

Stories of Hope and Change from 5-Key Model for Reentry Participants

EARLY FINDINGS FROM A MULTI-STATE TRIAL

MARCH 2021

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INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE
RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

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Overview of this Report



This report presents interviews conducted with four 5-Key Model participants. Participants describe their lives and tell stories about overcoming challenges and finding success. They also describe how the 5 Keys helped them to make significant, positive changes to their lives and the ways 5-Key Model practitioners supported them in making these changes.

To ensure participant privacy, each interviewee chose a pseudonym and the states in which they reside are not identified.

About the Authors

The report was prepared by:

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IJRD is a research center housed within the College of Social Work at FSU. Our mission is to use science to improve lives, communities, and institutions by developing and researching innovations that reduce unnecessary reliance on the criminal justice system and by offering solutions that produce equity and prosperity across race, socioeconomic class, and behavioral health status. IJRD specializes in conducting rigorous real-world research using randomized controlled trials and prioritizes rapid dissemination of research findings to advocates, professionals, and policymakers.

IJRD [team members](#) live and work in communities across the nation, implementing a range of research projects including the 5-Key Model for Reentry as well as research on other pressing issues relevant to criminal justice reform.

You can learn more about the overall 5-Key Model study methodology [here](#), how the 5-Key Model was developed [here](#), and the broader work of IJRD at ijrd.csw.fsu.edu.

You can access our nine previous reports – including one-page summaries of each report – [here](#).



Brandi

“Brandi” released from prison in December 2019. She was interviewed by Jennifer Garbin, Program Specialist.

JENNIFER: Which of the 5 Keys do you feel like were the most

important for you?

BRANDI: Definitely Meaningful Work Trajectories. I had to learn to make an honest dollar. Also, Healthy Thinking Patterns would be next. Once I earned an honest dollar, I had to learn how to keep it and not quit or go back to my old life.

JENNIFER: What’s going well in your life right now?

BRANDI: I got a house, got some money saved. Working 2 jobs and got one of my sons living with me. Those are the things in my life that are going well now. I have 2 electric bills in my own name now. I have electric and gas in my own name. I have a house in my own name. I have my first credit card! Full coverage insurance. My kids are doing alright. They kinda wanna follow in my steps, that’s nice. They’re trying to change their ways just as much as I’m trying to change mine.

JENNIFER: Do you feel the 5-Key Model played a role in the way things are going?

BRANDI: Well, as many times as I wanted to get high or beat someone up, I always called my 5-Key counselor. You guys were there for me and that’s what mattered because when people use drugs or are in trouble all the time, it’s because they’re lonely. You know, we even feel like drugs and trouble is our only option. We’re thinking, ‘Nobody understands me, nobody hears me, I’m alone.’ And that’s where the bad behaviors come in. When we feel like nobody cares, then it’s like why do I care? 5-Key really helped because any time I felt like I was gonna mess up, I had to say, ‘Hey I need help or I’m gonna mess up.’ But when I did that, you guys were always there to help me get through it.

JENNIFER: That makes me so happy!

BRANDI: I personally wanted to do right, and I had to realize that it’s on me to reach out and say, ‘Hey I’m feeling this way and if you don’t help me cope with it then I’m gonna do something I regret.’ I learned that I needed to call and say, ‘Listen, if I don’t say this out loud then it’s gonna be poison in my soul.’ For example, just the other day, I wanted to get high, and you guys at 5-Key always were there to listen to me, support me, and walk me through it. You had answers for me, but you were there for me to release the poison from my soul too, and I know it wasn’t judgment. I know that it was a safe place. And I know that anything you said to me wasn’t in malice, it was in positivity, and you guided me to my own answer, not just gave me one. You’re not just giving advice and telling me what I *should* do, which I hate.

JENNIFER: We are happy to help! So, what would you say you’re most proud of about your life right now?

