Texas After Violence Project

Interview with James Figueroa

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Summary:

Lovinah Igbani-Perkins interviews James Figueroa, who now serves as a project facilitator at two treatment centers in Texas: one center for recovery coaching (dealing with former inmates), and one mobilizing advocacy and advising for men still inside prison. Figueroa also finds jobs for the homeless. Figueroa tells a miraculous story of self-transformation after struggling with mental health issues and insecure family attachment all his life, compounded with the PTSD he suffered from six and a half years in prison. Almost all of his incarceration sentences were due to drug-related charges. Most prominent in this narrative is Figueroa's testament to the importance of reducing stigma around mental health treatment.

LOVINAH IGBANI-PERKINS: Hey James, how are you doing?

JAMES FIGUEROA: I'm doing good. Real good. How are you?

IGBANI-PERKINS: I'm great. I think if we could start by just saying your first and last name.

FIGUEROA: Oh, okay. My name is James Figueroa.

IGBANI-PERKINS: All right, perfect. I appreciate you doing the interview. Today we're going to be talking about the impact that mental health has had on you during incarceration: how incarceration impacted your mental health. Rather than just jump into that, I think it would be good if you said a little bit of your background. If you [could] just tell me a little bit about [life] before prison, what led [you] down that route.

FIGUEROA: Okay. So real brief: at two months old, I was taken away from my mom and dad and put in foster care. CPS started in Minnesota. I went through several foster homes. And then, at seven years old, I was reunited with my brother and sister and brought to Houston.

There was paperwork that backtracks to my childhood and said, He would have problems into adulthood. It seemed to be true. At 17 years old, my adoptive mom called the cops on me. Had me sent away to jail for the first time where I caught my felony. And at that point in my life, I just felt like, I have a felony now. There's no programs to help. This was in early 1999, 2000 and I just kind of gave up on life. I started committing more crimes, more crimes. My cycle of addiction [and of] getting incarcerated started at 17 years old. I ended up doing almost thirteen years in prison in and out. Five to six different trips.

In 2014, through a [Kairos?] program, I dedicated my life to Jesus and I knew I wanted to change. I just didn't know what it looked like. I didn't know some of the problems I was going to have.

I got released in 2016. Unfortunately, I relapsed and didn't realize what addiction was or mental health. And I went back for 90 days in Harris County. And when I came out—for the last four

years, I've done everything in my power to be a better person and shed light on exactly what I've been through and share my story to help others that have experienced or been through what I've been through. And that's kind of more or less exactly where I come from.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Wow, that's a lot. I'm glad you mentioned your childhood, you know, and being in foster care at such an early age. At that time, did you know anything about mental health? Or is that something that was even talked about in your family?

FIGUEROA: I was prescribed Zoloft. I think I was seven years old going into that home that adopted me. And they had this idea that medication was a lie. In this family you couldn't say that you were hurt. You couldn't express your feelings. Mental health was just unheard of. It wasn't even big back in the 90s. Early 2000, they said that I was playing—they used to call it the "poor me" game. So if you said that you felt some type of way—I stated I wanted to kill myself many times when I was in my childhood, and my adoptive parents blew it off and said, Ah.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Like you're just wanting attention

FIGUEROA: Right. They talk about trauma when a child screams for help and they don't get that help—they quit asking for help. And that's kind of what happened to me. It was something that you just didn't speak of. There was a stigma around it. I mean getting to the point of getting mental health now: it took so much for me to even cross that bridge to even get it. And so that's where I'm at today.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah, a little bit later. We'll talk about how you ended up crossing that bridge and what that process was like for you. So your first incarceration happens at what age?

FIGUEROA: Yes, so at 17 years old, I'm in Harris County Jail: first time. Never been in trouble in my life. I was a little pretty boy. I had blond highlights in my hair and my parents called the cops on me, and I went to jail and I was surrounded by minorities—Hispanics, and blacks. And that was the first time being locked up. For the first time, like, really learning how to fight, how to protect yourself. And that was the first time. But the first time in prison was in a federal prison when I was 20 years old. So from 17 to the age of

20, which was like a [inaudible] and and I went as soon as I got out. Three months later went to State Jail, stayed out a year, and then went to the federal institution for possession with the intent to distribute crack cocaine, which was 2 grams. But it was a drug bust [in which] they wanted to get everybody. And that was my first time actually being in a penitentiary.

IGBANI-PERKINS: So the incarceration that occurred at 17: how long were you incarcerated then?

FIGUEROA: At that time it was at Harris County Jail for just 90 days. It was 90 days.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Alright. And then from 17 and so you do the 90 days and then after that?

FIGUEROA: I want to say I stayed out 90 days and then I got caught with a pound of marijuana with the wrong people. Ended up doing six months in state jail. I didn't consider the state jail the penitentiary just because of the way it's running in the framework behind it. But yeah, that was my second incarceration. So it's almost like stages. County, state jail, federal prison, then prison.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah, kind of worked your way up.

FIGUEROA: Yeah, I worked my way up.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Okay, and so 20 years old. That's when you were in the feds, right? And you did how long?

FIGUEROA: At that time I did 18 months. 18 months incarcerated.`

IGBANI-PERKINS: Okay, and then the longest time you did after that was—.

FIGUEROA: So through all these years—the last time was from 2009 2016. I almost did seven years. Six and a half. But all through those years it went from six months state jail, 18 months in the feds. Then I went back—90 days went back to TDC for eight years probation. And I violated. Ended up doing three and a half years [inaudible]. I stayed out

for six months, went to state jail for nine months. Got out of state jail, five months, and then went for the last bid.

IGBANI-PERKINS: So, how long have you been out right now?

FIGUEROA: Oh man. It's been since 2000. 16 of the penitentiary. But 2008. 2017 was the last time in jail at all.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Congratulations.

FIGUEROA: Thank you. Thank you.

IGBANI-PERKINS: So the last time when you were incarcerated was 2017? Have you counted: do you know how many times you've been incarcerated in your lifetime?

FIGUEROA: I know trips to state jail, prison was six or seven because they tell you my background. Total arrests—Man. I would say at least 15 times. Sometimes it's for like [tickets?] or stealing something like that, or they had to let me go. Just different circumstances.

IGBANI-PERKINS: All right, and are you currently on parole or probation right now?

FIGUEROA: Yes. So, the last time I went, I was caught with I think it was for 4200 grams of methamphetamine, which were ecstasy pills. I had got caught with I think 20 to 30 the first time, bonded out, and then within three weeks arrested again with a gun charge and for 4200 grams of methamphetamine, which was ecstasy pills. I was addicted to ecstasy real bad— any type of pills: Xanax, every other type of party drug. I ended up fighting those cases, getting out, and getting six years probation for the first one and then eight years deferred for the other two.

So currently I'm on like 24 years and probation. I've been on it. In April it will be three years. To me it's just like—but I never I never thought —.

