Texas After Violence Project, Visions After Violence

Interview with Ronnie Smith

Interviewer:	Lovinah Igbani-Perkins
Narrator:	Ronnie Smith
Interview Date:	March 29, 2022
Location of Interview:	Joined via Zoom
Interview Format:	Audio & Video

Summary: Lovinah Igbani-Perkins interviews Ronnie Smith about his experiences in jails in Texas and California and how accepting treatment for his depression has improved his quality of life and helped in his recovery. Smith served numerous jail sentences related to drug and alcohol dependency issues, but avoided prison. In the interview, Smith talks about the loss of his professional license as a nurse and how that and jail time caused him trauma. He also shares how accepting treatment for his depression and accessing resources for unhoused and formerly incarcerated people in Los Angeles helped in his recovery and his life.

LOVINAH IGBANI-PERKINS: Alright. Hello. Hello. Hello. How are you doing this evening? [00:00:05]

RONNIE SMITH: I'm doing well, doing well. I was going to remove this– [00:00:12] No–

IGBANI-PERKINS: What would you like to do? Go ahead–

SMITH: No. No, it was something on my screen from you. I guess we removed it.

IGBANI-PERKINS: You're fine. Alrighty, so if you want to just introduce yourself and just tell me– just share a little bit about how many times do you recall being incarcerated? But actually, first of all, I want to tell you that I appreciate you for being willing to share your time and share your truth about your experience with mental health and incarceration, and how that impacted you and– just for your time and for being willing to do the interview. So, thank you. [00:00:49]

SMITH: Well, my name's Ronnie Smith and I want to say that I'm happy to be able to do this and hopefully, it will help someone. So, I'm excited about this. And if there's anything– or whatever questions you have for me, I'm ready to answer them. Now. What was your first question?

IGBANI-PERKINS: How many times do you recall being incarcerated? [00:01:15]

SMITH: How many times I recall– It had to have been over– I'm going to say at least– Eight times, at least eight times, and usually these were for brief periods. However, there was one time that it really impacted my life. It was pretty much close to prison, but I never actually got a number.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Okay. All right. I think we'll revisit that a little bit later. But actually if we saw around eight times total different and incarcerations. [00:01:58] Are you currently on parole or probation or anything right now?

SMITH: No, no, I'm not currently. Fortunately. I'm not.

IGBANI-PERKINS: All right, that's great. That's good. So when was your last incarceration? [00:02:12]

SMITH: My very last incarceration was– [00:02:17] it had to have been in 2018– and I'm going to back up maybe to 2017 because I began to get sober in 2018. So, in 2017, This was one of the brief stints that– because I'm out here using drugs and most of the time I'm panhandling, and this is in Louisiana, and I do recall getting locked up at least twice in that same

year for stealing from, you know, from the store, from Circle K. I'll just put it out there. But mostly what I was trying to steal was to feed my addiction, beer. You know, I'm going in, I had beer and I'm still gonna– I'm crazy enough to try to steal more. And I remember this time, the store clerk, he's like, "I'm sick n' tired of you, man." So he called the police this time and they found beer on me and took me to jail. It was basically– seven days, I believe for for that and then no probation for that.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Okay.

SMITH: But that was the last time.

IGBANI-PERKINS: All right, about 2017.

SMITH: 2017, yes. [00:03:50]

IGBANI-PERKINS: Alright, so– if we could back up actually, before your first incarceration ever occurred and, if you could just share briefly a little bit about your childhood. Just, you know, just Just your upbringing, what that was like for you, what kind of environment you grew up in and, you know, how was, how were things in your childhood? [00:04:13]

SMITH: Okay, a little bit about me. So I was born in Louisiana, in a city called Shreveport, Louisiana. It's not as popular as New Orleans, so everybody thinks about New Orleans when you say Louisiana– but Shreveport was large enough to get in trouble. It was the third-largest state [00:04:36] So, I was born there, went to school there, pretty much had a typical family life, with a stepfather, my mom was there– a hard worker. She worked for AT&T, at this time it was called Western Electric, but AT&T. I was pretty much a latchkey kid, you know, so– because my mom was always at work stepdad had two jobs. So I had a lot of, let's say freedom to, to mess up. [00:05:09]