BRANDI: I guess I’m proud of my ability to deal with people in situations. My dad is the nicest guy ever, so he’ll never be like, ‘No, I’m not going there with you because you’re embarrassing.’ He’ll never say that. He’ll just go with me and he knows he’s going to be embarrassed so he’ll put his head down – he knows what’s coming. Well, after 5-Key in situations where he was gonna have to put his head down, I actually acted right! He said, ‘What? I’m surprised Brandi! I was just sitting there waiting on it, like here she goes, and then you didn’t. Then you didn’t and it blew me away!’ In general, when people snap, I usually snap back but twice as loud. But now, when people snap at me, I just use politeness. I kill ‘em with the politeness. Now if someone comes at me, I’ll say, ‘Excuse me ma’am. I’m sorry that you feel offended by me, but we kinda have to interact here so I can get done what I need to get done. Okay?’ They might get irritated, but instead of yelling – which was my go-to, I’m polite. Maybe fake-polite, but still. My dad said once, ‘Brandi, you handled yourself well.’ And that felt great.

JENNIFER: That's a much healthier way to deal with a stressful interpersonal situation!

BRANDI: I'm piping down, and you know what? It's been such a huge difference in me that even my son "Joseph" compliments me. He'll say, 'I'm learning from my mom.' The other day I heard him say that and it made me feel so good. A few days ago, we was at his doctor's appointment to alter his medicine and he told the doctor, 'I'm learning from my mom that I don't have to immediately always get angry. I can try and understand the other person.'

JENNIFER: That's huge!

BRANDI: Yeah, it's huge! It made me feel so good.

JENNIFER: It should!

JENNIFER: Tell me about what your life was like before you started 5-Key and whether things have changed for you.

BRANDI: I was living in the halfway house when I first met my 5-Key counselor. The halfway house was so hard because they had all these rules and it was impossible to meet in person. I didn't really change in the beginning, because I was angry about being in the halfway house. But when I released from there – I really leaned on you guys to guide me through them times when I felt like I was gonna fail or give up. It was hard when I had to transfer to another counselor and I was angry about that too. But then I came to really trust my new counselor and that's when I got to where I am now.

JENNIFER: You've grown a lot since we first met, for sure.

BRANDI: I mean, when I was in prison I used to pray because me and Joseph never really had a bond. I was always closer to my oldest son, and I admit that that was wrong of me as a mother. Even in addiction, I always had my older son with me and never had Joseph with me. So, when I was in prison, I used to pray to get a bond – a connection – with him. I got sober before I went to prison, and I used to pray for a bond with him. I'd been out 4

months and I would pray because even then I didn't even get to make a bond with my son. Well, we got one now. It's not the greatest, but we have a foundation.

JENNIFER: That is so great to hear! For both of you! So, if you could go back and tell yourself something on the first day you started working with the 5-Key Model, what would it be?

BRANDI: That's hard honestly, because I feel like I've done everything right. I worked hard! But maybe I'd tell myself to just hang in there. The number one thing I've been saying to myself throughout the 5-Key program is that the easy way is never the good way. Good things never come easy, so the hard way is the route to take.

JENNIFER: Are there things that you learned from 5-Key that you apply to your life now?

BRANDI: Patience. You guys taught me a lot about patience. And then I learned a lot about credit. I also learned a lot about trying to understand others because I was hard and I didn't really care about how others feel. But working with you guys at 5-Key, somehow now I finally care about others. I mean, not always, but I try to care. I put the effort there.

JENNIFER: What difference do you think the 5 Keys made in the trajectory of your life, in the way your life is headed?

BRANDI: I think 5-Key made a huge difference. You guys taught me about credit. You guys taught me patience. I never had patience, but you guys always found a way to say it to me to where I could understand it rather than just giving me the good old, 'You know things will get better.' I hate that. I hate that phrase. I hate people saying that to me. You guys found a way to get through to me without me hating you. So, thanks.



Tony

“Tony” was released from prison in January 2021. He was interviewed by Rachel Schmidt, Research and Assessment Specialist.

RACHEL: Hi Tony! How is everything going? What’s your life looking like right now?

