



*after* / *life*

**Second Chances  
Beyond A Life  
Sentence**

**Volume 1 of a Series**

"Real Stories of Reintegration"  
A Workbook for Students of Law, Social Work, Psychology and  
Criminology. Personal Stories of Re-entry After Years Behind Bars.

What does freedom really look like after decades behind bars? In this first volume of a unique workbook, former prisoners share their own raw, unfiltered stories of life on the inside, and outside, prison walls—navigating technology, rebuilding relationships, and confronting a world that has moved on without them. Designed for students of criminology, law, psychology and social work, each section pairs powerful firsthand narratives with thought-provoking prompts, discussion questions, and reflection exercises. More than just reading material, this workbook is an immersive learning experience that challenges assumptions, sparks empathy, and invites students to grapple with the human side of re-entry.

## Introduction

Imagine the profound stillness that settles over a world you've only glimpsed through the narrow slits of a cell window. After decades of confinement, the clamor of freedom is almost disorienting, like stepping from a black-and-white photograph into a world of vivid, pulsating color.

This workbook is a chronicle of that jarring transition—an exploration of the difficulties, challenges, and joys experienced by individuals who have spent much of their lives behind bars and are now granted a second chance at the world outside.

For those who have endured a life sentence, the notion of re-entering society is not merely a change of scenery but an intricate dance of adaptation and reinvention. The

road to freedom is fraught with obstacles—reconnecting with a society that has evolved in their absence, battling the weight of regrets, and forging new paths from the rubble of their past. Yet, amidst these trials, there is an undeniable undercurrent of hope and resilience.

Through interviews and photographs, this book delves into the stories of men and women who are embarking on this extraordinary journey.

It reveals the complexities of their inner lives and the multifaceted nature of their reintegration. Their experiences are marked by the clash between a past they can't change and a future they must navigate with both trepidation and resolve.

# A life sentence is the harshest sentence on the planet.

Anonymous / ex-lifer  
turned attorney

I think a lot of the guys who get out have such low expectations upon being released and so for us to exceed those expectations, restores a sense of community and allows him to find a place in society and restores their sense of self. Especially the way we really love them immediately. It sets in.

Joelle Kirtley, Ph.D, CEO Mass Liberation

After decades behind bars, returning to society can be a daunting, overwhelming experience. Imagine living a life for decades where one is told when to wake up/go to bed, what time to eat, a set menu at every meal. Everyday living is in a room the size of a bathroom and leaving it is for mandated work, school or groups. Meals and medical visits add to the variety. Punitive in nature, our correctional system is designed to isolate and punish in a sensory deprived environment.

Aileen Hongo, MSW Adjunct  
Instructor, College of the Canyons

The lifer who receives a parole grant is resilient. They have risen to achieve the extraordinary. They have navigated the path of self-control, self-realization, self-discovery, self-awareness, empathy and insight. They have gained the tools of patience, wisdom, knowledge, understanding and compassion. The journey has transformed them 180 degrees, from the criminal defendant handcuffed in the courtroom, to the parole-ready individual in the boardroom. A life sentence is based on the elements of the crime. A grant of parole is based on the reformation of the individual. If more people in society possessed the coping skills, the maturity and the tools that the former lifer has, the sun would shine brighter.

Anonymous / ex-lifer turned attorney

I was a troubled youth. I was given a sentence of life without the possibility of parole. I went to prison in 1989 and I got out in 2023. 34 years. Childhood trauma. I didn't know how to express it and get it out. It was a common trend for boys growing up in inner cities to be men without emotions. Men don't cry. So I just had to bury it and live with that pain. Pain that came out in ways which affected other people. I was in and out of juvenile hall systems.

It was a car accident. I robbed a store and got into a chase with the police. I was going around 50 miles an hour and there was a head-on collision and I killed a woman. I was charged with first-degree felony murder and I was given the term of life without the possibility of parole.