IGBANI-PERKINS: And probation is tough because like, you know—People talk about parole. In my opinion—I've been on both too—and so parole is really like you you pay your fees, your $18. You stay clean, get a job and that's pretty much it. But probation like—. They are so, so difficult. They are so strict and have a lot of demands. You have to pay a lot of money. At least that's the way it was.

FIGUEROA: One of the things I've struggled with was in prison you move every six months, a year, to different places. I don't have family. I have adopted family; we just don't talk. After that many years. They look at me a certain type of way. I've had a bounce around in the last three years probably over 20 times: sober living, ministry, housings, apartment (couldn't make an apartment because of mental health). This is the second time trying to get my own apartment. And every time I had to leave, it was mental health. And my probation officer, she doesn't understand mental health. She'll say, You need to quit moving. You need to do this.

And so the mental health piece for probation is my biggest obstacle because they don't get it. You know, I've never had a you a [inaudible]. I don't even mess around.

IGBANI-PERKINS: It's like you're doing everything you're supposed to do.

FIGUEROA: Yeah, but the mental health piece was holding me back and my probation (when I do tell her) because I pay $200 a month. I'm a felon, you know. Being out on your own, you know: you've always [been] institutionalized. Somebody's been telling you what to do. I got accustomed to being in a sober living or a controlled environment where I knew that I couldn't make bad decisions because there were consequences.

IGBANI-PERKINS: And there was a certain level of accountability, too.

FIGUEROA: Yeah. Yeah. And so when you take on your own apartment, you take on your own bills, your own water, your own gas, your own life.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah, it's all on you.

FIGUEROA: Yeah, you have no backbone, and that's been one of the hardest things for me.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Not having a solid support system and somebody to turn to?

FIGUEROA: Yeah. Yeah. That's been huge.

IGBANI-PERKINS: It's like if something falls, or if I come up short for rent, like--

FIGUEROA: Like I had Covid for almost a month and my job didn't have PTO or any of that stuff. So I had to literally ask people for help, you know, get loans. I had got it for 4 days recently and I was telling my boss and I was getting a real panic attack. Like, I can't catch this. I don't have.

She's like, James, you have almost 30, 40 days of PTO. Like, You're blessed. You good. You could have cold for the next month. And I was--I've never had a job. I've leveled up that high where they're like, Hey. I've always been at the low level. So, you know, learning those things.

IGBANI-PERKINS: We'll get to where you currently are and a little bit later, but I want to ask you. Early on when you were incarcerated--those times: 17 years old, 20 years old, and the times in between and after that--was mental health something that you ever got treatment for while you were incarcerated?

FIGUEROA: No. My homeboys diagnosed me before any doctor could or would. I would be doing things that they would be like— they used to call me “stunner.” So there'd be like, Stunner's psyched. So it was almost like, anything I did, they were like, Bro don't even worry. He's crazy. But nobody said, Hey, buddy you should get that checked. It was a common thing in the gangs (and not even just the gangs, but the homeboy thing I was involved with) that you couldn't be on medication. You couldn't be a psych patient and be---

IGBANI-PERKINS: Why not?

FIGUEROA: So their idea was that you're not capable of making decisions that are logical. They look at--In prison being a psych patient meant you were crazy and you had no [inaudible].

IGBANI-PERKINS: There's a lot of stigma around mental health.

FIGUEROA: There were rules in prison where if your cellie was a site patient, you weren't allowed to tell the boss to tell any guards that you wanted to move. It was called catching out. But if you had a psych patient, which we diagnose--like He's psych patient--I need to get out of here. He's crazy. So there was the stigma.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Even there was some stigma, it sounds like, amongst the people that are incarcerated.

FIGUEROA: Yeah.

IGBANI-PERKINS: The guards. They would just move someone.

FIGUEROA: Right, so yeah. It was a common thing. Like, if you'd seen somebody like that, man, they'd just throw it off. Like, talking to themselves. And you didn't want to be categorized as that, you know? They would tell me some of the things I learned, like--. Through my years incarceration, I was doing things to get their attention. But they were crazy things like running in at chow hall and trying to jump on somebody or you know, saying going right in front of the Law and just beating somebody up--things that aren't normal. Getting tattoos all over my head and my face. These things weren't normal. Like, normal people don't think. And they were just spontaneous: do this. And I remember later on somebody was like, Bro you need to get help.

IGBANI-PERKINS: While you were in prison.

FIGUEROA: Yeah. When you're in prison in your around a lot of people, there are some: they want to see you crash and then there are some that are like, Bro that's not normal. That way, a thing is.

So I had some old school old heads that would always, you know, talk to me. And so they would tell me, Man, bro. Something is wrong with you, you know.

And I would ask them. I'd be like, Bro, you think somethin'?

And the only time I did was when I was in lockdown and medium custody. And I found out that could be the case by going to the site doctor. So I was like, Okay cool. I can play this pysch role and then beat this case, but unfortunately, the psych doctors are [inaudible]. And they were like, Now, you don't want to kill yourself? You don't want this. It was, it was three questions: Do you want to hurt yourself? Do you want to hurt somebody else? And then, What are your thoughts? And if you didn't pass that, then they'll be like, You just need counseling. And they'll put you on this crazy waiting list and I never seen them to the last day in prison.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Wow, that's difficult, you know. I'm thinking about your very first time in prison. After the county jail sentence and after even the state jail. But your first time in prison. How were you feeling? Were you afraid? I would imagine there was some fear. Like, I'm already in prison now?

FIGUEROA: Yes. This is something so, like--when I first went inside prison, I've grown up around a lot of multi-culture. Growing in foster care, they don't put you with your same color. I'm Native American by my father. So I'm not even technically Hispanic, like Mexicans are; I'm more mixed with all types of different things. I just know where 19 percent Native American and some other things. So, I didn't categorize myself as white, black, Mexican, Hispanic. I just went in there and I chill--We had gotten caught in this spray of. It was like a big drug bust with twenty people involved. I knew all these people from this small town of Port Lavaca by Victoria, and the majority of the guys that I messed with were black. And so, the Mexicans that didn't speak Spanish didn't like me. And so I was kind of caught in between, like I don't get this. So I would get into it with the Mexicans at first because, like I said, they didn't understand me, I didn't understand them. And I've been around all different cultures. So when one of the black dudes I roll with, he was like, Hey, bro, you know in jail, it's about color.

And I was like, But I've been raised around this this this. I've been raised around whites, I've been raised around blacks. I've been raised by a couple of Spanish...And they said, nah, you're going to have to ride with your people. But don't trip. There's this thing, Houston. They chill together. You're good. They're not a gang. Like, this this this.