TONY: Everything’s looking pretty good! Through the 5-Key program, I was able to start working at a big recycling center which was a major help for me. The 5-Key people were able to help me go find employment almost immediately. The program has really been helping me because I’ve been able to talk about some things that otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to share with anybody else. I’ve also learned some helpful breathing exercises and stuff so it’s been positive all the way around for me.

RACHEL: That’s great to hear! Tell me more about the breathing exercises and how they’re helping you.

TONY: Yes, so I’m dealing with anger from the charges I went in on. I shouldn’t have been found guilty. I did not commit them. And so I filed a post-conviction relief. I got a lot of stress and anger behind that because you know I’m having to deal with trying to get my conviction exonerated. I talk with my 5-Key counselor about it a lot and she’s been wonderful. I’ve been meeting with her on a weekly basis and we’ve been able to talk and she’s really, really been a help to me.

RACHEL: I’m so glad to hear that. I’m sorry for all the difficulties that have come your way and hope you get some relief soon.

TONY: I appreciate that.

RACHEL: Absolutely. What would you say is your biggest challenge right now?

TONY: My biggest challenges are going through the post-conviction relief and my medical status right now. I have chronic bronchitis and I have trouble breathing sometimes - I get choked and start coughing. It’s a real issue, trying to breathe clean air.

RACHEL: That sounds really tough and I hope you can get some resolution to both issues. Changing gears, if you could go back and talk to yourself when we first met you and recruited you into the study, what would you tell yourself about the 5-Key program knowing what you know now.

TONY: Well, I didn’t have no skepticism, but I didn’t think that it was going to work out as well as it did you know? I wouldn’t have expected what I’ve been getting so I’m glad that I really did participate. I’m really glad I did it and I stuck it through. I’ve been sticking with it because it’s really been helping, you know? If I felt that it wasn’t helping me or benefitting me, I probably would’ve dropped out. But it’s really working.

RACHEL: What would you say is the thing that helped you to stick with it?

TONY: For one, my 5-Key counselor is just like super, super nice and helpful. She’s concerned about me and she makes the meetings interesting. She listens to what I have to say – if I have any input, she takes that into consideration and that means a lot to me. You know, it ain’t like, ‘this is what we going to do and this is how it’s going to go and these are the rules.’ She includes me and asks me what I would like to do, which I really appreciate. That really goes a long way with me.

RACHEL: Great, I’m happy to hear that! What have learned from the 5-Key Model that you’ve continued to use throughout your life?

TONY: I'm able to be more open and communicate my thoughts and feelings – to deal with situations in a positive way. I've learned coping skills about thinking about a situation and what the outcome will be if I react in a certain way. I can think about options and cope with situations – that's the main thing for me.

RACHEL: When you were in prison and getting ready to come home, what did you think your challenges were going to be?

TONY: I thought my challenges were gonna come from being on probation. I spoke about how I was wrongly convicted and I proved my innocence, but they're still not wanting to exonerate me. I think that if I hadn't been in this 5-Key program, I probably would have said, 'You know what forget it – I'm going to snap off!' But with 5-Key, I've been able to be patient and think about it and think about what's going to be a better outcome for me. I just got to be patient – that's one of the things that I've had a problem with – I would get so angry and immediately go off and end up back in prison. That's where I don't want to be. So, by knowing that I have somebody that I can talk to each week who's gonna listen to me, you know, that gives me something to look forward to.

RACHEL: Where do you see the trajectory of your life going now?

TONY: Well, within the next 6 months, I see myself being exonerated, getting an expungement, and getting a better job. I live with my brother right now, which is perfect, but being able to get my own place out of the 'hood is where I see myself 'cuz then I don't have to worry about my past record. With a good job and a better place to live, the sky's the limit from there.

RACHEL: What are you looking forward to as you continue with 5-Key?