I had a daughter who was born in 1989 just before I went to prison. My mother raised her. My mother passed in 2006 but my daughter was like 18 by that time and she continued to come and see me. It forced me to work on myself. I started mentoring kids. They would bring groups of kids in and we'd be talking with them, giving them advice, telling them stories. Giving our testimonies. I filed for a commutation

before (Governor) Brown left. And the last 10 people that he looked at, he turned them all down. And I was in that group. That's my luck.

The DA wanted to keep me in. So he reached out to the victim's sister, to write a letter to oppose my commutation. So she says, I didn't even know he was still in prison. Let me get in touch with him before I write a letter.

We had a visit face-to-face. They set it up. Me and her, we hugged, we cried, we hashed it out. And so finally she says, I'm going to see if I can get you out of here.

And she did. Without her intervention, I'd still be in prison right now. Their family didn't believe in capital punishment.

Her husband's a quadriplegic. Because of a car accident. Somebody hit him. So I take him out to the movies. I go see him often. Once or twice a month. She had a big enough heart and open mind to be able to see all these things and all the good that came with it. The healing. Her family and my family.

Write about a moment in the interview materials that surprised you. Why did it stand out?

What internal conflicts could arise when trying to form new relationships without institutional structure?

Reflect on the concept of "second chances." What does it mean in practice, not just in theory?

Californians Once Facing Life without Parole Give Back  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/28/us-californians-once-facing-life-without-parole-give-back>

I Just Want to Give Back  
<https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/06/28/i-just-want-to-give-back/reintegration-of-people-sentenced-to-life-without-parole>

**John Johnson**  
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This is my restitution. It's all thanks to her. This whole story is amazing. I share it with people because I use it as a way to show people that forgiveness is big. You can get healing through forgiving.



# Sample Questions for Class Discussion

## 1. First Impressions

What detail in this person's story stood out for you? Why do you think it stuck with you?

## 2. Culture Shock

Imagine being released after 25+ years. What would overwhelm you the most in today's world? [ technology, politics, social media...] How would you handle it?

## 3. Family & Time

This storyteller met children—or even grandchildren—who had grown up without them. How do you think time away reshapes family roles? Can those bonds be rebuilt?

## 4. Labels & Identity

Once someone has "ex-con" attached to their name, how does it shape how others see them? How might it shape how they see themselves?

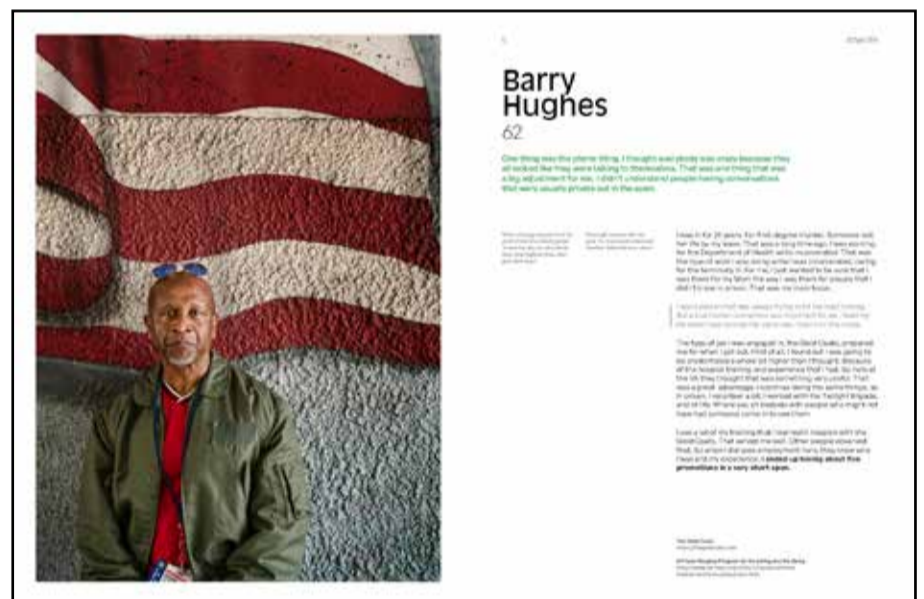
## 5. Systems vs. People

Do you think the challenges in this story are mostly personal struggles, or are they signs of a system that makes reentry harder than it should be? Explain your view.

