

“Steppin’ Into My Shoes”

By the ReEntry Theatre Program

A play for the radio

Episode 3: Hopes and dreams

Jo Louis: Hello and welcome to “Steppin’ Into My Shoes,” a new radio play created by Civic Ensemble’s ReEntry Theatre Program in collaboration with College Initiative Upstate. This play is based on oral history interviews conducted with people who have experienced incarceration, court involvement, or drug rehabilitation.

This week on our final installment, you’ll hear stories about the hopes and dreams of people who have experienced incarceration.

One more note to our listeners: some of the stories you’ll hear depict scenes of drug and alcohol use, and domestic violence, and may not be appropriate for all audiences.

Theme song plays

Throughout the play, sound effects play behind the actors speaking, such as water falling, birds chirping, waves crashing.

Scene 1:

Actor 1: Change! You can’t always pinpoint the exact moment that it happens. I guess it’s because it doesn’t happen all at once like that; change is gradual. It’s like water or wind erosion. Like, if my life was the water, it would just sit there not moving at all. I’m just this little drop of water, and as other droplets fall, I absorb them. These raindrops of experiences and ideas start to form as I learn and grow.

Now, if this pool of water I am doesn’t get any bigger I’m either going to get stagnant and dirty, or evaporate and return to the ether.

That was me, man, my life water was stagnant and filthy. We’ve experienced all sorts of trauma. What is your trauma? What are the things that you experienced on your journey that manifested itself into poor decision making - no real options, partners, the places we go to mentally, physically, emotionally? Our insecurities and obsessions, our hangups. Not thinking we deserve anything good. So we do things that are damaging. ALL THE BEST BAD DECISIONS. Drinking and drugging and staying out all night with others my peers. You’re a youngster, you go to juvie, basically jail, and learn those skills you need to survive.

But there's a little bit of light for me now. I've made a change but I'm not sure how it's going to evolve. I have a little light now.

Scene 2:

Actor 3: I was born here in Ithaca. Ithaca, New York. April 29th, 1959.

Actor 1: I grew up in Lakeland, Florida. Actually, I was born in Bartow, Florida, and I grew up in Lakeland, Florida. It's like the city part of my county. Basically it's like the major city in my county, so it's more like city life. I didn't really grow up in a rural area, but I did take trips to Plant City, which is more of a country area. That's where my grandma stayed. I used to spend my summers there.

Actor 4: I was given up for adoption by my birth parents. I spent a week with my mother, apparently, after she gave birth to me, before she gave me away. And I just only recently learned all this because my birth father found me.

Actor 2: I was born in Ithaca, NY.

Actor 6: I grew up here. And I went to Fall Creek School. Went to Boynton, ACS, and then left town after I got done with high school, left and came back and left and came back, I don't know, a bunch of times.

Actor 5: Born and raised, most of my family was born and raised around the Ithaca area. I think it's an okay place to live. Well, at least it used to be, right now it's a little different. Yeah, I grew up downtown in a really good neighborhood right around the corner from GIAC.

Actor 2: I have good memories. I loved playing sports and I loved playing football. God. Family. Football. So I'm around 15, 16, 17, somewhere around there. Also, at that time late 80s, early 90s, when I was in middle school and high school. At that time crack was huge and everywhere in the United States. My mother got addicted to crack bad right around then, so that was a tough time for me. I was in fifth grade, so I was 10 or 11, and went to live with my dad for the first time. My dad had me when he was 16. A year later, he was gone, he went to the Navy, so he could try to support me and make something of himself and do what he had to do, so he wasn't around.

I went to live with my dad when I was in fifth grade, moved to South Hill, after going to Central, throughout my elementary school. So I switched schools in fifth grade, South Hill, moved in with him. He was very strict. He just came from the Navy. He told me "10 minutes on the phone, talking, you can't be having all kinds of phone calls." We lived all the way out in the country with limited transportation, he's always got to get home. He made me do the dishes every night, I had to mow the lawn, he made me paint stuff all the time. Those were my chores

and jobs all the time, so that was instilled in me at a young age, and I'm still a hard worker like that.