But I do recall as a youth, just wanting things that didn't belong to me. My mom tells a joke a lot about her coming home and finding a motorcycle– and actually it was a mini bike– but a motorcycle in the house that and me and my brother had taken from somewhere. So it was– basically growing up, doing little, let's say delinquent activity, [00:05:42] but going to school making decent grades, actually– but I always wanted to leave Shreveport.
Let me just go ahead and start with that, and I did actually, I made an attempt at 16 years old. I left and joined a group of magazine sales. I didn't know that the people never got their magazines, but I knew the owner drove a jaguar and I wanted to be like him. So I joined the sales group and they sent us to– they were advertising on the radio, If you want to make lot of money, go travel. So I joined that and I lasted about a week. So, like I say, I always wanted to leave Shreveport though– So my next attempt was Job Corp, so I did that. Okay, I joined Job Corps–

and the thing about it, drugs and alcohol seemed to be always around. So in Job Corps, I do remember them giving me an early release, okay, because I found that I wanted to be entrepreneurial– I was there rolling marijuana joints there at– I was about sixteen, maybe going on 17 at this time, and I'm trying to roll them to sell them. Well, I smoked a little bit, but I wanted to make money, is what I want to do. [00:07:00]

So at 18, well, I got kicked out of there. At 18 now I'm old enough to join the military. So, I'm trying to get out of Shreveport, out of Louisiana, so I joined the military and they send me to basic training, advanced training, that was good experience, you know, to get out of– you know, to see the world. But, I only joined the National Guard. So guess what? I'm back to Shreveport now, doing my training there in Shreveport and just, you know, in the summer– you know, you go to training for two weeks. [00:07:36]

So I– I did that, but like I say, my desire was always to get out us Shreveport and fast-forward– what happened when I was around 23, to get out of Shreveport– I basically hijacked my mom's car and I drove it to Fort Worth, Texas and when she came looking for her car, I mean– there was a long story with drugs and alcohol involved in that, but I stole her car and she she found me. She found where I was at a Salvation Army in Fort Worth and she asked me, "Ron do you want to stay here?" I'm like, "Yeah, I'm going to stay out of Shreveport." Because that was my biggest deal– was to get out and see the world. [00:08:21]

So that's 23 years old, right there. And that's never having gone to actual jail. So then, now we can start talking about how I'm now incarcerated, with possession of a gun in Texas, you know, as a young youth, you know, so I began to get into more trouble. Okay, so that's the fast forward. That's my whole childhood, but I did well in school, actually, I got out of the military with an honorable discharge somehow!

IGBANI-PERKINS: Congratulations [00:09:00]

SMITH: I always straightened up enough to do the right thing, so, I had a good head on me. But– I always wanted that extra– to make extra money or to do something that was outside of what society called just, you know, just– I didn't want to work for a living. I wanted to either sell weed or do something–

IGBANI-PERKINS: Fast money.

SMITH: Fast money, that's it, exactly. [00:09:29]

IGBANI-PERKINS: When you were growing up, I know you mentioned your being raised by your mom and your stepfather. Was your father around, your biological father around at all.

SMITH: He was at a younger age. Yes, it and I had– I would visit him.

IGBANI-PERKINS: What was your relationship like with him? [00:09:48]

SMITH: It was really loose. I mean, he was an alcoholic, he drank a lot. I remember getting in the car with him and sometimes my mom wouldn't even let me go because if he was too drunk to drive, then– I mean this was way back then, when they really didn't have all the stiff laws, I mean, you drive around with a 40 in between your lap and really, that was the norm. So if he was too intoxicated, sometimes she wouldn't even let me go, you know, and this is– my mom had– I have four siblings and only two of us– my sister. We have the same dad. That kind of family. [00:10:28]

So my other brother, he has his dad., then my younger sister and brother they had the stepdad that I lived with who actually raised us and, y'know, did pretty good. You know, my dad, he was in the picture, but he was actually never around and later on, he did die when I was really young, in my 20s, from cancer. [00:10:54]

IGBANI-PERKINS: [00:10:56] And how was that for you being a young man? Young adulthood–

SMITH: [00:11:01] I did not like it at all. I was mad. I was angry for a long time. I mean, how could you leave me? I need you. So that kind of thing– and actually, just to–I had a brother, a stepbrother now, who was my sibling on his side. Now, he actually got shot in the head and died when I was– It was like the year after my father– maybe two years after, so I lost my dad and my brother. Now, this is the brother I really hung out with, because we did a lot of dirt really. I knew he liked to stay in trouble. See, and actually did, he was a good fighter. He taught me how to fight, and he– that's why a guy shot him, because he got beat up– because he beat this guy up, you know. [00:11:53]