I'm like, All right, cool. But going in, I was real nervous because when I hit my first transit, I didn't speak Spanish. And so the Spanish kind of gave me that cold shoulder like man, you got to speak Spanish to rock with us. So I kind of felt out of place. Like I'm in this body, but I'm not in

this body because I'm not understanding the things you understand and I don't come from your culture, your background. I was adopted. I was in foster care. Like my life's way different.

And so from that point, I just had it. I didn't want nothing to do with no games, Hispanic, nothing. And then I went to another place and one of the Hispanic Houston guys, they took me in because I was from Houston and you shared how it was and what to expect and we ended up getting into it with this other Mexican—I don't want to say gang but they're from Mexico. And at that point I was like, Okay, I'm just to be loyal because this guy fed me, he made sure I ate every night. He right, he was my friend. I looked at him. But, being so young, I didn't know nothing from nothing.

IGBANI-PERKINS: That's family-like. Yeah.

FIGUEROA: When I got to the other unit, I was so pumped up. Man, and they do this. Whoo. And those Houston guys were like, Hey bro, this is how it is here. I was nervous at first because I had done stage L, but I wasn't part of this Houston thing.

IGBANI-PERKINS: So prison was like a whole new world, almost? It's totally different.

FIGUEROA: Yeah, and I'm just agreeing with this one guy. He's a good friend of mine. And he was just saying, Hey, bro. It came back to somebody else from that place before I knew I was [inaudible] was like, oh, you decided to get down with this Houston thing. And then it became this big old--and I was just agreeing with the guy because I've been to state jail.

But he was like, [inaudible]. That was a scary moment where I was sitting in this circle full of homeboys that I'd barely known for three weeks. And now they're discussing if I lied to them. I was like,

IGBANI-PERKINS: It's like it's better if you had already done some time?

FIGUEROA: Yeah, and they assumed that I was already part of this Houston thing and I wasn't. So they thought I was false claiming but I really wasn't. I was just like, Bro. I was just agreeing that I was in state jail and you were throwing out names. So I'm

like, oh yeah yeah. Just trying to fit in and be cool with. It ended up hurting me and then they were like, Hey, bro, We're fixing to check you after chow.

So, this is where I'm psych patient, because I have no Let's fight later. Some people can do that. Me: I was like, we're going to do it now. And I didn't even go to chow that day. And I went out to the rec yard, and I went up to these dudes in front of everybody. I had this thing with hitting my face. So before any riot, I would just Boom. Boom. Boom. So somehow I was pumping myself up that when it did come it wouldn't hurt. You know I'm saying? So I went up to these dudes and I was like, Boom. Boom. Boom. Let's go.

And it psyched them up. That was the first time I can honestly say, psychologically, something was wrong with my brain because I didn't react to fight some stuff like other people. Always, it was something I always do.

So at that time they ended up, Eh you know, He's good. He showed that he was ready to get out of here. Like they gave me a pass. And so I was nervous but I was like, There ain't no way. Like in my brain, I said man. I ain't leaving this yard. Like, These fools are gonna have to kill me. I just went through this at the first place when they said if I didn't speak Spanish--. And so culturally you could say, Man. This guy went through a lot with his own [inaudible] just because of the upbringing he had as a child. And how much that impacted my prison experience also, you know? People don't even put it in perspective. Like if you don't come from that lifestyle, that culture, you're going to have a culture shock going in the prison.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Oh yeah.

FIGUEROA: You're going to be in a situation like, What am I doing?

IGBANI-PERKINS: Like how did I get here?

FIGUEROA: Yeah, like it was so crazy.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Did you ever take any classes while you were in prison?

FIGUEROA: So at the beginning. It was my perspective on it--at the beginning, I was trying to do changes and college and stuff like that. But I learned that one major case could cost you your school. So in my brain, it was like, You either go all in with your homies and this life. It's almost like the streets: If you go to college today, one's gonna overtake the other.

So every time a situation came (because I was in started going to college. It was some Warehouse Logistics college thing), I realized real quick that I couldn't balance both. Because I was so fearful of a major case for quitting college that I would have to let one down for the other. So I basically gave up on school and was like, Man. I'm going to be a thug and a gangster or whatever until I go home.

IGBANI-PERKINS: You literally had to choose. It couldn't be Going to school while I'm incarcerated, doing my time, and being affiliated with convoys--You had to literally make a choice.

FIGUEROA: Yeah. And then in 2014-2015 when I went through Kairos and I was going to Church, I was getting humiliated. Like, Ah there's the church boy. And that's when I started going to college because my values changed. Something happened spiritually there. I was now choosing the right way. I was like, You know what? I want to better myself. I want to better my education.

And so I started going to college. I went to go get my AutoCAD certification, I did sheet metal, and then later on, I did some classes for LCDC. So yeah, what's my perspective on things? I went through [inaudible] six programs and they offered LCDC classes. The classroom hours.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah I got excited on those.

FIGUEROA: My professor was like, Man. And then they had a pre-recovery coach. Since being released, I tried to pick it up but the mental health just held me back for a while.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Wow, it seems like you've been to one barrier after another since you were a baby literally. The classes you were doing, where they were taught by prison staff staff or outside volunteers?

FIGUEROA: No, it was all outside. Civilians upon civilians. Not one class was taught by somebody from the prison guard. You had Career Education, which was taught by other people incarcerated. But even then, you could see that it was impactful, but it wasn't because a lot of these guys were just doing it. You would see how they were really living on the wings. So it was like, I'm listening to you tell me about STDs, but then I'm seeing you do some wild stuff on the way.

So that kind of probed a lot of people from the pure education part. Like, I would have listened to you but I'm seeing your life and it's not reflecting what you're doing in the classroom.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Doesn't add up to truths. So, do you feel like the prison prepared you to be released? Like how did they prepare you to be released?

FIGUEROA: Not at all. Not at all. I think that if you said from one to ten, what is your pre-release system of getting released? I think it's horrible. I would say negative 50 million or whatever. Because the fact that prior to getting released, you know, they give you this packet of where to go and it's not even a big sheet. It has St. John's and something else and that was it.

IGBANI-PERKINS: You're saying it had jobs, but that was it.

FIGUEROA: No, it was this place called St. John's. Like, Go get free clothes or whatever.

So for us getting released we would always talk about it: Bro, I don't know where I'm going to live. I don't know what I'm going to do. You know? I don't have no family. Where am I going to go? When I got released that last time. I didn't even have an address. When I left TDC the last time (a lot of people don't know this) but when they paroled me this last time, I'm sorry the time before--So the last time I went to my sister's, right? That was the one in 2016. And that one, I wasn't prepared, she wasn't prepared. Like I was in Rosenberg. I had a monitor on. We didn't know what type of monitor I was going to be on: if it was the high level, low level. All I knew

was I had to report. I didn't know about any jobs in that area. They didn't prepare me. When I went through the FI6, it was all on recovery. It was basically like an OWL P program where they taught you this all day. And then when you talk about jobs, they say That's not what we do. You'll have to figure that out on the other side. Going through changes: it was all the Franklin reality model. It was this--But it was never like, Hey, this is where you go. This is the support. This is how you're going to get this. And it was so bad that we had to do our own research and there were things going around about If you go to mental health and you go here and you--. Like we were finding our own resources, passing along as inmates. So yeah, so they were tellin us you get certain types of benefits here here, but then it ended up being where it was just a myth, you know? None of it was true. You had to actually seriously be mentally challenged to get some of this stuff.