TONY: I look forward to continuing with our meetings – me and my 5-Key counselor – and learning some more coping skills and dealing with some other issues I have. I like that we can talk and communicate, and I know she ain't going to form opinions for me or tell me what I shouldn't do. She's always got something positive to say to me and, you know, I've never had nobody that always been able to accept me positively. It's always some type of negativity or there's some type of suggestion that would make me think they think bad about me. In the past, that's stopped me from talking to people and then because I'm not able to express how I feel, it builds up, gets all bottled up. I'm worried about what I'll do when the program ends.

RACHEL: We will make sure you feel prepared when the program is coming to an end for you, I promise. You have time for sure. Do you feel like learning these coping skills and communications skills have helped you in other areas of your life? Beyond managing the anger you have about your conviction?

TONY: Well, it's helped with relationships. I made a commitment before I got out that I was cutting a lot of people loose, so I really don't have too many friends. I talk to my brother and my family and I have a few friends. It's helped with communicating and the friends I have are positive people. Oh! I almost forgot! I had failed my high school equivalency test in 2016 and my one friend really helped me decide to retake it. She was like, 'If that's all you got to do you need to go do it!' She pushed me and I went and I took the test yesterday. I'm just waiting on my results. I think I did pretty well! Hopefully, I passed and then I'll have my high school equivalency at the age of 47 so that's a big accomplishment.

RACHEL: That's amazing! When will you hear the results?

TONY: Well, I went online hoping to get it today, but it said another 7 days or so.

*RACHEL: Well, we're wishing the best for you!
Please let me know how it turns out. I know you
were taking classes last week to prepare and you
feeling like you did well says a lot!*

TONY: Yeah, I took classes to get ready. I hope I passed.

RACHEL: I would love to know what are you most proud of about your life right now?

TONY: I'm proud that I am accomplishing small goals right now. I'm free of basically any trouble. I'm proud that I got a job, I got a vehicle, I got a good place to stay – so those are three major things that I was able to do pretty fast. I've only been out two months. I was blessed and I'm just accomplishing goals and tasks that I need to do and I'm doing everything legitimately. I ain't got no crazy mess and I don't have no relationship dramas. I'm proud of that.

RACHEL: That's awesome. Truly. What would you tell people about your experience with 5-Key?

TONY: Well, this program is great. They do what they say they're going to do and really help. They help with employment and housing, even though I'm stable where I'm at with my brother. I told my counselor I was looking for a job and she said, 'Okay. I know such and such person at the recycling center.' Within two days I was there saying, 'I'm ready to work!' It's great and I got my forklift certificate and I'm working on other certifications to clean up hazardous materials and waste. They even sent me to the career center to help with my high school equivalence test.

RACHEL: This is so great to hear! Any last thoughts?

TONY: I appreciate you talking to me and when my counselor asked me about it I was like, 'Sure, yes!' She said she thought she'd have to convince me, but I was like 'Yeah!'

RACHEL: Ha! Thank you so much, Tony! We so appreciate you being a part of the 5-Key program and hearing your experience today! I'll be thinking about you and thinking good thoughts about your test results!

TONY: Thank you!



Dell

“Dell” was released from prison in April 2020. He was interviewed by Coty Murphy, Social Work Intern.

COTY: Tell me about what was happening in your life when you first started 5-Key and how things have been going since you came home.

DELL: When I first started, in prison, I guess I was focusing on what was going on in there, at that time. I had like probably about a year or so to go before I went home so I wasn't thinking about going home. When they first came and you know start talking to me about stuff, then we started working with like the keys y'all be doing. Then I got out.

COTY: So, what made you interested in starting the program in the first place?

DELL: Well 'cuz the research was going to help people in prison after me – trying to keep them from coming to prison. So I felt if I was doing the thing to help somebody else from going through what I'm going through, then I wanted to do it. You know, try to give back. I have been through prison – you know like 3 or 4 times. Back and forth. So, if I can say anything to make a difference in the next person's life and keep them from going through prison then I wanna help out.

COTY: Thank you for your help with the project and your involvement. I know you've been very engaged with the 5-Key treatment program. What do you think is the biggest thing you've gotten out of the 5-Key Model?