So, anyway– I just felt like both of them deserted me. And so, I really wanted to get out of Shreveport then, you know, so, Because I didn't really have any– and those were my male models. I mean, a dad that drank drank himself to sleep most of the night, but he was a good worker. My biological dad actually, he was refrigerator repairman. And I used to, as a young even, eight, nine, ten years old– love to go with him because on the weekend he'd go fix– He'd have extra spare jobs, outside of this company, and I handed him his little tools, so, our relationship was okay, he was in the picture, but he really wasn't very supportive. [00:12:39] And then, like I say, later on I got angry because I felt like he, I mean, he left me, but he died. I mean, later on, I understood. I've come to grips with that. No, but so that's two males in my life

that I really needed, that I lost early as a young man. So, nobody to really guide me in the right direction. [00:13:03]

IGBANI-PERKINS: Right, so, you know, raised by mom and stepdad and then at an early age, you decided Shreveport was not for you– And you became what seemed like– on a mission to get out of Shreveport. And then in your early 20s, of course, you lost two people that were seen– possibly closest to you, that you really cared about, which is your dad and your brother and lost them really close together. [00:13:33]

Are all of your incarcerations in Louisiana? [00:13:36]

SMITH: No, no. No, I've been incarcerated in every state that I've lived there. But I've only lived in, Louisiana, Texas, and California, but every state– I've been incarcerated. And now, I have not been incarcerated in every city in Texas. I was never an incarcerated in Houston because I was sober then, but but pretty much every other city I've lived in. I have gone to jail there. Dallas– jail– briefly, you know, that was a long time ago. So, I don't know where you want to start–

IGBANI-PERKINS: Tell me about the one where you said you almost– you almost got a number but didn't. [00:14:18]

SMITH: Yeah. That's the one that I really– When you said we needed to present this, this is the one I really wanted to share with someone maybe [00:14:31], you know, and really to talk about It it for my own self because I don't talk about it very much. But this was when I moved to California, I moved there, just on a whim. I'm living in Dallas and I can't stop using cocaine. And so I just jump up, pack all my clothes and leave a whole apartment full of furniture and move to California. Okay. So this is where I'm leading up to this incarceration, ok, because it happened in Los Angeles.

[00:15:07] So I just wind up in Los Angeles and I get one of my mom's friends, she kind of helps me out with a place to live– and I kind of get settled there for a minute, but it didn't take too long for me to pick up one of my addictions, which was drinking. [00:15:29] And so, my first arrest there in Los Angeles– and actually it was in 2004– was a DWI. [00:15:38] Okay, and I had a Cadillac, I had done real well, I had a nice car, I was working in my profession– and actually, I'll have to back up just a little bit because to make this story complete. I want to make the message that– to let anyone know that– listen, no matter what background you came from that within a minute or a second of a bad decision, you can turn your life around. Now. see, I'd– to rewind just a little bit higher-– gone through a lot of things in life, and then I found some recovery, and I begin to get my life straight and I had even completed nursing school. [00:16:28]

So, here I am an RN, A [unintelligible] RN, very needed, very promising future– and that was in my 30s now. So here I am working as a nurse in Dallas and like I say then I got this wild hair, and now I'm in Los Angeles. I did get my license transferred, but I'm a nurse, and working for mostly for insurance companies, hospitals– and so I had different positions out there. Now, here we go, like I say, 2004, [00:17:01] I'm driving a nice car because I've got a nice job where I wear suits every day and can buy pretty much anything I want, you know, making upwards of forty-plus dollars an hour, you know, almost fifty dollars an hour. Now, you would think somebody like this would just stop and know better and I had friends to tell me, Ron you have so much to lose,– but I didn't see it, you know, so my first DUI was in 2004. The nursing board does not like that. They don't like nurses that drive around and run into other– 'cause see actually, I ran my car into a parked car. I had blacked out for a little– I guess for a while– and whenI woke up, I had rear-ended a parked car. [00:17:53]

So I had nowhere to run, I was arrested that day, and this begins now, just a series of arrests, okay. And series of events. That led up to what I'm going to talk about was this incarceration that almost cost me a long time. So, the DUI that happened in 2004– now, the nursing board does not investigate. They take at least three years to investigate. So, here I am, I'm still working as a nurse. They haven't done anything. And finally, I get another DUI, though, in 2008. [00:18:39] So I'm back in county jail now. And actually, I tried to fight the first DWI. [00:18:46] You know, you could hardly ever beat it, because they got you– I mean you run into the back of a car and then they arrest you right there on the spot and give you a breathalyzer, you know– but I just– I wanted to try something, because I knew I had so much to lose. [00:19:02]