And then the time before that I was released to a halfway house. TDC said, We'll put you in a halfway house cause I had no address. And they shot me out all the way to West Texas. All the way to El Paso. Surrounded by a whole community of people that I didn't get along with in prison. And now you're expecting me to get a job where I'm basically an alien because it's all the rivals from prison. So you're putting me in rival territory. Even to go get a job, my life's at risk. I'm in a halfway house, so I can't protect myself with a gun or anything like that.

IGBANI-PERKINS: There's literally no support.

FIGUEROA: Yeah, no support. I had to beg a friend of mine to let me get his address so I could come back to Houston and try to find somewhere to get into. And unfortunately, I went to this one place off Collinsworth in 59. It was a border house, but even then I didn't have an ID. So I had to wait. I was living in the streets. This is all on parole. And if you went to your parole officer, they gave me two choices: you find an address I got to send you back to prison. It wasn't Let me help you. We got this. It was none of that. It was real. Now, I'm hearing about more programs, but I just don't know how that's getting passed along--/

IGBANI-PERKINS: Okay, James, would you, would you say that the prison system failed you as far as trying to help set you up for success after you're released from being incarcerated.

FIGUEROA: Yeah. On every occasion. I can literally tell you and I'm covered with tattoos, but on my release out the door—. It's hard to talk about because it's how the system basically looks at us: but you have more teaching officers saying, I'll see you in six months. You have TDC officers say, You're not going to make it. I'll see you in a couple years. It was almost like they were banking on us to come back. Not one of them said, Good luck or I hope you make it.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Nothing encouraging.

FIGUEROA: And that was the mentality of TDC. It was like, Hey, I'll see you in six months. And that was every time I was released, no matter if I had to smile or was aggravated. And so for me, I just felt like the system—no wonder there are hardly any programs for it. Because the whole idea is for us to stay into that statistic of, you know, recidivism. You're going to come back.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Part of a statistic.

FIGUEROA: Yeah, and so, to be able to be where I'm at today: I just hope that more doors open as far as advocating, more lanes. Because we're like, for myself: I'm ready. I just don't know exactly where to plug into and work.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah. Sounds like you're eager to give back, that would help those who are incarcerated still. What mental health issues did you have after you got out?

FIGUEROA: So yeah, so a lot of it went back to my childhood, to neglect, to poor nourishment. I found out later what it was: craving somebody's attention. But I was diagnosed with PTSD in 2000. Actually, when I went to work with you. And I don't want this to sound like I'm trying to pump you up, but I didn't know about any resources and I had such a stigma against mental health that I didn't want it. To refuse to get help. I've created hundreds of Facebook pages trying to recreate my identity, recreate who I was. I was so broken inside, I had homeboys that I felt were coming to get me because I took tattoos off my face. I was the public basic example of getting out the streets and then getting let down by those people and saying, Wait, I don't want nothing to do with these people and I'm done. So, the streets felt like I was playing with God and so I had all these feelings and thoughts in my head and I

couldn't share with nobody because people would not understand. The Christians wouldn't understand. The streets wouldn't understand. And so, I'm just stuck with all these different thoughts. The last time I was just at work and one of my co-defendants on my case was like, You know, bro, this this this and holiday my girl.

And I'm just like, Bro I got to go to work, come home and that shot me into like a PTSD episode. I'm at work. I can't even concentrate. I'm reading my Bible. I'm in tears. I'm like God, why are these—I couldn't stop the thoughts of just thinking I was gonna die. And that's the moment I was like, Something's wrong with my brain.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Hmm.

FIGUEROA: These are not normal thoughts to be at work, thinking like this. And you had always told me about mental health, that you had resources. You had me go get my gold card and I wasn't too hip on the mental health at first. It took me a while. But at that moment, and this was just last year—

IGBANI-PERKINS: Sounds like you were having issues all over, whether it was work and your relationships with other people.

FIGUEROA: Yeah. Yeah. Even to this day. You know, I've been single for almost two and a half years now. My relationships are just broken. I'm still going through these 12 steps. I'm so confused with religion. Death. Heaven. Hell. I've been—All these different doctrines and things have just been crammed down my throat and I'm just barely in the last six months said, Who are you James?

IGBANI-PERKINS: You're finding yourself.

FIGUEROA: Yeah, like finding healing or saying, You know, these things that you went through: it's okay to talk about them. But I just never had a platform to talk about them. Getting the—it's called Zoloft—a lot have dissed it. But it's helped me tremendously. I used to be racing like this. Now. I'm kind of mellow. You know, when I'm at work, I can concentrate. I'm not up and down. The only thing I struggle with now is religion and what's good, what's not. But basically recovery has helped me to understand, If you want this life to stay sober, stick to the 12 Steps because this other stuff is—-crazy. You go to church.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah.

FIGUEROA: I'm lost with a lot of it. And so I think about the near-death experiences—I've had triggers of PTSD and then also triggers I think about an afterlife. I was thinking about it like 80% of the time, and it wasn't myself. It was like, If I go to the store I could get killed. Or when Coby Bryant got killed, I didn't get out of bed for like three days. It just always--Death triggers the PTSD. And right now, I'm just waiting to get counseling for how to deal with that. And I think it's because I've been so close to it, whether it be in prison, in riots, or being surrounded by your homeboys and nobody can save you. Being on politics, you know, 15 of this gang, 15 of this gang, and it's just you. And you don't know if you're going to make it out that night. I think it's so much that is in fact in the PTSD and I think more people have it. We just needed to talk about it more.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Do you feel like your mental health issues after your release caused you to have some problems with finding a job or housing or, you know, obtaining housing or an apartment? Maintaining it? Being able to maintain it?

FIGUEROA: Yes. So in my first three years, I probably had over ten jobs. And I say, youth recovery. The youth recovery of the job market and usage is really small. There's only five, six of them. I ran through at least three, four of them. And Unlimited Visions, man: God bless them because they took me back like five, six times. Literally, like, you know, I'm saying? Because I went to work, but something would trigger me. I would get with this ministry and they'll be like, no, you need to do ministry. And I'd be dragged this way, and then Nah I want to--. And so part of it was just the struggle of listening to different sets of people. So I was scared to make decisions for myself coming out of jail, and I trusted another man to do that. And when I did that, I gave him basically power over my life. He could tell me where I need to work, what I need to do. What I needed to say. He controlled all this. When we fell out, I was broken worse than when I came in now because there should have been like a boundary. Like, I'm not a person that--You need to make decisions for yourself. But every time I would make a bad one, I knew that they felt some type of way. And so my relationships even got worse because I knew if I made a bad decision, they're going to cut me off. It happened so many times.