DELL: Well, I've learned how to do interviews and talk to people and dissect conversations. I learned how to use the phone to find different stuff, looking up stuff for jobs. It done taught me a lot of little stuff, little but important.

COTY: What was the biggest challenge when you first came home and how did you overcome it?

DELL: The biggest challenge after I got out was I really didn't have nothing to do. I was still in the prison mode, so I called my 5-Key counselor and she was like basically trying to get me back on track with what's going on outside. She showed me all sorts of different resources, people to go talk to, stuff like that. That was something different from the previous times when I had went to jail because before I ain't have nobody. You know, somebody to like check on me every week, somebody to talk to.

COTY: What would you say that you are most proud of about your life now?

DELL: When I got out, even though I was dealing with y'all, I done went out there and got back into the same things I was doing before – getting high, hanging out with the same people, getting into trouble. And then I had this car wreck, and the 5-Key counselor told me about an alcohol and drug treatment program. I finally took her advice, you know I really kept on reminding myself where I was at. She talked to me about what I said I was gonna do, how I said I wanted things to be different. And I guess I just took in what she said, and just started really listening to her. I mean, I didn't listen at first! But, she just kept on hitting me with stuff and telling me she knew I could do it, and I took it from there.

COTY: That's great! It sounds like support from your 5-Key counselor was really important to you.

DELL: Yea, having the check-ins and taking whatever recommendations she kinda give me was important. You know you can't do no worse! It'll help you or hurt you and most of the time it's helping me. I start listening to her – especially about the part about going to alcohol and drug treatment – 'cuz I really didn't wanna go back to that stuff, but I did keep going back. I'm still in it but I'm clean and all that. I'm in a whole lot better place.

COTY: That's incredible news – a huge accomplishment. What else is going well for you right now?

DELL: Well, right now the relationship with my family has got a whole lot better. It helped for them to be able trust me and let me go do little stuff – I can tell a difference compared to when I was using and where I'm at now. I get a little bit more responsibility, I be around my family a little bit more, and that helps me out a lot. I go to church too.

COTY: Sounds like your family is supportive of you!

DELL: Yea they are. They didn't know about 5-Key but they knew that I was doing something. They seen me out there on the patio on the phone. When my 5-Key counselor call, I usually be out there writing down stuff. They knew my counselor was trying to help me and they done took me to a few sessions. They knew she was standing up for me.

COTY: So, how do you think your life would be different if you weren't involved in 5-Key?

DELL: Well, for one I wouldn't have went back to no alcohol and drug treatment and got the help that I needed, 'cuz that would have been the last thing on my mind! That's the main thing right there. Also, I wouldn't be going to no church or being involved with the family, you know. I wouldn't have been doing none of that.

COTY: Gotcha! I know that you and your 5-Key counselor talked about you graduating from the program soon. What do you think you'll take with you after you do graduate?

DELL: I've learned basically like accountability – just being responsible. Being somebody you can depend on.

COTY: Do you feel like that's different from other times you left prison?

DELL: Yea, I do because without 5-Key I'd still be 'running the trails,' so to speak. What's hard is I had to let all of my friends go. A couple of them I still try to hang on to, but I start seeing little stuff my 5-Key counselor been telling me and I just gradually let them go too. I realized there ain't no benefits to having them. I started looking a little bit more at them as people – seeing the person for what they are, what they use, what they say. They had to go.

COTY: I'm hearing that you've learned how to navigate some of those complex and complicated relationships.

DELL: Yeah, I've been working on these relationships around me.

COTY: So, if you could go back and tell yourself something on the first day that you started 5-Key, what would it be?

DELL: I honestly didn't think I was gonna get this far in it, because really I ain't never really finished nothing. Never finished nothing at all. Not classes or treatment. Nothing. I think I done been up there to treatment like 6 or 7 times – ain't never went all the way through or completed a real class. But now, the way I've been doing – I ain't missed a day and been on time. So I guess talking with my 5-Key counselor and y'all people got me on the right track. 'Cuz, as I said, I ain't never really finished nothing and I usually wanna make up excuses and not answer the phone or try, but this time with y'all, for some reason I was just picking up the phone and trying! I think talking to y'all helped me to wanna get right and I guess that made me get right.