His strict rules only kept me around so long. By the ninth, 10th grade, I was gone. I was at my dad's for sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, four years. When I was about 16, I was out of there, living on the streets with my friends, running the streets and hanging out with my boys. We had an apartment. They had an apartment for a while and I stayed there a lot.

Actor 3: I only have one sibling, my sister. We both were raised in Ithaca with our parents. My parents never divorced. My father was a functional alcoholic for many years. My father would come home and he would drink. And when I was young, he was a great guy. He really was an awesome guy, big heart. But he never acknowledged that he had a drinking problem. And we know all about alcoholism and drug addiction. It got worse and worse. As his drinking would increase over the years, he started becoming less functional.

He had a spot where he would drink, down in the basement. It got to the point where he'd literally come home from work and just say hi, walk right past us and go into the basement with his work clothes still on, and he'd emerge a couple of hours later. Maybe throw some jeans on, hang out for a few minutes and then go right back down. And he'd watch TV down there, he had his own little setup, and he would drink all night.

And when I was getting a little older but still very young, maybe five years old if I had to guess, I started seeing that Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde transformation. I would hear yelling at night. My dad was drunk and he would be yelling at my mom. Arguments became a nightly deal. Sometimes it would really scare me and I'd wake up and I would try to interrupt it by saying, "Hey, I need help over here." And my dad would stumble in the room, drunk. And I'd say, "Oh, I have growing pains". I was just trying to distract him from arguing with my mom. That became worse over the years.

And it got to the point where it was almost nightly... I mean, there'd be a couple of nights out of the week where he'd be quiet and those were great nights. But most nights we'd start yelling at each other. As I got a little older, it got to the point where now I could start fighting on some level. Maybe I was seven or eight at this point. Couldn't put up much of a fight but I'd put up something. I remember one night I grabbed a lamp and I threw it at him, he was freaking out on my mom and it hit the wall and glass shattered. But I had to take a stand.

My mom's a very intelligent woman. She had a great a job where she just retired. She was a Master Certified Accountant. She's a pretty smart woman. Honestly, my dad was a pretty smart guy too, but he never acknowledged he had a drinking problem.

Scene 3:

Actor 1: The moment I walked away from that bridge, I knew I was a changed man. There was a little bit of light for me now. I headed back to the trap because that's where I live, you know.

I've made a change but I'm not sure how it's going to evolve. I have a little light but it seems that I am moving from one darkness to another.

Actor 5: I got myself into some (more) trouble.

Actor 6: I was going back and forth to jail, in jail or whatever. I kind of was unstable

Actor 5: I went to jail, a while back, and I was thinking, what am I going to do with my life? When I went to detox, it was a switch for me. I woke up and my kid wasn't there. I mean, no one was there. Just me and a room with a cot and a television. And I never wanted to feel that again. I never wanted to feel that way ever again, and that's what my plan is, to never put myself in that type of situation, and to learn to feel. That's, I guess, that's a lot of it, is I didn't want... Nobody wants to feel pain, and to lose your husband is not easy, and not when you have two children that need him as well. So, yeah, I mean... But I guess I've learned that just because I've gone through something difficult, doesn't mean other people haven't gone through something worse. You know what I mean? And they're all still up and breathing, so so am I.

Actor 6: It's no secret that I've had a long love affair with drugs. That has done a lot of damage in my life, but it also brought a lot of good things that people don't want to acknowledge. I wouldn't be where I am today if my life hadn't taken that course, the turns that it did. but it's just the truth. Yeah.

Actor 2: There's three phases in drug court and once my partner passed the first phase and went on to the next phase, I said, "I'm going to stop drinking for one week." And my partner, she was like "yeah right" and she didn't believe it. But I believed it and I wanted to stop drinking for a week. I'd already been prepped to stop because I'd take breaks from drinking every time I had a piss test coming up. She knew this too, she'd be with me when I wasn't drinking for those days.