## 6. Your Role

As a future lawyer, psychologist, or social worker, how might you show up differently after hearing this story?

# Sample double-page spreads



# KEVION LYMON

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**Dad's Back Academy** helps formerly incarcerated fathers returning to society. <http://www.dadsback.com/>

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**What's your goal?** My goal is to be a role model, to be a father, to be a man.

**Goal setting advice:** Set your goals, and work for them.

I was born in 1991 and my dad left in 1996. You don't really know what's happening. Your life is just occurring. Even going to prison, what I did was out of my routine. I shot at somebody. Gang related attempted murder. Nobody got injured at my crime. The gun jammed. They gave me 19 years. I did it.

I found out I had cancer at the same time. Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma. In my elbow. I was at my low. I was like, "This is not me." What do I do to get out of this situation? I started reading. I started feeding myself. I started reading, "Nation of Islam" and I became real, real pro-black at the time. And that's what gave me the self-confidence in myself that I didn't have. I started getting into spirituality. It took me six years from when I realized I shouldn't be here. This is not living.

I'm not used to feminine responses at all. She [his daughter] has attitude with me and all. She teaches me a lot. My Momma was rough. All that happened to me and she was rough. I didn't grow up with a Momma that hugged me. I didn't hear frequent, "I love you's". My Momma was raised with four boys and one girl. She'd say "you messin' up in school? I don't like you cause you're messin' up."

I believe in God. I gotta believe in who ever made this happen like this. I gotta believe in it like that. I look at [my life] like it gotta be God. I mean, I've always been a nerd. I'm into art. I read poetry. I know who Basquiat is. Especially when it comes to my own people, I'm into the culture. I gotta teach her [points to his daughter sitting on his lap], so she doesn't have lack of confidence, and go out there and be something that she's not. I believe in, "as a man thinketh, so he is". It's hard to grasp it, but that's what I believe.

Biggest challenge when I got out? Everybody's expectations. To some of those people [family members], I was a constant in their life. I was gone for ten years. My values and my morals aren't the same as ten years ago. So if I don't respond the same way... now you got those conflicts. They expect me to respond similar as to when I was 18. And I say, "Is there something wrong with me?"

I live by axiom now. Stuff like "Dad's Back [program] gives the way that I live ammunition. Cause it's knowledge. And the way that I live is simple. I'm living the simple life. Teach my baby 1,2,3. Then we can go to 4,5,6. Let's do this in steps. No rush. I rushed."



## Macy Boungert 34

**We're all afraid to be forgotten. We want to be relevant, not irrelevant to the world. The first two months out was really difficult for me. All I knew was prison. I got out. And it was about meeting expectations.**

**It overwhelmed me. Now I have all this responsibility. Car payments, gas. Find your own clothes, shoes, your own food. In prison, you don't have that. It got to the point for many guys, they'd ask me, "Where's the nearest prison? Where can I sign in there?"**

**It's dangerous in there. Less responsibility. Less expectations. I got to the point where I wanted to kill myself. I had suicidal thoughts. Thoughts I couldn't share. My brothers and sisters at API Rise [Asian Pacific Islander Re-entry and Inclusion Through Support and Empowerment] helped out. Talking to people who have been in my shoes. We don't have to say much. They know what you're talking about. Sometimes you just need someone to be there to listen. That it's okay to be vulnerable. It's okay to share your emotions. And that's what I've been doing since then. I ran a hotline in prison. A suicide hotline. Suicide. Love. Heartbreak. Depression. Just trying to help them find a way out without saying it.**