Seth

“Seth” released from prison in February 2019. He was interviewed by Amberly Prykhodko, Director of Clinical and Professional Training.

AMBERLY: What has been happening in your life since I saw you last?

SETH: I got off parole is the biggest thing. Happened August 2020, so I’ve been off for about seven months.

AMBERLY: Wow! How does that feel?

SETH: Feels great! I went traveling for the first time! And I have a lot of other things going on, I learned a lot from y’all and now I’m helping people who have been to prison! I learned a lot from y’all on overcoming adversity and I started my brand Transi-tionz, and now I’m helping people overcome adversity, helping people get through what they gotta get through and overcome that adversity. Because once a person gets out of the mess they’re in – which is prison – then they gotta change the past and transition, change their life.

AMBERLY: This is so exciting! Tell me more about Transi-tionz.

SETH: We are growing! I have a website, YouTube channel, and I started a podcast! I help people get their story out there into the world because a lot of the world is closed in and people don’t tell their lives, especially about how they overcome adversity. They show it and tell it and listeners can learn from them. I’ve learned a lot from these stories – about how there’s a lot in life you can beat and even when the odds are stacked, there’s so much to be proud about in life. The stories aren’t just about prison, but about overcoming. I help people to walk with purpose and when I started doing that, everything has been beautiful.

AMBERLY: Tell me more about walking with purpose.

SETH: Well, I had so much help and learned so much from y’all at 5-Key. Communication skills, talking – so important. I’ve been through a lot of ups and down – everyone has! – but you gotta get through it. You got to! You taught me that! That’s walking with purpose to me. And when I was traveling, I ran into people that have watched me and listened to the podcast!

AMBERLY: That’s amazing!

SETH: One thing I didn’t tell you – I started having some problems with parole and they send me back to county. I had told you about my daughter and she was making bad grades. So I made a promise to her – if she brought them up, then I would take her somewhere. So, she brought them up – all A’s, you can’t deny it! I called my parole officer, and asked if I could take her to the arcade, lunch, this and that, and they said no. Well, I went anyways. I went anyways and they put out warrants, sent people after me! I went to the parole office to talk to them, saying, ‘Hey, you know I’m not out here messing up.’ But they wasn’t trying to hear it – I still went to jail. I did get to talk to the parole board and one of them said, “Well, this guy, all he did was take his daughter to the arcade, he wasn’t doing anything.” So, they let me out of jail but they put a lot of bogus violations on me. I ended up beating all of them! Every single one was bogus.

AMBERLY: Wow.

SETH: I remember I used to talk to you about this – how this happens to people all the time. And it happened to me. It just makes my story even stronger, you know. Makes it even stronger.

AMBERLY: How did you cope with all that?

SETH: I was mad! Mad at the world. It's like you can't win for losing – I mean, I'm doing everything out here good and y'all send me back to jail for doing a good thing, but not to parole's standards. I had to spend 30 days in jail for that! I should have released sooner, but then I had to stay in jail longer because of COVID-19. So, in the beginning, it was the end of the world, you know. Back in the cage, I promised myself I wouldn't go back to, stuff like that. But I coped! I kept going. I got a lawyer and had some great support around me – this time I didn't break the law, so I had a lot of people on my side. I even had a friend from the military write the parole board. I had so many people on my side.

AMBERLY: How did your mom take it? She's good at advocating.

SETH: Oh, yes, she was fighting! She was just like, 'He's doing good, he's doing right, you know this!' But they assumed I was in the wrong.

AMBERLY: Right. How did you cope with being in jail?

SETH: I just watched the news and I wrote to my kids and my girlfriend every day. I called home all the time and had people call my family too. I have a new baby son so that was hard to be away.

