

Lester Young Podcast

Link to the Podcast: <https://soundcloud.com/okori-christopher/reentry-week-podcast-lester-2021/s-Largqg7c8yQ>

Marian Thacher

Hello, and welcome to today's reentry week podcast, that will focus on the topic of mentoring after incarceration. I'm Marion Thatcher from the American Institutes for Research, and joining me today is Lester Young from Just Leadership USA. Lester is an individual with lived experience, and we will be talking with him today about mentoring. Lester let's start with this, how do you define mentoring?

Lester Young

Thanks for that question, and I will just say first, peace and blessings to the audience, those who will get a chance to hear this podcast Thank you all for tuning in. How do I define mentoring? For me mentoring is a no judgment zone relationship between a mentor and the mentee. The mentor needs to meet the mentee where they are and walk with them through the trials and tribulations of reentry. Because you know those who are returning home from prison encounter these different challenges, so, as I said, that mentor has to be able to use his or her wisdom of lived experiences to help guide this mentee in that process of having successful reentry.

Marian Thacher

Thanks, good points. What were some of the challenges you faced after serving 22 years of incarceration?

Lester Young

Wow another great question. You know, returning home from prison after 22 years was extremely overwhelming. Most people, when you see a person walk out of those prison gates, is a moment of celebration, you know where you reunite with your family, your friends and you are in your community ready to start life over again. But, for me, no one really told me of the many challenges that I was going to face. Walking home from prison after 22 years and going into a fast-food restaurant, I was intimidated and overwhelmed with ordering from the menu. Because technology changed. Not being able to use the laptop or not even a cell phone, these different things became overwhelming for me. One of the second things I experienced was the rejection. I wasn't prepared for the rejection that would come from seeking employment, being that that was one of the conditions of my parole. No one ever told me of how many rejections you're going to receive applying for jobs, especially a person like myself who had a violent offender, that rejection cause me to struggle with the level of depression. And dealing with that level of depression, it put me in a dark place for short period of time.

And, with the benefit, going back into that second question, having a mentor. My mentor, who had the lived experience as someone who already served time and returned home from prison, he was able to walk me out of that dark space of feeling. Of depression and anxiety that came with them returning home from prison after that amount of time.

Marian Thacher

Wow that must have been really challenging. So how important was it having a mentor after prison for you?

Lester Young

I would say it was everything. You know because of my personal and professional level of success now is tied to me having a mentor. Someone who walked me from depression, anxiety panic attacks, and feeling just like I was not worthy of anything. My mentor was able to meet me where I was and walk me out of that place into a healthier place by using his experience of being incarcerated, helping me to identify my institutionalized thinking, you know something I was unaware of at the time. But he was able to point out how this institutionalized thinking was my greatest enemy and I needed to remove that by changing my mindset and acclimating back into the world. So he, who was also that mentor and that life coach, just really helped me hone in on that and help me to unleash and release some of the stuff that I was unable to process during my incarceration, especially when I came home, so I was able to release it through venting how I felt about certain things.

Marian Thacher

That sounds really lucky that you connected up with that individual, how did you connect with your mentor.

Lester Young

I actually had a relationship prior to me being released from prison, he was already mentoring me while I was in prison, through teaching various classes in prison and he continued that mentorship after me being released from prison.

Marian Thacher

That's great. Why would you say mentoring matters, not just to you, but to everyone, getting out of prison?

Lester Young

Oh, I believe mentoring is key to a personal level of success after incarceration because again. it's almost this metaphor, a person walking who injured himself in the crutches. that's like a mentor. A mentor is that crutch that helps this individual learn how to walk healthier after incarceration, help them deal with the trauma of incarceration, help them deal with the rejection all of those things that come with reentry.

That mentor helps that individual rebuild relationships with his family, his children, help them seek employment and knowing how to just present themselves. As someone

who's formerly incarcerated and letting them know through the mentor example, that success after incarceration is possible.

You don't have to limit yourself to your felony conviction, but your mentor, someone who's been there and had that level of success, they become that mirror that you aspire become greater than because of their example.

Marian Thacher

That's a great image, so it sounds like having a mentor really mattered to you, how does it matter to your expertise and what you're doing now. I know you're working with formerly incarcerated people now and how has it affected your work?

Lester Young

It allows me to effectively connect with the men when they're returning home from prison. We work with particularly men who are returning home from prison helping them turn their setbacks and the comebacks.

My lived experience, it allows me to approach this work in a different way, with a level of empathy. You know, because I know what it feels like to go in a fast food restaurant and get overwhelmed by a menu, I know what it feels like to go into self-serving line at ma Walmart and unable to process it because you're afraid, so my experience allows me to have that level of empathy to be able to help these individuals process it.

To be able to help them walk through these processes, that is, want to allow them to be free from that institutionalized thinking, but also the fear of reentry.

Marian Thacher

Well, that sounds great, thank you so much for sharing your experience and your expertise with us today.

Lester Young

I appreciate you inviting me.

Disclaimer

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Thank you.