And so over my first 3, 4 years. I went through so many jobs, due to mental health. I left one job. I went into almost hiding over a PTSD episode. I called my lawyer. I called the pastor I was working with.` I called Victor from the gang. Oh, I called—everybody was like, Bro, and they all were--. None of them. Not one of them said, Hey, bro, you need to see a psychiatrist. They all just said, What are you doing? You must be doing something wrong, you know. Even my PO. Nobody could see that it was mental health. And then when I got diagnosed on my own through you, people were like, Okay, now I see it. So I really felt like if I ever worked with a guy getting out of jail, and I see it, I want to be able to tell them first and foremost that that's got to be addressed before I can even help you, bro, because I'm not going to, I'm only gonna make it worse. And so that's something I learned that I try to share with a lot of people that want to go save the world: be careful because you're going to pull that band-aid off and you're going to make it worse than what it was at the beginning. And, you know, that's the position, you know, with my mental health.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah, I can see how it seems like--When you were saying how when you connected with certain people and you went with it. You felt like you needed to do whatever they wanted you to do. And it seems like you easily went into that, probably because you'd been incarcerated for so long off and on and you're used to being incarcerated. They tell you what to do, when to do it, or whatever. So you get out and it's almost like—even if it's not in your best interest, it's easier for you to fall into that, so to speak?

FIGUEROA: So somebody I was talking to they told me, they told the exact [same thing]. And I really wanted to go to school on the psychology part of it because I'm trying to find out where I can fix my own brain.

Because I'm just waiting to see a psychologist myself so they can explain it. But the same principles, the same idea: this man on a horse. He would tell me where to (in TDC)--where to where to eat, where to shower, who to look at, who to talk to. You can't go here. You can't cross this yellow line, [inaudible].

So, when I came out here, I had somebody that was watching my social media. I had somebody that was watching my relationships with many girls. And if somebody died and I needed to go to the funeral, I would ask this dude. If a girl asked me to Starbucks, I would go ask this dude. If he

said block that girl, I will go do it. And then he would say, Well I didn't tell you, I just was advising you.

But I took it just like TDC. You know: same skin tone, you know, same figure of what was over here and I never got to coordinate like that's where it comes from. And when I didn't do what he liked, I felt horrible. Just like in TDC: You would crave for TDC if you're in the whole squad for them to say Good job.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Get their approval.

FIGUEROA: Get their approval or me being part of my homeboys. And if nothing wasn't going down, I would go do something just so I can get a pat on my back and say, [inaudible]. And even now I'm learning because I'll still reach out to him, but it'll be like I'm reaching out and it's not, it's not mutual.

So, in my brain--my brain now is saying, You have to get around people that love you every day all day, not just when you're doing good. And we know we can't work with him because he's like this. And so I'm getting around people that are in recovery, that understand mental health, understand addiction and just trying to stay in that network of people so I don't feel like an outsider or man. Or I'm just, you know, He's got issues. His brain doesn't function like ours.

It hurts, you know, being around perfect people that don't have these issues. And so that's why it's hard for me to go to church a lot because I feel like when I do or say something, I'm always like, It's like my words don't come out for them to understand. And no matter what bible study core group. I share and it's like it just goes void.

IGBANI-PERKINS: You're often misunderstood?

FIGUEROA: Yeah, misunderstood. And it sucks man. It just sucks. It hurts.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah, and it's amazing. So, all of this time throughout all these different incarcerations, and all of these different issues in life, whether it's the relationships or the with family, romantic relationships, employment, mental health is never like

an option. Or let's try this: an offered solution even with your engagement as you encounter other people in organizations.

FIGUEROA: Yes. So I was with this ministry, right? And they had a certain program. They had a certain way they handle situations and it was like a one size fits all because, when you start making it person-centered, that's where it gets difficult because you have to really understand that person. And a lot of programs where one size fits all, you can't get in this. I just, I can't deal with that because I got all these guys over here that can get with the program but you and you and you, you know--. So that's person-centered. All organizations I've seen as a one-size-fits-all and when you have problems you're kind of like in this world on your own. And there's other guys that I communicate with that kind of feel the same way. Like, Bro. I see what you see. And I and some of them do. And some of them do see mental health and some of them don't.

Because I'm so open, they know they can at least come to me and I can be like, yeah Bro. This is why this is. And so even working with guys that I work with (because I work in career and recovery), my boss says, We don't believe in "no." Like, you know? There's no problem too big. And there's, there's just no barrier that we're not willing to go head-to-head with, and if that is the one place I can say that. Mental health is so real because I work with the homeless population. And when I say mental health is real, oh it is. I'm glad that I dealt with it myself. So we get along. Even with their voices. Like we get along. Who are you today? I get it.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah, and it seems like you know, even within the family, when you were in prison, the people that you took you took to as family: even there, there was so much stigma behind mental health and you're crazy, things like that. After you got out, was there ever a time that you felt like giving up? If so, what would that have looked like?

FIGUEROA: Yeah, so I remember when it happened. So when I was in jail this last time, the 90 days, I had a female that was fighting for me to get out of jail. My sister: they felt I wasn't ready for change. They felt that I didn't need to be out yet. And so there was a fight in there. But inside, one minute I would be: I'm going to get out, do the right thing. Next minute, I'm like, beep, beep. I'm going to design 65 25 ain't nothing. So a lot of people are like, Woa.

And then getting out of jail, my giving up my first 15 months when I was fighting my court case. My giving up was saying I'm turning myself in. Like I'm gonna [inaudible] whatever they're telling about. And I had people that were like, Bro, don't. God brought you too far. This this. My giving up probably would have been (and it's hard for me to talk about because in my field, you can't talk about it because you work with people and they don't want you to feel)--but I'll be honest: there was a time in life when I walked away from that Ministry. I just wanted to go. I was ready to leave this world. The only people in my life that took me in (and the church, family, people say Church hurt doesn't hurt. It does) because it almost wanted me to commit suicide at the beginning. Because I just almost like, What do I do now, You know? I trusted people and I'm not feeling the same way. I have this hurt and I can't go back to the streets because I put in too much in this life. And so I just kind of been like at the social these last two and a half years, but figuring it out, you know, get around recovery. I believe that's one reason why I've been good. Because it's you just around some solid real people that are going to tell you, you know, Hey, it's okay. That "one day at a time." That has saved. My. Life.

IGBANI-PERKINS: I already know.

FIGUEROA: Don't worry about what's next.

IGBANI-PERKINS: That's right. One day at a time.

FIGUEROA: That's what really saved my life. Just one day at a time because it takes the pressure [off].

IGBANI-PERKINS: So much power in something so simple.