So then I had another DUI, because I could not stop drinking, okay? So– and then I go back to jail and– so now– what happened now, this investigation finally happens and I get a letter from the nursing board that I am no longer eligible to practice nursing in the state of California. So that cut me deep, I know that even if I did get myself together– and they had all these charges, what I did, outlined– everything I had done. Because I had the car, I had a loaded gun in it. Now. I'm riding around as a gangster nurse. [00:19:48] Who did well at work, now. I mean I when I was at work, they loved me, you know, and I never harmed a patient or anything like that. But in my– my lifestyle is basically what they looked at and they said they don't need a nurse that rides around with loaded guns and run into other people's cars and then have two DUIs. [00:20:10]

So actually they didn't even– So by the time they got to the investigation, I had already caught a charge for possession [00:20:21] with sales of cocaine. [00:20:24] Yes, we call– I'm not a– I'm not a dope dealer. I am a user and I basically was trying to get a bigger Rock of cocaine, and what I did was I sold to an undercover, right there in the downtown, Los Angeles area. So I immediately– I had no recourse to say that I did not do it, to say that, "Oh that– that on the ground was not mine," or anything like that. It was– it was a sting operation and– but like I say, I

was on a mission to get a bigger one. So I wanted to sell this small one to get that and then he definitely took it. [00:21:06]
So I go to jail with, looking at– Sales of cocaine. DUI, I probably could have got a, you know, the nursing board, "Listen, get me some help. I'm going to straighten up, turn around." But now here I am with another charge that they don't even know about, they're only investigating the DWI. [00:21:28]

So– I'm at a dilemma. I go on the deep end, this. Okay, I go to jail now– and I say that the jail traumatized me and it, actually the whole situation of going to jail did. I don't know, it changed my life because I could not fight it. Like I say, I was caught dead to rights, but this term of jail, which was, like I say I could have got more time. [00:22:04] And actually, I only served my time in county jail and they gave me what you call a county lid, which is supposed to be a year, but they got, they got overloaded– The jails are overloaded. So they're kicking everybody out as soon as possible. So I actually, I did seven months, three– Yeah, seven months, three weeks and two days.

IGBANI-PERKINS: [00:22:29] And what could have been–

SMITH: What could have been, definitely– I could have gotten a number. If I had screwed that up, now, or messed up somehow in jail– Then I could have, they could have sent me straight on the prison–

IGBANI-PERKINS: Did you get probation also? [00:22:48]

SMITH: Yes, I did. Yeah, I got probation after that– and I do recall, getting sober enough and long enough to get off of that probation in California, and actually, my plan was to get off and get out of California, which I finally did in 2013, but– Like I say, a bad type of charge for me. [00:23:14] I just felt my– I went into a deep depression after that, but then it's what the point I wanted to make, see because I felt as though I had lost something, and my attitude is not the same today, because money is not everything– not to me, not anymore. But back then it was like, I felt as though I lost my sustenance. That I lost my– my purpose for being here. You know, it's like– So, because I knew that and people were saying, oh man, try to get your license back, do this– I'm like, "Man, you just don't know, they already- they haven't even investigated this other charge of cocaine sales, and they're still investigating, they've got me up and they've already suspended my license for D2 DWIs." [00:24:04]
So, here we go. I'm listening to other people and I'm thinking, okay, maybe they are right. Maybe I should try and– sometimes– I mean, I believe them, but most of the times not. Because I know that I'm still in my addiction [00:24:25] and I'm not gonna be able to fight this and follow through on what I want to do. So that was the– that wasn't the last time I was in jail, but that was the the most impactful, jail sentence. I ever served. Because, like I say, when I got out, I began to

see a psychiatrist. Because I didn't– want to go on, you know? I mean, I really did not want to– I didn't feel like I had any– I didn't feel like life was worth living. I really just–

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah.That's pretty traumatizing, though. I mean, the whole fact that is really all about your addiction, but not only did you get thrown into a cage in jail, this if that's going to help your addiction, but also stripped of You know, your whole– [00:25:23]

SMITH: Livelihood. You know, my livelihood–

IGBANI-PERKINS: And get your license taken, it's like part of who you are, you know, and so to get stripped of that, that's pretty devastating, and traumatizing. [00:25:34]

SMITH: Right. So that's the point, like I say, I wanted to really bring home for anyone, and for myself too, that, you know, I made that decision. Like I say, to pass that undercover officer that rock. It was only one rock, (laughs) and I'm laughing because it was in a sock. I had it– No, it was in a glove. I caught myself concealing it. It was in the glove and I took it out. I remember it. And I remember some people around me that were saying, no, no, no! But I didn't know what they were talking about. But I'm like, I just sold it to him. Next thing I knew– see one split second, one decision, one bad decision can impact it– my whole life– and actually it's– it's probably, I don't know, I want to say I believe all things work together for good, So– because it put me where I am today, with more insight, it put me with a sober mind for over four years now. So, I'm going to say that it may have been for my benefit because, I think that on the road, I was on, I was on the road to self-destruction, you know. [00:26:48]