AMBERLY: Oh! I didn't know that! Congratulations!

SETH: Thanks and I'll tell you everything – it was crazy. Long story short, some things happened with his mom and I got full custody. His mom was my girl and I found out that she was using drugs – cocaine, stuff like that – and she was hiding it from me. Hiding, hiding, hiding. So, I called her one day and told her, 'Hey, you know I can't deal with this, you know I'm on parole, I got a lot of stuff going on. Either you gotta let it go, or I'm gonna go.' She told me she was gonna let it go but she couldn't do it, ultimately. I ended it because I got my life, I gotta elevate, I can't keep going back and taking risks like this. I should have said something, got some help or something because I found out I had

a son, and he was born with cocaine in system. I didn't even know she was pregnant. They call me at work, I had a DNA test and talked to the child protective people. My son went to foster care but only for a few hours and even though I had showed up just to ask for some connection with him, everything shifted when the DNA results came back and they told me that I was the natural father. I had to leave work, buy a car seat and diapers. The child protective worker went and brought him from the foster family and boom – he's been with me ever since. It was a mess and the judge awarded me full custody. She went to rehab right away but she fought me and wanted full custody, not even shared. The judge didn't like that. Now I got my son with me every day. Everyone pulled together and I got custody. It was hard but we got through it! We got through it and we are today, standing strong, standing strong, smiling, and testimony after testimony.

AMBERLY: That's incredible!

SETH: It is! And now I've been with my son and focusing on changing the prison system. Especially about release dates. Some states tell you 'Okay, if you good this long, we'll let you out' but not here. Here they say if you're good until this day comes up, *maybe* we'll let you out. But when that day comes and you been an angel and you come up for parole and they say, 'You didn't catch a case or get in trouble, but still no.' And you just feel like, 'I did everything you asked,' you know, and that makes guys lose hope. That day comes up, you don't get to go home, and now the world's upside down. People deserve a second chance, you have to look at each individual situation. It's a lot of guys down there like that will never see daylight.

AMBERLY: What are you most proud of in your life right now?

SETH: I'm proud of my transition. I can look back and compare my life now and then. Life is so much more calm now, there's no pressure, or worries about 'what will happen when they find out I'm

driving without insurance' or other stuff like that. Things are smooth. I changed my life. I'm happy now. And there's people around me who know I'm doing positive. I feel like I'm just growing every day and I love having freedom. I don't take freedom for granted. I tell everybody I don't take freedom for granted. I remember where I came from. And I remember it even on the hard days when I'm not feeling good. I think about how I can look at grass or go to the refrigerator, stuff that I took for granted. So I got to remember I've only been out three years – I remind myself where I came from.

AMBERLY: How else have you been helping people leaving prison?

SETH: Well, when I first came out, I was working as a plumber. It was good money. Like, really good money. So, I start thinking about making these teams of like four guys and having them learn the trade from a plumber, contractor, electrician, whoever. That never happened, but I teach people the basics, so they know they have options. To this day, I know people that are robbing, stuff like that, and don't have any kind of skills. But if they had this skill, I think they would try this instead, you know? They would try this.

AMBERLY: I remember the very first time I met you – it was on Valentine's Day, do you remember?

SETH: Yes, I remember.

AMBERLY: You were really worried about going back to prison and meeting me in your old neighborhood. You told me, 'This is what I need to do right now because otherwise I'm going to go do something I shouldn't.' If you could go back to the person you were then and tell yourself something, what would it be?

SETH: I would tell myself it was a mind thing and that I was overreacting. Today, I can go over there and still have the same mindset of not doing old things. I've been over there a few times – not many – just 3 or 4 times, but I don't do nothing. I tell

myself that I can't stay, can't hang out, I can say 'Hey how y'all doing, here's what I'm doing' and if someone wants help to do something different, I can push that for them, I can promote it. Now I'm trying to teach the guys I used to know what I was taught – everything I learned from prison, and the stuff that y'all taught me at 5-Key.