FIGUEROA: Yeah, yeah.

IGBANI-PERKINS: There's a lot of power and one day at a time. You're living it one day at a time.

FIGUEROA: Right? That's amazing.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah. I was just going to ask if any faith-based organizations helped at all.

FIGUEROA: Okay, so getting out of jail, I didn't know about recovery. As a community, as sober living, Oxford, Unlimited Visions, counseling and recovery. I didn't know about this. All I knew was streets, Christianity. There was no in-between. It was streets [or] Christianity. So I reached out to all the faith-based--. I did everything they asked me to. Now, I'm growing out my hair. I'm growing out because I realize in this real world, if you want to level up with companies and get a higher pay grade, there's just some things you just don't live no more. And faith-based: they wanted me to display my tattoos, share my testimony, make maybe ten dollars an hour. And you know what, that was life. You never own anything. You're just going to be here with the [inaudible. Poor?].

And so faith-based kind of taught me the things God wants for you on a like in a fantasy world, you know? Saying it wasn't like the reality of getting angry, right? They have a scripture for everything.

IGBANI-PERKINS: It's like I hear you, but I'm out here, and this is—.

FIGUEROA: Yeah, yeah. If you express yourself, they'll be like, Woa, all right, so I can't deal with you. I don't know what's going on.

I had a pastor that was, you know—. We worked a lot on just building. But at the end of the day, there were just some boundaries with his faith that he couldn't cross. And, you know, partly was mental health, partly was addiction: things that he didn't understand.

I tell people all the time: just because you have a heart for helping people doesn't mean you're actually helping people. You could actually be causing more damage. I'm a classic example. When you've had enough with somebody like me, you throw them in the trash and they have to figure this life out on their own. And they're in a worse situation. If you just would have left them alone and said, Look, I can't deal with this. You need to try this—.

And that's why I feel like faith-based kind of broke down. They taught me all the things that I needed to be doing or that God needed me to do. But when it came to real life, addiction, mental

health, career, jobs, that's where it was missing. So, doing all the great things the ministry, things they taught me, but there were a lot of pieces that were just missing and I had to figure all that out on my own.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Do you remember what your breaking point was after your home since your last incarceration? What was the thing that made you say, I can't live like this anymore. I'm going to get some help and what was the thing that pushed you to get some mental health?

FIGUEROA: Yeah, so with the mental health, right? Yeah. Okay. So when I was with the ministry and they were making decisions for me, you didn't see it as much. Like I would plug, de-plug. You didn't see it. But when I actually went out on my own, I started seeing the episodes, the patterns, the behavior. I could literally see like—.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Something just wasn't right for you.

FIGUEROA: Yeah, so the process wasn't clicking. For a while, I was kind of headed back to the streets almost because I was displaying these tattoos, I was engaging with old homeboys, until I had a situation that made me like, Bro that's over. And I still didn't want to deal with it because every time I wanted to, I would go back to the faith-based or the Christian Community. And this is where my struggle was because that was the only Community I really had. Even though I fell off, I would always run back to them, say Hi. I'm ready now. And every time I ran back to them, they made me feel, Just pray. You don't have mental health. Just pray about it. Don't claim that over your life. You don't have an addiction. So I would be like, I don't have it no more. It's not there. And I was living a lie.

IGBANI-PERKINS: You tell yourself that it's gone. It's taken care of.

FIGUEROA: Because how can I be around a community that doesn't believe me? That something's wrong with me. And then me be the only one that sees it and all y'all don't and y'all just say, No. He's an immature Christian.

So for me, I was like I had to quit being around these people. So I had to kind of like, So what is a community that understands mental health, that you can talk to about these problems? And I went to AA. And I went to sober living. And I started talking to people from Iraq and X veterans

and people like that and they started sharing their experiences. And then I felt I'm not that far off. I'm around other people like me. And I was still trying to go back to the Christian Community, but that link was always missing. And so when I go to church now, I'm like I go for social praise worship, hear about God, but I don't get personal no more. Because I'm like, we don't think the same. We have a different perspective. Like I can't tell you. I'm feeling real down today because you don't understand depression. So I gotta put on a smile and just say, Hey life is great. God is good, and it's amazing, and walk out of church. I go to an [AA] group, and breathe and say, Bro, I had a bad day. I had a messed-up day today. And you know what? I didn't drink. It's one day and I feel more out. So it's like, I go to these events now for social [events] and just to hear something about the God I love. I just have to be real short with people that don't understand this lifestyle and what comes with it afterwards.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah. It sounds like when you first started going to AA meetings, it sounds like you finally were able to connect with other people that had some of the same shared experiences as yourself. The first time, it was like love. In prison it was about what you can do for them or what they could do for you.

FIGUEROA: Now it's just like a prediction. Like every time I go I'll be like, man it's family because—.

IGBANI-PERKINS: You'll be with people from all different walks of life. But y'all have something in common.

FIGUEROA: Yeah, the last time I went, I was talking to a cop who, you know, dealt with alcoholism. And, you know, his story, his perspective. And he said, Man, you shared—you made me realize all criminals ain't bad. And, you know, I just was like, I'd never met a cop anywhere else. You know, would understand me. And he still calls me today and it's amazing like you say.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Some of the relationships you have today! I'm going to get a little bit into today in just a minute. I did want to ask you. Wow. So the AA seems like a changing point, a turning point in your life, right?

FIGUEROA: Yeah, it was because—. I was told getting out of jail: they gave me a set of rules. They gave me—If you do this, this this this this, God's going to bless you.

And if you do this this this, then I can't help you. So it was like, if you do all the right things, we got you. But if these things like, Hey, bro, you know, I wish you could get this, but you can't so kind of dust your hands. That's what they call it. Dust your feet. So I was doing a lot of things to people-please. And then when I realized I was still in my process, that's where I felt like the breakdown, you know?

What generally happened was like, a lot of my issues weren't addressed. A lot of things weren't addressed. And so, the whole idea of recovery, and just how all these changes--I just felt like you're finding yourself. The first 15 months, I felt like it was dealing with my faith, like putting my faith in God, but then being hurt by a group of people that you really trusted. And for me, the whole journey is just. It's crazy because it's just so complex. But you listening, I bet you're like, Wow, like I see it.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Most definitely. There's a saying that says, The support of one to another is without parallel. Or something like that. Is really priceless. When you finally got connected to some mental health support after your incarceration, what was it or who was it that helped you that finally get connected to some help?

FIGUEROA: Okay. So a lot of people spoke to me about it. Jessica Yeager. She's a recovery… She has an amazing story. I was making all these Facebook pages because like I said, I was trying to back away from the Christian Movement and transfer to the recovery movement, but I really didn't know how. So I was like, well, I'll just start a new Facebook. I ended up doing that like hundreds of times. My mind was going back and forth and it's [inaudible]. And she hit me up. She was like, You need to go look at MHMR. Or, You know, you can get help. It's there. And I like yeah, Jessica, that's cool. But, you know, you have any jobs like in recovery? Like, I'm trying to connect. Like I wasn't even thinking like, how I need to get that.