So– but like I say that jail time and now the jail terms, let me just add this, also– that the jail terms after that, even though they were short stints, the ones when I moved, try to move– when I did move back to Shreveport, and like I said, got arrested for vagrancy and trespassing and for stealing out of Circle K– You know, they would always ship me straight to the mental health departments, you know. And that was, that means– if you don't know, that's when they take all your clothes and you got on the, what you call that green– I don't know– It's just a covering. Okay, at least something to cover you, but it is cold and it was– you don't have, you don't have any clothes on, in other words, because they don't want you to, they didn't want me to do harm to myself. So, but most of the times, once they– Once I told them about my history a little bit, I went straight to the mental health department of the jail. Okay, so so that's sort of my story to, you know, just a deep depression from what I thought was ruining my life– but I'm here today.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah, I do want to say congratulations on four years of sobriety. That's that's good. And I know that takes a lot of work. [00:28:26] When you tell me about when you got released, if the seven months or a little over seven months, was your longest stay, and the

most with that being the most impactful. [00:28:38] Did jail– Do you feel like jail at all prepared you to go back into society?

SMITH: [00:28:51] As a matter of fact, I, I can't say that that's true for me. Maybe for some, but– [00:29:01] Essentially, what I did was I– sit around, and talked big and I played dominoes, and I talked about how I'm going to be gonna be this big drug dealer when I get out, you know, and they just didn't know I was locked up for one– one rock of cocaine and therefore, for sales– but I'm now this big drug dealer. You have to make up– make up your story inside. Yeah, so there's just–

IGBANI-PERKINS: So, no classes? No kind of support while you're in jail?

SMITH: As a matter of fact– No I did, I did– I took– I do recall, going to and joining, they had a sobriety group. As a matter of fact in the Los Angeles County Jail [00:29:56] where you would get to go to meetings. Okay, and I think They were AA related. So that was one of the biggest things. And later on the incarceration in Shreveport, I remember going to some of the Bible studies. So there was always some type of programs that would offer to help you, you know, but I think on that seven-month stint, I was really just counting the days, counting the minutes, you know, to get out of there. [00:30:27]

And like I say when I got out, I did help probation for, whew– I think a year probation and that kind of– that time went quickly. And there might have been two years, Ms Lovina, but I did it. I connected with my PO and I did not miss a step, because I wanted to get out of California. And so, I pretty much stayed sober, most of the time I didn't miss meeting him, because probation scared me, a whole lot. I mean that I did not want to go back and do that rest of that time, see, that they promised me.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah. Those– the classes you took while you were in jail, was that taught by jail staff or people outside?

SMITH: The Bible studies. I remember they were from outside.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Okay.

SMITH: [00:31:23] People that came in to the jail. Now the the the AA that was in Los Angeles County, It was pretty much outside groups that came in and they would talk to us and give us literature, you know, like the brochures and things like that, but they were all– and usually some of them had been incarcerated before themselves, you know, they so they would talk to us.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Kind of like peer support, like people that have been in your shoes.

SMITH: Absolutely.

IGBANI-PERKINS: That's awesome. So, when you, after you were released from prison, I'm sorry not prison, but from jail after that long stint, and so, by this time of your life, you have gone through some major losses, as, you know, between after the deaths of close family members, your freedom, and also your license. Something that you put a lot of effort and hard work into. And so after you are released, do you notice– or what mental health problems do you feel like you identified–or that you noticed? [00:32:37]

SMITH: Well, like I said, the depression. I had already been diagnosed by a doctor while I was actually– when they sent– when I got the letter from the nursing board, California nursing board, I was actually working at the time. Okay, and I had a good job. I had a 401k built up. So, I actually had Insurance to go see a doctor because I did not– even though I had a job, I did not go. in for about 3 weeks, because I couldn't get out of bed. [00:33:21] And then finally, when I did go to see a doctor, he diagnosed me with depression and put me on Prozac, something like that. And so, I began to try to help myself and at least get out of bed, because he I knew that it was over and I don't know whether–how much experience you have with, or know about depression, but I'm pretty sure in your field, you do– But I, like I say, I just could not get out of bed. And this was even, this is before going to that going to jail. So I had already been diagnosed.

