Introduction

With more states looking for an economic solution to solve their budgetary problems, more prisoners are being released early from their sentences. The question I pose is what do we do with them once they get out? How will they survive once ex-offenders return to the real world? Politicians are calling for ways to let individuals out of prison faster because of the economics of doing so. But surprisingly almost 70 percent of them return to prison within three years. Why?

Recently HBO's John Oliver answers that question and exposes how America sets up these prisoners to fail, by imposing terrific legal barriers in receiving employment, housing and education. I was one of those lucky enough not to return to prison after being released. I had served 12 years of a 15-to-Life sentence for a first time non-violent drug offense under the mandatory minimum provisions of the Rockefeller Drug Laws, which were the precursor of the federal drug laws, which lock up hundreds of thousands of individuals for minor non-violent drug crimes. This sadly, has led to the mass incarceration of Americans.

My story begins in 1985. Twenty-five years old, I had never committed a crime in my life. That winter, living in the Bronx with a wife and child, broke and desperate, I was duped into delivering an envelope containing four-and-a-half ounces of cocaine for the sum of five hundred dollars. I was set up, and walked directly into a police sting operation.

Given the draconian Rockefeller laws, the strictest in the nation, as a first-time nonviolent drug offender I was walloped with two 15-to-life sentences for one isolated drug sale in Westchester County, New York. Since it was my first time, the judge gave me a break and sentenced me to only one 15 years to life term in prison. I did my time at Sing Sing, one of America's most dangerous maximum-security prisons. While there, I acquired several college degrees, including a Master's degree from the New York Theological Seminary and discovered my talent as an artist. I fought for many years behind bars to regain my lost freedom, and after twelve years of living in a six-by-nine-foot cell, I finally accomplished my goal.

In 1994, as I was still serving time, my famous painting, 15-to-Life self- portrait was exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art, which eventually led to my release from prison. New York Governor George Pataki granted me executive clemency in 1997. This was all chronicled in my critically acclaimed book *15 To Life*: How I Painted My Way to Freedom.

In many ways, though, this is where my story begins. Immediately upon my release from Sing Sing, I set out to shed my prison identity. I rejected the standard handouts offered to all NYS prisoners leaving the system: some cheap clothing, a forty-dollar check, and a one-way train ticket home. Astonishingly, for prisoners without family or friends, this limited assistance is their only financial support when trying to establish a fresh start upon release. I traveled back to the South Bronx, where I was reunited with my mother, Lucy, and other family members. Overwhelming joy and happiness dominated my first few days' home, but once these initial emotions began to fade, I realized the freedom I fought so long and hard to win was not what I imagined it to be. The way of life I once knew was gone, along with my friends and most of my support base. I discovered I was alone in a new world that had drastically changed without me.

I tried to reunite with my daughter, Stephanie, whom I left at the age of 7, and then, at age 19, found me to be a complete stranger. I also struggled with the most mundane tasks. I was released under the guidelines of parole, and for the next five years, I

lived in dread of violating its conditions. A simple walk in the neighborhood, or a train ride, was elevated to a state of panic because of the fear I might violate parole and return to prison.

I searched for a solution to my problems and realized that when my cell door was shut behind me, I did not leave behind those twelve years of hard time. When those prison doors close behind you, you are not free. You are still doing time—just doing it on the other side of the bars. I soon find out that prison life was deeply rooted into my present existence; a decade of life in an environment where survival mechanisms and behaviors were hardwired into daily existence had changed me profoundly. In prison, one essentially lives one's life on the head of a needle, with the constant sense that death hovered at all times.

Being hardwired for survival was a good thing. In the free world, though, it was another matter, especially when these mechanisms would surface suddenly and without warning. The tools that were once lifesaving had become a tremendous burden as I tried to get my life back together. I had survived the prison experience and made my way to freedom by creative self-expression--painting--but I was soon to learn that freedom had its costs.

No longer guided by the paternal benefits of institutionalized dependency, I found roadblocks at every level of my existence. For many, including myself, carrying the stigma of being an ex-offender is often debilitating. From being denied employment and housing, to not knowing how to establish healthy relationships, life became exceedingly difficult. In addition, maintaining that freedom, I soon found, was no easy task while wrestling with the haunting memories of my past imprisonment. I always felt as if I were one-step away from returning to prison.

Finally, I landed a job as a paralegal for a large corporate law firm in New York City, and then as a communications specialist for the Drug Policy Alliance (the largest group in the United States who advocate against the war on drugs), and I soon found myself in the center of a media storm. The Rockefeller drug laws were on the verge of changing, and given my unique case, I became its spokesperson. I became a sought-after advocate around the nation for drug-law reform and criminal justice issues. My syndicated blog on the *Huffington Post* and stinging editorial pieces about the war on drugs appeared in news sources across the country. After many years of fighting, I helped lead my organization to dismantle the draconian Rockefeller Drug Laws. In April of 2009, historic reform of the Rockefeller Drug Laws was made, and I was in the middle of it all.

Along the way, I was profiled on Walter Cronkite's "Great Books" series, a television documentary about Victor Hugo's novel *Les Miserables*, narrated by Uma Thurman. Through my drug conviction, the producer of the piece asserted that I became the modern version of Hugo's epic character Jean Valjean: a good man condemned to hard labor for a petty theft of a loaf of bread. When Valjean is released from prison, he must carry a yellow passport that identifies himself as a former felon. While I don't have to carry a yellow passport like Valjean, I felt the sting of being branded with the label of "ex-felon."

Like Valjean, in "This Side of Freedom: Life After Clemency", I go through heart-wrenching trials and tribulations as I seek to regain my lost roles as a father, husband and productive citizen, all while fighting to end the draconian drug laws that irrationally imprisoned me and many others. This book will tell a riveting, compelling story, with an arc as dramatic as my prison life.

It is a much-needed book that will help those formerly incarcerated and their families know what to expect, to know that they are not alone in what they are experiencing. It will offer a positive role model, inasmuch as I am a formally incarcerated individual who is part of the minority of those who never returned to prison.