And then eventually, because of you, I was able to get my gold card. You send me to the lots. You helped me out tremendously. I still wasn't there yet, but I eventually, after that last situation where I felt like people were outside of my job--and I'm sober and clean. Like, this is paranoia. People would think, what?—but it's just metal health.

And when I talk to that 1-800 number, they were so comforting. Like, those people who answer those phones. They are so non-judgmental. If you could just talk to those people on the phone all day—because they ask you questions and they--

IGBANI-PERKINS: They listen to you.

FIGUEROA: They listen to you. And that was the time when—. And since then, the mental health--you being there and me contacting you and saying, Hey go here. And giving me the resources, like Casa de Amigos, the place downtown off of Caroline. Something happened where I had to end up going to the MHMR because how Harris Center works is different-- the gold card doesn't cover one. But if that one didn't work out, then this one does. And you know, a lot of people talk about democratics, but I'll tell you something. Man, they made this impossible. Because somebody like me: there's no way I could balance all these different obstacles and be able to pay health insurance. And they have taken care of me the last year and a half. Like it's been crazy. Because I'm in there and I'm just, you know, sharing where I'm at financially and they just step up to the plate. And say we're going to take care of this, don't worry. And so I would say the one person was you: never judging me, no matter how many times I made a new page. Yeah. And how many times I would say I'll go here. And I remember I was so excited to tell you: Hey, I finally did it. And I had so many people in my corner like, Go do it. I mean, it's been amazing.

IGBANI-PERKINS: That's good. You just were speaking about Health Care. Do you feel like if you had the ability right before you were released to get health care and if it was provided to you by the prison somehow, do you believe that you would have sought Mental Health Care earlier, right after your release? Or do you think it wouldn't have made a difference? It still would have—.

FIGUEROA: God. I'm going to tell you: When I was just a state jail in 2009, I had committed a very horrific crime and that crime cost me the next nine months in state jail to just not even, not even care about anything in this world. And I was so gone that the day before I got arrested, I was like, Man I'm going to go back out there. I already could be facing 25 years. Like, I'm going out there. I can't get no job because if this pops up on me, I don't want them to find me.

I imagine today: if mental health would have sat down with me a couple days prior to that and said, hey, do you want some help? Do you want healthcare? I believe at that moment I would have said because--I couldn't do it on my own--Yeah, this was going on. I need help. Hey, my mind is--. And even the last time getting out--. Like I said, I went Christian in prison. And it was either go Christian or go Muslim. If you're part of any family if you're part of any [inaudible] if you're part any group--you know what I'm saying?--you had two ways to get out: either you went Muslim or you went Christian. There was no such thing as get into recovery. That would have blown my mind if it was there because I would have been, What is that? And so I never addressed mental health because you know in the Christian world it's, Just pray about it.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Pray for everything, right?

FIGUEROA: And he's going to get over it. And if you're, if you're not healed from this, then something's wrong with you.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Hmm.

FIGUEROA: And so imagine if somebody like me getting out after almost seven years, changing their life, giving it to Christ, and then somebody say Hey, do you want some health care? Do you? I mean, how's your—At the moment, I probably would have been like, Yeah. I'm really messed up. I need some help. Because I am just on the physical body, there are things going on with you: your emotions, your anxiety, your stress. Days before you get out after doing almost seven years, your brain is fried. You just constantly think about having anxiety. Your heart starts pumping. You get Shivers, you get hair standing up, You're just, you're gone.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Right.

FIGUEROA: And I really truly believe that a lot of us: They get out of prison. We're kind of just stuck, you know, in the end. I tell people: I say, We're like cats with nine lives. I've lived this type of life, I've lived this type of life, and none of them are the same. Some of them you never want to go back to. And so yeah, I just hope it gets better. But I'm glad that there's programs like this that are actually invested in guys like us because man, I'm telling you. It would be amazing to be able to go back in or work for TDC as somebody that says, Hey

man, this is, this is some of the things that y'all need to change and be able to go to Congress and say, Hey man I'm living proof. We care but we need help because it ain't been easy.

I tell people all the time, TDC has entry level programs and barely that. Have you ever seen the Cheyenne Center or Ben Read? Like guys grabbing people's drinks then live in these drug tested environments. It's so disgusting how they treat us. And then I'm at a second level where I've talked to faith-based Ministries, recovery, and nobody has an answer for a guy that gets out of jail, has surpassed the entry level and now it's trying to go to college, trying to do things. And they have no support or help for somebody like that.

And I've asked for faith-based, recovery based. I've asked everybody. I say, Who helps us to find out what college to go to, what loans to take out? I'm busy. 19%, APR on a car. You know, twenty percent APR that I don't even know those numbers, you know? And so I'm thinking in my head like, Those programs need to be out here: how to file taxes if you never had a tax—. Well, these different things I had to go through, and I would just love to sit down and say, What about these guys? Because I've had to do it on my own and it sucks.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah. Seems like with some right with the right changes, prison could really be--if there's going to be a prison--It could be a place where people really get rehabilitated and are really prepared for success after incarceration. The best question I've been wanting to ask you--now, I think, because it's the best part. Everything that you've told me. But where are you now? What are you doing? What do you have going on now in life?

FIGUEROA: I would say in the last year—. They call it the bamboo tree, right? Effect? That they talk about in recovery? That you keep watering it and it doesn't grow, it doesn't grow. And then finally, it just spurges and his bamboo tree's just humongous. That's kind of what my life's like. For so many years, I didn't see any growth. And then I would say this last year, I financed my first vehicle with intent to actually pay for it. You know, I'm saying? I sold my other car, had a 1900 down. They hit me on the AP like I was saying, 20%. I didn't even know those numbers. I just needed a vehicle. That was the beginning. I was working at the UVA, working a second job at positive recovery. These are both treatment centers: one as a recovery coach. One as an RA recovery advocate working with guys inside.

During this time, I just felt like there's got to be more because there's a certain pay grade and I wasn't doing anything. Getting higher. I messed up my college situation. I'm still fighting the appeals to explain about the mental health, and then moving, and then covid, and then a desk. So it's still an appeal. That's what stopped the college part. But six months ago, I got a job at Career Recovery Resources as a sober coach, making 30 [inaudible].

IGBANI-PERKINS: Congratulations.