Actually it's my friend, Jerome, the pivot man for my whole group, who was my big drinking buddy, he was my inspiration to stop drinking. He stopped drinking after my partner stopped drinking and my partner had to stop for court reasons. He stopped drinking because he had had it with the drinking. He said he was going to do 90 meetings in 90 days. I made a joke that I would do 90 meetings in 90 days when I'm 90 years old. The day it happened, when I said "I don't know if I can ever drink again" that was it for me.

Actor 1: But at least this decision seems to be headed in a more positive direction. I think a lot of it just is that I've been so negative for so long that nothing's come good out of it, so why not switch it up and see how it works out? Really.

I started doing yard maintenance for Ms Pat, an older lady from down the street. She pays well and it gives me something to do, keeps me out of trouble. Mr. Terry, an older friend of mine, lets me paint some of the rooms in his houses. This helps me pay rent at the trap. Now I know

you may be thinking why am I still at the trap? Well, even though I have made a life change I still feel that I am in my comfort zone there.

Actor 5: After I had my first son, I attempted to go back to TC3 and take a few classes. I did take a few classes. But then I would stop taking classes, and then I would go back again, and then I would stop, and then I would go back again. I mean, I probably went in and out of TC3 at least five or six times. But I have a lot of credits. But let's see, when did I go ... Well, I went back when he was a couple of years old. Then I went back again. Then I just kind of stopped. I'm not sure why. But I just stopped.

Then I was just working. It was always in the back of my mind, I wanted to go back to school. But I wasn't exactly sure how many credits I needed to graduate. I wasn't sure exactly which classes I had to take. But it was always kind of like here, like it was always ... It never went away. I always was like, "I've got to go back to school, I got to finish this. I got to do this." But then years and years would go by. I'm talking like 15 years went by. I'm like, "What the hell?" Then of course, my struggles and stuff that I happened to get myself into didn't help. Then I got sober. I got sober in 2017. After that, things started to fall into place for me.

I think it's because I was a little bit more clear-headed, and my goals became more real. So I ended up doing a College Initiative program. I found out that I only have two classes left to graduate. For years, I only had two classes. I thought I had like six or seven. When I found out I had two, I was almost mad at myself. Like, I was just like, "Are you kidding? Two classes? You should have been doing this so long ago." But anyway, I was pregnant for my second child. I was in drug court. I was in a play. I was living on a hill that I had to walk to the bus stop every day, because I didn't have a license.

There was a lot going on at that time, but I did it. I did those classes. I graduated in 2018, with a Criminal Justice degree. I felt like a million bucks. But I want more. I want to go again, I want to do more school. I planned on doing that, but then I got pregnant again with my third child. So the mom thing keeps coming into play. But like I said, it's still there. Once I get something that I want, it doesn't really go away. Even if it takes me years, that drive is still in me. But that hasn't died yet. So we'll see. Hopefully I can maybe ... Now with the COVID, everything is so weird. So I'm not sure what my next step is going to be with college yet. But it's definitely important to me.

Actor 6: The meeting was in the bottom of the big Presbyterian Church and along with Sarah, Hannah and Lucy, there were about eleven or so participants, several of them I knew or recognized. These were people that were involved with one of the drug courts, on probation or parole, or were in some type of return from rehab. It looked like an AA/NA style meeting in the basement of a church. There were also a couple of mentors, Khalil, this OG gangster dude from Baltimore and Philly and could paint these badass paintings; the other one was Terrell, an ex-marine cab driver with a flock of beautiful birds that had threatened a judge on live radio! I thought these guys were great. They both seemed to be doing a ton of work in their communities and were well esteemed within them. Eleven became ten, then nine participants. Relapses, drug court and parole violations-one guy ended up in a coma! I think 4 participants

were onstage at Opening Night of our play, along with both mentors and the actors. Before the performance, as Khalil and I spoke to each other waiting for our cue, he mentioned the name of his nephew. I said “Oh my god! You’re Nation!!!!” This was the guy all my friends on my football and baseball teams talked about when I was a kid. Nation doing classes at the Southside Community Center was a big deal to them. We laughed at not recognizing each other, and our cue came.

