pill line in that unit is in the exact same spot where Old Sparky used to sit, right? I remember waiting in line for the pills when I was, sometimes you need prescriptions for this or that. I remember standing in line and just that realization that on the other side of this wall was death row and that people were brought into that room and strapped to that chair, and electrocuted right in that place where I was standing.

The Walls Unit is the only location in Texas where executions can be performed. They built a new death chamber behind the infirmary, so you can go and weigh the irony of that, but they built the death chamber right behind the infirmary. People are basically, when the condemned individual, their date comes, Huntsville Unit sends out a van, I've actually been in the van before.

They send out a van to the Polunsky Unit for the males, I don't know where, I think there was one woman executed while I was there but I don't know where they bring them from, but they go to the Polunsky Unit about 40, 50 miles away, and they bring the condemned person back. I remember the first time on that unit, sort of realizing what was happening because everything sort of, everything is different.

Like at noon, they stop movement on the unit so that they can bring the van in with the condemned person, and the van drives across the same, the rec yard, and then turns behind the infirmary and goes to the death chamber, right? They stop all movement. I remember like your current of life changes on those days. Then they close the commissary at three pm in order to minimize movement.

Then everyone goes to dinner and then at six, they just sort of hold everything still. It's at six o'clock that they usually deliver the lethal drugs, right? It was like you were, everything sort of changed, your pattern of living had changed for that day, so I was firmly aware of six pm coming. Just knowing that within a short walk from where I was, that someone was being put to death, and how sort of casual and bureaucratic the entire operation was.

Later, I became a trustee and so I was placed in a dormitory just outside the back gate. Our windows for the dormitory, it was actually in the, it's in the old stadium where they did the prison rodeo. They took down most of the stadium but they kept one, one section where it was kind of like it had been a staging area for the prisoners who were participating in the rodeo, and so they had converted that into a trustee dormitory.

Your window, there's this big long window on one side that faces the back gate, and the back gate is kind of a security area, so everything going in and out has to go in this one sort of double gated section where the officer can do another search of the vehicle. That search also extended to the hearse, right? They bring the van in, six o'clock comes, then a hearse goes in and brings the corpse out. The hearse has to come all the way back through the back gate.

Yeah, I remember we, all the guys up against the window as the officer was opening up the hearse, right? There's a dead body in the back, at least in view for those people standing at the window to see, whether it be covered or not. I never had the courage to actually—I didn't really want to see a dead body, was not wanting to see that. It was so troubling to me. Like, because this was our existence.

It was troubling to me that the very first time, the very first execution, like I can remember where I was standing. I can remember where, I remember how it felt. I remember that sense of sickness inside. I remember that my 12-step sponsor was there for murder and like I couldn't help but thinking, "God, what if it were him?" Like this guy who's like my mentor, "What if it were him?" Because what separates him and that condemned person? Just different juries, right?

Okay, so that's how I was experiencing the first one. Four years in the unit, executions had a different feel. It was like, "Oh, this is the day that they close commissary early. This is the day that I need to stop recreation early. Oh, we're not going to have chapel this evening. I don't have to volunteer tonight." Like I'm experiencing the execution, I'm experiencing the change in my routine, I'm not experiencing the execution anymore.

I became, my experience of it got blunted until the chaplain ended up developing severe health issues, and he ended up having to quit and retire early, like our beloved chaplain. Because he had spent nine years of his life being the person who has to minister to the condemned individual, and placing his hand on the man's leg as they deliver the lethal drugs, right?

Then go minister to the family and whoever else needed support at that moment. Like nine years of that. Like I'm experiencing the disruption in my schedule. He's having to have to retire because

he can't bear it anymore, he cannot bear to see another person put to death, right? Yeah. Yeah. It's an assembly line, we have an assembly line execution system here. Yeah.