IGBANI-PERKINS: While you were in jail did they give you any type of–

SMITH: Yeah, they were giving me my medication. Yeah. At least they would do that for depression. And then I had some– I had some knee problems. They would give me Ibuprofen, I think. But mostly– I mean they would just– I think it was Zoloft or something like that that they would give me for my depression. [00:34:22] And I basically stayed away from most people, didn't get into too much trouble in jail. So in jail, then like I say, the only thing that I really would get in trouble is talking too much– talking like I'm a big shot out on the outside and really not having no evidence to prove that, you know, just, you know, just talk and you know, playing dominoes and bide my time. Ready to get out.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah. In jail, did you ever see a therapist or any other mental health support outside of medication? [00:35:07]

SMITH: Well, you know– Yeah. Just the therapist. Yeah, as a matter of fact, they– they evaluated me a couple of times, because they really thought that I was suicidal, you know, so they they put me on this hold, and then they thought about releasing me to the general

population. So, they did another evaluation. Now, these are just evaluations, So I don't know if that's answer to you question. So this is not like, say– you know, having like regularly scheduled sessions of treatment or anything like that. So this is like, they would evaluate me to see if I'm ready to go to general population, you might say. So they would ask me a series of questions, you know. But no, no– I don't– No sessions of like, therapy. Especially not individual. It may have been more the group, like what we had the CA meetings, that was the closest thing to therapy that I experienced. [00:36:16]

IGBANI-PERKINS: Okay. Awesome. Tell me a little bit about any other needs you had difficulty meeting after your incarceration that you feel like, your mental health was impacted– It like housing or employment. Did you have challenges in those areas? Where you feel like your mental health was– It was contributing to that?

SMITH: Well. my mental health always contributed to it, but the jail definitely–The experience of having being then locked up– was traumatizing. I mean it, I never, like I said, short stints I had done before in jail and actually bond out, you know, most of the situations like the DWI, you know, I was out within like three hours maybe the first time and then the second time, they may have kept me for a little bit longer. But most of the time bonding out, but to not be able to have the freedom that most people love and enjoy and take for granted, you know, was what I had to experience. I think that was the biggest thing for me, to have to move when someone else says move and eat what someone else says eat, you know. That's the– I mean these are things that like, today I pray and I give thanks for those things that I take for granted. You see, when I think about that jail, you know, how– Wow and then some of the– some of the city jails is like Shreveport, you know, most are– I mean, I'm healthy and a little bit overweight right now and– you really lose weight. With some of the meals that they had, now that I'm recalling. And it was like, they were so skimpy, that I went hungry a lot of nights, you know, just so– [00:38:36] So not eating, not being able to enjoy necessities, like, you know, like–

IGBANI-PERKINS: Adequate food.

SMITH: Right, food, and then privacy, you know, I mean– that's– and that all comes with the punishment though, I guess, because you're going to the bathroom and you're going to the shower and you– it's just not home. So that's– to say that's not traumatizing, (chuckles) it is definitely a life changer, right? So– so I knew that that jail was not for me, even though I did have to do some more time after that, you know, for, like I say– for trying to steal things that– take things that didn't belong to me. But that experience, staying that long and waiting that kind of time– And I think about it often Lovina, how I can say, I'm here, just moving into a new apartment and that's a big thing for me– Because in jail, they just move you around. They Shuffle you around to different courtrooms to different jails. [00:39:54] Holdings, you

know, so so today, I get to decide what time I get up and what time I go to bed and, you know, so that's the big trauma that I'm relieved of today.

IGBANI-PERKINS: It's like having your sense of Independence back.

SMITH: Absolutely, absolutely.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Tell me what your experience was like, getting your mental health needs met after you were released. [00:40:22]

SMITH: Well, the first thing that I had to come to acceptance of, Lovina, was that I had a– I really didn't believe. Even though the doctor diagnosed me way back in 2008 with depression, okay. I had to accept the fact that my depression had a lot to do with my drinking, okay. So, because– I never would take the medication. I'm just going to put it like this. Okay, I never really accepted treatment. Okay, the doctor will prescribe the medication, you know, but I'm like, no, I'm not there. I'm not– that depression ain't all that. You know, I'm not going to be taking all these pills and changing my mood– modifiers and all this, you know, so– but until I began to actually take the medication as prescribed. [00:41:29] Only then was I able to really– to get help and really to stay sober and stop doing all the stupid stuff I was doing, because see– like I say, I did not take my disease, take my depression seriously. They would prescribe the medication, but I'd like, I take it for a couple of weeks, maybe a month. You know, I'm like, I don't need this. So now I'm still on Zoloft and I think I'm more stable now and more– So the treatment, after getting out, okay, staying on treatment– my treatment regimen is basically my goal. To– to know and believe that– even though some get better– I'm better now. I make– I just need to continue to take my medication or be treated and go to counseling or to go to therapy, whatever else I may need to add to that. I don't do too much counseling now, but I take my medication now, I believe I have – I believe what the doctors told me that I'm depressed and that always added to me going back out and taking a drink, you see, because the drink always help to– to change the way I feel. So now that I take my medication, I don't have to go out and have a drink, is what I'm thinking. Did any of that make sense? [00:42:59]