Seeing Khalil in his life now, a much different man than the man I knew earlier in life. I mean, this guy had a swagger that I wanted. Over the years we have become great friends, he and Terrell both. Through them I met Phoebe Brown, Fabina Colon, Edwin Santiago, all the other guys at Multicultural Resource Center. I lived right upstairs, it was destiny for me to land exactly there. These guys were all working hard for the people and they looked so happy doing it. So when the play was over, I told Sarah I needed more.

Actor 1: Having somebody that actually came where I was at and then introducing these ideas and different things, not taking me out of my environment, but bringing it to my environment, I think that made a big difference. When I stopped dealing with what I was dealing with, I stopped everything. I didn't even try to make another dollar off of anything I felt wasn't good. If somebody owed me money, I didn't even want it. I started trying to do other things, like going to get my GED. But dealing with all of those things, I just knew it wasn't for me. I have a lot more potential.

Actor 3: When I left I was 30 thousand dollars in the hole. And in order to get my transcript to go to TC3, I had to get that paid off. So during that time, I actually started working for a contractor here in Ithaca and I became a carpenter. And I just worked my butt off in order to get that money back and then to put myself through school. So this whole time I've just been absolutely grinding, trying to get my money straight in order to finish school. And then, finally, I'm not on probation, I don't owe anybody any money, and I don't have to take any classes. I've got a little money in my pocket. I can go do, really for the first time in my life, whatever it is I want to do. So what I want to do is go see the desert for the first time. I want to see the whole Milky Way. I want to see a cactus up close. I've never seen that. Now I'm at the point where I might go for a walk in the Wildflower Preserve, jump across a little stream, skip some rocks, and just start dancing or something if I'm listening to some music and that makes me feel really good. Just to feel the pressure of city life wear away. It's really nice.

Through this whole time, I have my family too. Lucky for me, they place a high value on education. And I didn't know when it first happened, but because of them, I knew that education was going to be my way out. And a condition of my probation actually was that I continue my education. I didn't take that very seriously for maybe two years. But I mean, during that time, I was lucky enough to have had an employer who was willing to work with the fact that I had to go to probation every week. And that's when I started getting into carpentry.

More than anything else, carpentry taught me I could do something with my time that was valuable to somebody. I personally enjoyed the work that I was doing, but also that it was something that I could take pride in. If I did anything from digging the holes for the footings to

putting the roof on a brand new house, that's something that I can walk by and tell my family or whoever I'm with like, "Look, I built that." It's something that I can be proud of. That definitely gave me a sense of purpose and made me feel like there was something that I could do that I could be proud of that had nothing to do with substances. You know what I mean?

Actor 4: I think that most people find it pretty hard in the end and at some point want to figure out "what else can I do besides drugs to make me feel good, right?!" I like to ask people, "What did you used to like to do before you started using drugs?" What did I used to do? Just do that! Just being functional. A better quality of life down the road.

Actor 1: I went through this experience and I was like...

ALL: I could help people who are struggling like I was.

Actor 6: By being able to share my experiences with others to help them get through troubling times, I am able to reconcile the years spent out there living this life. Those experiences have value and I am able to remain focused on being a better me and making a better community for all. Many people die getting the education I got and it makes my message that much more powerful and valid.