**My Mom and Dad are still around. They love that I'm out. My Mom thinks I'm still that 10 year old. In the gang, she hears the word "friend", and she thinks it's still that same old gang member. I'm showing her that I do know how to conduct myself as a citizen, as a member of society.**

**Women tell me, "You've been down for 20 years. You're not ready for a relationship. You're not serious. You've been deprived of sexual activity. Now that you're home, you're a hormone that would get in bed with anybody and everybody. Remember, my deal is that I got locked up as a 10 year old kid. As a 15 year old boy, my thing was going to the beach. Theme parks. Cause I'm still a kid at heart. Yes, I'm 34. I'm a man now. I know my priorities. But at the same time I like to have fun. I go skateboarding on the weekend with my friends. I got hurt a couple times. My body's different. When I fall, I really fall.**

**When I got out? I wanted to get laid and eat some burgers seeing my family. Everything was so surreal. Like, I'm out here! Sometimes, when I'm driving, I think, I can't believe it, I'm out here! I'm doing pretty well for myself. I got my car. Got a job. A lot of people have this misconception about prison: that all that prisoners really are, are people that are locked up, all uneducated or animals. But we're not. We're just people who went down the wrong path. Can you really blame me for doing drugs?**

**Choose one returning citizen's story. What part of their experience was most challenging? Most helpful?**

**What does a healthy first step toward rebuilding look like for someone like you?**

**Imagine being reunited with family after decades. What might be your biggest challenge or obstacle?**

**What social resources might just be going unnoticed here but not there just yet?**

**While My Family Graduated High School, I Got Behind. Share a link to your educational program.**

**Share One Thing (Image or Video or Voice and a Peak Story) that you're proud of and how it helped you.**

*"America" by Macy Boungert*  
We say we live in America, right? The land of the free. But the majority of the citizens are incarcerated. You say that you live in the home of the brave. But yet, when justice is being out, you are too afraid to get to the bottom of what's going on. You think that by looking up that it's gonna solve the issue. But it's not. It's not. I mean you deal with it. You kind of find out what it is that teenagers are going through. I didn't feel the love of home. I didn't feel like my dad loved me. Because even though we're mama boys, we still wanna be like our fathers. We feel like our father is like Superman and when we don't feel the love, we feel like he don't love us. So what happens? We turn to the street and you have people there who, oh damn, he's easy for the picking. Go ahead and do this, go ahead and do that. You are so in over your head that all you wanna do is be accepted. So you do these stupid things. 10 years down the line you're in prison, not knowing what the hell happened, not dealing with your emotions. You do drugs just to feel, because you don't wanna feel the pain. You want to numb everything. And sometimes people just be successful when they kill themselves. you know!

# *after/life*

Second Chances Beyond A Life Sentence

After/Life is a 6-volume chronicle of men and women who have been found suitable to return to society after being sentenced to life in prison. Each volume is printed as a 11"x 15", 24-page tabloid format- recounting tales of ex-felons' incarceration and re-entry. It is filled with stories of redemption and restitution, enduring struggles and even humor in the face of changes in society that can be baffling for a person who has been imprisoned for 10, 20, and even 50 years. Each volume includes classroom discussion questions and links to further readings on crime, recidivism, re-entry and more.

For a wide variety of students, it is a glimpse into another world. As a teaching tool, it is an engaging start for any class discussion of resilience, incarceration, tolerance, prison reform, restorative justice, aging and LGBTQ issues, among others.

**Ron Levine** is a photographer and educator, with over 25 years experience interviewing and creating portraits of inmates that have been exhibited around the world. His work can be seen at [www.prisonersofage.com](http://www.prisonersofage.com) and [www.ronlevinephotography.com](http://www.ronlevinephotography.com)

**Abdullah Ahmed** is a multi-disciplinary artist and graphic designer. You can see more of his work at [www.abdullah-ahmed.ca](http://www.abdullah-ahmed.ca)

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