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah, it does. It seems like you've learned how to be mentally well. [00:43:04]

SMITH: Right. I like I say I started following the prescription from the doctor instead of not believing– because I like I say, I just did not believe that I was– my depression was that serious that I needed to take the medication, I was I'm like, well, that's for sissies, depression. I mean, that's– I'm not that bad off. But now I had to accept the fact that. listen I need to give my– I need to do something different because I kept doing the same thing and I kept getting the same results.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah. Do you feel like your mental health after you were released from your incarceration, do you feel like it impacted your relationships with people– whether its family, or romantic relationships? [00:43:54]

SMITH: Well, yeah, it changed my circle of friends, pretty much. Like I say, I was in a professional atmosphere, go to an office of business and– so– So it did change the circle of my social life, you might say. So I'm no longer– and not to say that– well, I was pretty popular. I mean I was like, say, a male nurse– I mean I would get invited to parties the family from the hospitals or from different staff and they were always– in Los Angeles they were always having a party for something. So now I'm out of jail and I, and I got this attitude about me that, listen, I don't fit in over there anymore, those friends– they were probably just a fly-by-night friends. What do they call them? Yeah, so I really didn't associate with the same crowd.

IGBANI-PERKINS: Do you feel like it had a– your mental health, had a direct impact on on your relationships with people at all? Did it change how you interacted with people at all or make it more difficult or more challenging to maintain healthy relationships? [00:45:32]

SMITH: Well, what I am trying to say is– most of the people that I, after I got out of jail, most of the people that I hang– spend time with– were people who had been to jail, okay? So, like I say, when I was working, I could sort of live two lives, okay? One, I drink and go out and party and this-and-that and then the other one, go to work and be professional and live on that side, but now I didn't have that where I was a professional any more. So I don't have those type of– the only friends, or the only people I associate with, they've either– they're using cocaine or they're drinking all day. Like, I was, or there you see there, so my social life turned around when I got out of jail, I didn't–

IGBANI-PERKINS: Completely different circle of people.

SMITH: Absolutely. I was in a completely different element. [00:46:41]

IGBANI-PERKINS: Understandable. And who– was there someone that helped you gain access to mental health, to help in that area when you got out? Or, how did you get–

SMITH: You know, I'm gonna say this, that Los Angeles is– is really resourceful. Okay, basically the downtown area if you've ever been there, and it's scary– 28,000 homeless people are there downtown, daily. [00:47:20] But they have a lot of resources, if you want help. Now, there's a couple of programs. There's a, there's a building– that's a 10-story building, called the Weingart– every floor has a different type of program, you might say. Some for women only, some for ex-cons only. Some for– so, and that's a whole building. Now, this is just one building–

then surrounding– They've got the Salvation Army, they've got the Union Rescue Mission over here- So, this is where I wind up after getting out of jail because as a matter of fact, that's where County Jail is, this is downtown Los Angeles– unless you get shipped off to one of the [gates?]. [00:48:10]

Okay, so all these resources if you want to take advantage of them– and there was one program that did help me a lot. And several people that I can name that helped me a lot, because they knew my background, they knew where I was coming from. [00:48:34] So, the programs are going to be what you make them. So I could call those– Like I said, my sobriety is pretty recent– four years. So I tried to stay sober and tried to, say, pull it back together once I got out of jail– Okay, there in Los Angeles. However, I– this is not my story of recovery, this is still my attempts, and going from program to program to try to at least gain some sobriety long enough to– I don't know, I thought that I was getting sober but apparently I didn't stay sober very long. I mean, usually it would be eight months to a year at the most, you know, sometimes two. [00:49:29]

So getting out of jail and making it from 2000– actually that was 2010 when I went to jail for that possession. And actually I didn't leave Los. Ageless until 2013. So getting off probation was a big thing and then just living on the street for a while too, because I didn't come back to an apartment– That was that I had left. I didn't come back to any family that I had left, because I was pretty much out there by myself. I can say, I knew people that were in the programs of AA, CA, except for– those were pretty much my family. But the thing is, you got to– I had to be sober in order to be around those people. So if I wasn't sober, I'm on my own, I'm pushing the buggy trying to collect cans to get enough money, to maybe get a drink or to get any– sleeping in the ladies bathroom, you know, at the park, you know, something like that. So it was really bad. And when I think about that, you know, going from, like I say being this nurse with a very promising future, you know, to sleeping in the ladies bathroom– I don't know. It just kind of– it saddens me, you know. [00:50:57]

But like I say, if this will help anyone to know that– Listen, today, I'm really a pretty much satisfied person. You know, I don't have all the things that I could have, but like I say, I've only been sober four years now.