I heard that the shelter was hiring. I got a job there and started working overnights. Eventually a position as the evening supervisor opened up and I got the job. It was great, I really enjoyed working there and helping people. But, the longer I worked there, witnessing the system working EXACTLY like it was meant to, which others call broken, the harder I worked to change it. I began to alienate myself professionally from my peers, going to work took more and more effort. Finally, I had to stop, I was having a nervous breakdown. I think I took people's problems personally and the ineffectiveness of things just wore me down. It felt awful, like I was abandoning them, and it broke my heart to leave. But along the way, I helped a lot of people that still to this day thank me for what I had done for them, or one of their friends. For example, one evening, the police brought this person in at like 2am, having to remove them from a bad situation. It was a rock bottom moment. Since the shelter doesn't usually give someone a hotel at that time of night, I walked them through the shelter to show them exactly where they would be staying. Most people that get brought in like that, by the police, do not stay. They were like "oh hell no, I can't sleep here." I took them upstairs and I just listened to their story while they waited for a family member to get them a hotel room for the night. I told them I had gone through a similar situation that they had. I advised them of some options, and I never saw them again. We saw each other recently, and they said to me, "oh my god!! You're the guy!" It was so cool to see how things had turned out for them! Those are the moments that all that work pays off, but it's not WORK, it's sharing. Sharing to keep it so my experience may help others, that's what a spiritual warrior does and that is who I am becoming.

Actor 1: Moving from the street life into one that's within the legal boundaries, it doesn't need to be boring. It doesn't have to be some mundane 9:00 to 5:00, come home- ... and watch TV until you go to bed for the rest of your life. That's not how you have to live. There's so much more to it than that. You just can't see it because your eyes aren't open to it. And it took me a

long time to open my eyes and realize that there's way more to this life than what I even thought was possible. And the things that ultimately make me the happiest are first of all, they're free, right? The things that really make me happiest are free. They've got nothing to do with money and they have way more to do with health, connections with people, and connections with nature. And to really open myself up to that has made me feel like a much more complete person, more than I was when I was 19 and I was just wildin' out.

Actor 4: This internship with the COTI program, which does outreach to folks. basically a more informal counselor. So like being the counselor. The COTI team is kind of that middle man, where we can go out in the field, and help people access services.

Yeah, I'll be honest. I, myself, have experience with the COTI program. Yes, and it is an amazing program. It benefited me along the way as well.

Actor 3: My wants and needs are just about learning now.

Actor 4: North Carolina, South Carolina. Virginia. I want to have a house or even just a piece of land and own it by the time I'm retired and have a good pension. Something that I enjoy doing obviously.

I do like the beach. I do like the trees in season, but when the snow hits, No! Am I too young to be a snowbird? I will be at my beach house helping people.

Actor 5: The moment that I stopped moving forward with school, the good things in my life started slipping away from me. I was losing the important parts of me, like care and concern, in general, for my life and truly anyone else's for that matter. My life spiraled out of control, as well as the lives around me and close to me as they were affected by my actions.

Actor 4: You have to have really strong... You have to believe it. It's never going to be true if you don't believe it. Tie it to any sort of emotion. If you can feel what it would be, like you're imagining a situation like you're going to design your dream house, you have to act as if it's true and it already happened. What does it feel like being there? It's like as soon as you can do that, you're well on your way.

I think it's, we all have this power, just some of us don't harness it because we don't know what we want. We don't know or we're being pulled in so many directions like, "Oh, this is what I want." Or, "Maybe this or maybe that." We're just not sure. As soon as you know and you're sure, like I guess when I saw his picture I was like, "I want to be with someone like that some day."

Actor 5: The moment I realized, wholeheartedly, that there was something wrong with me., like, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. A voice popped into my head and said, "You're worth more than what you are settling for and You Are Enough!"

Suddenly, I felt aware. Aware of the pain I was causing myself and the loved ones around me. The awareness that I was being part of the problem and not the solution. And an awareness

that I was slowly dying with a hole in my soul. After years in between college attempts, I took a leap of faith and committed to myself, to my sobriety, and to my family to give it my very best shot to turn the page and continue writing my story!