I don't know whether to be ashamed or not. If I was experiencing the execution as sort of a disruption of my schedule, as a break in my routine, like I had become that desensitized. Like how do the officers experience it? How does the warden experience it? How do they experience being, playing a role in the execution of another human being, how do they experience that over time? I think seeing, being, losing our chaplain made me realize like it comes at a cost to all of us, right? Yeah.

WOOG: How did you know that the chaplain was also ministering to the condemned or how did —

SMITH: He was very open with us.

WOOG: He was?

SMITH: Yeah. I mean the chaplains placed on the Walls Unit are generally those very, very late in their career. They're ones who have the highest levels of respect within the system. They're hand selected. It's not just some job posting that they put up. Like the system will go try to find the best of the best in terms of their chaplains because of the role that they would have to fill.

Not only do they have to sort of perform the chaplaincy tasks, generally they're choosing someone who also wants to be part of the spiritual life of men. Like a chaplain could just be like a volunteer coordinator and make sure that people's religious rights are recognized, and to be the one that notifies someone when there's a death in the family, like they could fulfill that minimal role. The chaplains at the Walls Unit are generally ones that want to do more. They want to develop a spiritual life that's supportive of everyone there at the same time that they're fulfilling their obligations around the executions.

WOOG: So he spoke to you about that burden?

SMITH: Yeah. I remember he admitted it on the pulpit, yeah. Like, I can't do it anymore. I can't do it. It's too hard. Yeah. Yeah. So that's—Do you have any happier questions you want to—This is, yeah. It wasn't—I wouldn't trade my experience, you know what I mean?

WOOG: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SMITH: Like I think of the life I'm living now. I mean I told you about how awful it was in those years leading up to the crack use. Like I was ready to take my life, I just didn't want to live. I think the heartbreaking thing is that it took, that I had to sort of be stripped of everything before any space could open where I could have a life like I'm living right now, right? So I have to be really careful. I can't say like,

"Prison made that possible. If it weren't for prison—" Because it's not true. Like you hear how I'm finding support for myself. I'm living in a very, very healthy way and I'm very protective of my outlook and I find support to help me to keep that, right? If I could do that back in 2005 I would have done that, I wouldn't have gone to prison, right?

I think—so I just have to be careful. But—I'm really grateful that I got to experience losing everything. I got to experience losing everything that was of any importance in my life, like losing it and getting to, getting the blessing of a life that was better than I would have ever imagined before, right? Like that's such a huge gift, right? But that's not the experience of most people coming out of prison, that just so happens to be my experience.

WOOG: What do you attribute your survival to? Overly simplistic question.

SMITH: I mean, I'll just give you a simplistic answer. When I showed up at the county jail and there was a meditation teacher at the very moment when I was sort of crying out to the universe and said, "I don't want to live anymore. I don't want to experience existence anymore." It was like there was, I recognized that I wasn't alone, there was something answering, right?

I'm not like saying someone should go down this particular spiritual path or this one, it just opened me up to this idea that I'm not alone, right? When you know you're not alone anymore like it's—I just started saying yes. I said yes to everything positive that they had. Like I just sort of embraced this new way of experiencing life. I don't know. Ask me that same question a year from now, I'll probably come up with a different answer.

WOOG: I'll mark my calendar.

SMITH: Okay.

WOOG: Is there anything else you can think of to share? The other thing too is we can always do a followup if you want, if you were interested or wanted to.

SMITH: Yeah.

WOOG: It's not something we need to talk about now but kind of as you're processing it, if you have any interest in that, just let me know.

SMITH: Okay. Yes. I don't have anything else. Yeah, I have to go find Mother's Day gifts.

WOOG: That way we'll turn off the camera.

SMITH: No.

WOOG: Thank you so much.

SMITH: Yes, absolutely. Well, I hope this was—Yeah, I hope this is a good launch pad to a—

WOOG: It's amazing, thank you.

SMITH: —Series of interviews. Yeah.

WOOG: Mm-hmm, yeah. It is.

SMITH: Okay, good.

WOOG: Oh my gosh. There's so many times I just wanted to stop— [END OF INTERVIEW]