IGBANI-PERKINS: The best is yet to come.

SMITH: Right. So all those material things, though– that I thought would make me happy– they really caused me more problems. Probably– More Money, More Problems (laughs). So–

IGBANI-PERKINS: So it sounds like, though, when you when you got out you were pretty familiar with your community and you knew how to get connected to resources, yourself. And you took advantage of what was available there.

SMITH: Oh yeah, I learned a lot. I learn how to apply for social security, how to get on what they call out there, general relief, how to apply for my food stamps. They set you up before you leave there. That's one thing about Jail, at least they'll set you up for food stamps before you even leave there, you know,

IGBANI-PERKINS: Wow, that's unheard of here. Did any faith-based organizations help at all?

SMITH: That's– Like I say, the ones that I recall, they're all downtown Los Angeles and one's called the Union Rescue Mission, which I was part of their program for standard sobriety– But they are all over Los Angeles and if you want faith based or AA based that's on you, but even AA is faith-based to a certain extent. So– so yes, definitely, they are all over Los Angeles and I– I would participate in them– but like I say, I really could not get a handle on my sobriety until I really understood my depression was a part of my using and drinking and drugging, see? So now I'm doing better. Like I say, I haven't been to jail in– whoo, let's see. Two thousand– seventeen? Okay, the years are adding up. [00:53:29]

IGBANI-PERKINS: That's right.

SMITH: And it's a good life. Like I say, I don't have to eat what someone else wants me to eat today.

IGBANI-PERKINS: And it seems like part of your recovery, and even healing, was coming to terms that you had a co-occurring disorder. You had two things going on and that you had to address both of them and not just one or the other.

SMITH: Right, well, I can say depression is– and I can't say today that I'm cured of it– I mean, I don't you say that, you know, so– so it's ongoing and it's– I'm glad that in jail that they did, somewhat address it, at least they kept me on my medication while I was there and they– not to say I wanted to be out of general population, but they, they make sure that I didn't harm myself or got that depressed that I would want to harm myself. [00:54:33]

IGBANI-PERKINS: That's good. I have one last question based on your experience. What advice would you give someone who is getting ready to be released from jail or prison, and they're about to get out, and they have some, some mental health needs. They have a mental illness, and they're about to get released. What would you what would you leave with them? Leave them with? [00:55:03]

SMITH: I pretty much would say the same thing I've said tonight, which was– accept– Give the doctors a chance. Okay, if you've been diagnosed with depression or anxiety, or any other number of mental health disorders. Give the doctors a chance [00:55:35] and accept the treatment and see how that works for you. As opposed to being your own doctor, and stopping medications when you think that you should. So, my advice is to give the mental health, professionals a chance and see how that works. Okay, instead of doing it the way you think you should– that would be my advice to anyone that's coming out– and maybe– I want to say, they may not know, but they've got an idea that they are mentally, un– let's say not on the [?]. Okay, say it any way you want to. But if you have an idea– inkling that you may not be mentally fit to live life on life's terms without help– then definitely seek professional help, instead of trying to treat yourself. [00:56:42]

IGBANI-PERKINS: Yeah, yeah. I think there's a lot of people are really resistant to seeking mental health help. It's an area– its associated with so much stigma. So I think, you know, to don't try to treat yourself or just give yourself advice– give the mental health clinicians–

SMITH: Give them a chance. Yes, see– see how that works, is what I'm saying, so– and I believe you'll be surprised at the outcome, because I did it and it worked for me.

IGBANI-PERKINS: [00:57:23] Well, thank you so so much for your time. And for sharing, the transparency, really, really appreciated.

SMITH: [00:57:31] I hope it helps someone, Lovina. That's my biggest hope, that, it gives someone else a chance– Anything that I may have said, that would– because I don't have a lengthy jail history, but I know that it traumatized me enough to not want to go there anymore. I know that they did the best they could for me while I was there and treated me with dignity, most of the time. I mean if I treated them bad, then they were going to treat me bad, so they treated me fairly while I was there. And– but that's the type of environment that I really want to stay away from, you know, so I'm working hard at that, and like I say, I haven't found a need to go back to jail since It's to the 2017, so, I'm excited.

IGBANI-PERKINS: That's amazing. And I have no doubt that what you shared will help many, many people.