Scene 4:

Actor 6: I've come up with a plan for a halfway house and have begun the process of coordinating with other agencies to get it in motion. The whole idea is that once it gets started it becomes self sufficient. The basic structure of it is based on what I have learned from ReEntry and working at the shelter, along with my experiences navigating the system and how to use it to my advantage. The idea is to teach these things to others to build a support system similar to the AA/NA community. When I worked at the shelter, 86% of the parolees that came through were back in prison within 90 days. I think I can do better than that. That's one and a half people out of 10 stays out of jail. I was one of those one and a half people. It's taking a person from prison and sticking them in another prison style dormitory where he's living with the same kind of people doing the same kind of things. And now you can easily add alcohol to that. But through what I've been doing, I have built a rapport with the area parole supervisor and have called him and asked him not to violate people a couple of times and let me get a shot with them first, and it's worked. It'd be hard to be involved with people getting locked back up. And COVID has really thrown a wrench into things but it's time to get going again.

Yeah. Yeah. I specifically kept two people from going back to prison and got them into rehab. Sometimes, I get lucky.

Actor 5: I think every parent is probably scared of their kids leaving the nest, for me, I can't say it's different, but I feel different. Because not only are they leaving the nest, so to speak, I have to leave the nest, so to speak. With my husband passing away, my children get income from him, so that's how we've paid our bills all along. And once my youngest graduates, we lose that income, so for me, it's my time to grow as well. So, I mean, not only are they going to leave the nest, mommy's got to leave the nest as well. Yeah. But I'm looking forward to it, really, which is different for me in the past few years, that instead of fearing the unknown, yeah, it's more an excitement. I think a lot of it just is that I've been so negative for so long that nothing's come good out of it, so why not switch it up and see how it works out? Really.

Actor 3: I started gardening this last year. I definitely could see myself doing it more. I mean, I feel like everybody on some level thinks that it would be great to get their little piece of land, get their garden going and get their solar power functioning. You know, like off the grid life. I mean, I don't know, I'm not 100% committed to that, but I think there's something nice about picking a tomato from your own garden. It's better than it is from the grocery store but it's also nice to think that you produced it yourself. Yeah. So I think definitely that's an avenue that I will explore, but I mean, the reason that I want some land mostly is so I can build a wood shop. I would love to build some furniture in my lifetime. Yeah. There's just something really

meditative about just working with your hands. You really just forget about everything. It's nice to take yourself out of the moment and just have one thing to focus on.

Actor 1: I'm looking back on it now, and it's really hard to believe I dug myself out of that bottomless pit. I used to feel like I was never going to change. Now, it sort of gives this sense of invincibility. Now I feel like I can do anything.

Actor 4: I think a lot about spirituality, as if we are all connected by the pieces of us that are made up of pure divine love. The human heart has an electromagnetic field surrounding us, it's so strong that it will detect other hearts in close proximity and sync up into a rhythm. This energy keeps traveling out to the stars, it gets weaker the further it goes, but it never stops. Our bodies are made up of stardust, when stars run out of oxygen they explode. This electromagnetic field traveling out to the center of the universe could be the path our souls take when our bodies run out of oxygen and we return to our natural habitat for after all we are star children, where science and spirituality intersect. This is what my dreams are made of.

Music plays

Jo Louis: You've been listening to "Steppin' Into My Shoes" by Civic Ensemble's ReEntry Theatre Program. This week's episode featured the voices of Leroy Barrett, Abdullah Khalil Bey, Jo-Louis Hallback, Amy Heffron, Pam Lackner, and A.C. Sidle

This play was directed by Gabriella da Silva Carr and Julia Taylor. Our Producer is Julia Taylor. We developed this play in collaboration with College Initiative Upstate, including Benay Rubenstein. Our program intern was Tilda Wilson. Sound was designed by Rudy Gerson and the audio engineer was Nate Richardson of REP Studio. The theme song was created by Jo-Louis Hallback, A.C. Sidle, and Brennen Feint.

To support the ongoing work of Civic Ensemble & the ReEntry Theatre Program, visit www.civicensemble.org and click the donate button. Thanks for listening!