FIGUEROA: I would say, within 20 minutes of the interview, they called me back saying We want you. We want you. I went through 11 days of this background check that just drove me crazy. And they were so excited to have me but they didn't know what I was going to bring, what I was going to do. Within three months, I was doing outreach. I was going door to door, I was working with homeless and they were like, This guy is so much more than a sober coach. From that point on they gave me a five thousand dollar raise. I was working with these programs that they built with Harris County Sheriff's Department, The Hot Team, where they employ guys for a helpful day and then they feed them breakfast and lunch. These are guys straight off the streets. And then I come in as a case manager, make sure they're getting their housing assessment. Make sure they have emails, make sure they're getting resumes. And these are guys that are living out of their backpack. And I'm working with these guys. I'm doing groups with them every Thursday.

And because of that, and because of this they said We want to give you a raise of 50k a year being a work site supervisor. Meaning you'll be over this abatement team. You'll also do case management. And during that time, before this happened, I got the NRG. So I've been like a program developer. I've developed a program from the payroll, from time, spreadsheets I've never done. The HMIS program. I was already dealing with the Columbus; now I'm certified in the HMIS program and it's just taking off. And this is my third week of working with these guys doing payroll, doing all their clothes, their inventory. These guys are housed, they're part of the housing program. And now I've got them employed working 30 hours a week, 25 to30 hours a week. And they're like, You're the greatest supervisor because you've been there, you know. If they have any excuse, any problem—. I just got a guy today that's saying I had a situation and I need to talk to you. And this is 8:00 at night.

It's amazing. I finally got my own apartment again. I have a two-bedroom. I just got a roommate. I'm trying to get on the financial up-and-up. I'm growing my hair out, my beard. If you looked at my life today, there's one thing I could say is The work you put in--. The work you put in that nobody sees. The things that you do and nobody sees: it'll take you to the next level.

Because everything I learned, every obstacle, every problem: being used, people taking advantage of me—. All the stuff you learn. And it takes off now. Friday, I go meet with the lady that writes the grants, my boss. She's like I need you to go with me because I need to get this contract so they'll hire our guys, and you're the perfect guy. They passed over somebody else and they were like, Nah, I need you. I need you there. And just things like that. Been sober four years and 3 months being on probation. My probation officer is referring people to get jobs from me. So other people on their caseload that don't have jobs: she sends them to me because of where I work. So I mean if God is good, it's amazing just to be able—Man, it's just crazy.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Wow, that is beyond amazing. There are two things that you said in his interview and I want to speak to both of them real quick. One of them: you said you sharing with me what it would have looked like for you if you gave up. I am so, so glad that you did not give up. And I hope that giving up is something that is no longer an option for you.

FIGUEROA: Yeah.

IGBANI-PERKINS: The other one you said a little bit ago. You said you were so messed up. You ain't messed up. You just described like, wow, what? Congratulations on top of congratulations. The sobriety alone for four years is a huge congratulations. Because it doesn't take a lot of stress to push you back to that. And so congratulations for taking it one day at a time. But on top of that, the career, fighting to go back to school, advocating for yourself, helping other people. Words can't describe how excited I am for you and your journey and I watch you so much and you inspire me and encourage me to keep going. I'm really, really, really happy for you. And the sky's not the limit. There is no limit.

FIGUEROA: No. I truly want to thank you because, you don't know it, but the things that you say, the things you post on social media, the activist you are made me realize that mental health is not a problem. Some of your posts are directly for people like me, I

take it so literally. And the conversations I can share with you. And you're like, Oh, it's this. You need to go here. I'm gonna give you this and you're going to go over here.

It's truly amazing. And without people like you and the program like this, being able to even share this, man. I would have wrote my name a thousand times on that paper and said, please share every piece. Every minute. I don't care what's in it. I want you to share it all because somewhere somebody needs to hear that, man. It's a lot of very—and you're not alone and we're fighting through it because somewhere along the way, these doors are going to crash open and TDCJ is going to have to answer a lot of questions. So I'm just thankful.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah. I have one last question. What advice would you give somebody else who is getting ready to get released and, like you (maybe they come from a background like yours, where they've been incarcerated multiple times in their life) mental health is not something that is like a plague and is so stigmatized that they don't even feel comfortable to share that part of their life with anyone and they're getting ready to get released from prison. They have not had the help or support in prison before prison, during their incarcerations, and now they're getting ready to get out tomorrow. What advice would you give this person?

FIGUEROA: So first of all, the first thing that came to my mind was and I want to get this copyright on the shirt. If it's not already. You. Period. Are. Period. Not. Period. Alone. Period. The reason why is because: the feeling of somebody else has gone through what you've gone through. The feeling that Mental Health: you're not alone, and getting out of incarceration: you're not a victim. So many people say it's an excuse. No, it's not.

And if somebody is freshly getting out of jail, the first thing I would say is Raise your hand. It's okay. Raise your hand because you need help. You can't do this alone. I know you've battled. I know you struggled. I know you've done it all through your ears or prison. I know how Gangsta it is, but I'm telling you right now: you need help. The system is built against us, and the more guys that come out and stand together and fight together and do this together--I promised you, we can take over this whole system and make it a better place. I work with 20 to 30 homeless guys, and every morning I talk to them, they all are saying yes, the system. Yes, this. If I could only get this. And I tell them that, if all of us used our voice, if all of us let them know that the one person getting out tomorrow. Well, you're not alone. Please raise your hand. Please go to these places. Don't be afraid of mental health. And that stuff is real.

It inspires me now, to be able to share: mental health is real. And there's help. You don't got to stay like that. Like that's, it's just crazy. You know? One story I wanted to share. I have a friend and I'm going to say his name because he was really impactful with youth: Emilio Parker. He was so good at what he did. And he ended up relapsing. He ended up robbing and stabbing. I talked to him in Harris County. He's fighting some charges. And I said, if there's one piece of advice, you could give me, Bro. What is it?

He said in the work you're doing? Keep mental health first. He said, it's ruined my life. I didn't address it. And now I'm facing a hundred some years, dog. And there ain't no way for me to get out of this system. This situation for me, please James. Mental health, whatever you do. This is coming from somebody that's made it out. Got out of jail. Got out of this, helped youth. Crazy: opened doors for people like me back incarcerated. And I ask one thing and he says mental health.

That's powerful. You don't want to be screaming Mental Health when you're facing 50,000 years. It's better to do it now. So that's just a piece of—what I could share with you.

IGBANI-PERKINS: So powerful. Yeah. I really appreciate you sharing your truth and transparency. You just really being open about everything. I really really appreciate that. And is there anything else you want anybody to to know about you or that you wanted to say before we end?

FIGUEROA: Just to let everyone know: I love this here. I love speaking about it, I love talking about it. I love the platform, the programs. Anywhere I can volunteer, Anywhere I can plug in, just let me know where. This has opened my eyes. Not forgetting about the brothers and sisters that are still incarcerated that I too have, you know, neglected that area. And so, I just want to say, I really love this right here from Kim Kardashian on down every person that school forgot about. Wrongful convictions, incarceration. I just want to say thank you, and any way I can help. Please. I will go wherever. And sums it up; I just love what y'all do.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Well, thank you so much.