AMBERLY: What do you think is different from your mindset now, versus back then?

SETH: Maturity. I would definitely say maturity. I made amends, I don't make excuses but back then when I got out, I used to make a lot of excuses, a lot of excuses. I used my 9-year stint in prison as an excuse for everything. But now, I'm back to real life. I deal with stuff, I cope with it, I make it the best, and learn from my past.

AMBERLY: So, what did you learn from 5-Key?

SETH: Oh. A lot. In the beginning when I was first out, I got caught up in stuff and I still get caught up some, but I learned how to cope, I learned how to communicate better. Communication was the biggest thing, biggest thing.

AMBERLY: Yeah. How so?

SETH: Well, I used to be quiet about a lot of stuff, not talking at all. But as I got more comfortable with y'all, I started to talk. I learned that I had to talk to somebody. I had to get an opinion and options from other people. Then, think about those opinions and options and make the best decision. I used to be 'all or nothing' and now I know that all-or-nothing thinking isn't good for me, for police, for anyone. And now I know all this so just every situation there has to be another option, you gotta weigh all the options. All the options. Weigh all of them.

AMBERLY: That's nice to hear! How did you start to feel comfortable opening up to us?

SETH: I think when you go to a program or something like 5-Key, you want to participate, talk to the people, to feel comfortable. Y'all at 5-Key made me feel comfortable, made me feel loved. 5-Key was more than just some program that helped me get a job – something I would do half-hearted. I mean, if it was that sort of program, I wouldn't be here doing this interview. No other program has ever gotten me to want to do an interview.

AMBERLY: I can hear how differently you're communicating – with your daughter, her mom, and your son's mom. It even sounds like you view her differently, you see things for what they are.

SETH: That is so true! I learned how to communicate, I learned how to just be straight to the point, keeping away the drama, keeping away the extra, you know? But, it's something though. I can't explain it. I learned how to do all that. I think just being nice, cordial, friendly. I stay out of the drama, I don't match the arguing, I keep things scheduled and planned out. I'm respectful. When I keep to that, there's no problem.

AMBERLY: Wow! That's a huge, that's huge! I remember how it was back when I first met you. It used to be 'if she gets angry, you get angry.'

SETH: Yeah, that needed to change.

AMBERLY: Wonderful story! Because it started out really tough.

SETH: It did for sure. I probably wouldn't even be able to have this conversation with you when I was younger.

AMBERLY: Oh! I was so distracted by the story about your son, I didn't ask about your daughter!

SETH: She's doing great! I see her Friday for the weekends. She just went home Sunday and started in-person school Monday. We'd been doing digital school, but now she's back in the building. She's in 6th grade – middle school – which is a big transition for her. But she is doing it so well.

AMBERLY: That's wonderful – I'm glad she's doing well! What would you say she's most proud of about you right now?

SETH: I mean, honestly a lot. We hang out a lot. We have fun. The biggest thing is just me being there. That's the biggest, most important thing, hands down. Just me being here. Able to see her, she can call me, stuff like that. And anytime – it's not 'Ah, I have to wait to go see him, I have to wait' you know, if she's going through something, she's got a phone, she can just call me right away. If something happens at school or in life – just having that access to her father is very important.

AMBERLY: I'm so struck by how hard you've worked to get to where you are – not just physical work, or work for your job, but working all of the mental and emotional stuff. That's really hard work. You made a choice to do the work, and to work with us at 5-Key, and then to keep it going once the 5-Key Model program ended. I hope you're really proud of yourself.

SETH: I am, but I'm not done. I'll be proud when I make a big difference.

AMBERLY: You don't have to wait to be proud.

SETH: Oh yeah, I am. I'm proud, I'm proud. I'm happy with life definitely. Everything's good, everything's good.

AMBERLY: Anything you want people to know or words you want to leave people with?

SETH: I want people to know that whatever you go through in life, you can get past it. And once you get past it, you have to remember what brought you there. You have to say, 'I'm not going to go down that same path to put me in that situation again, ever, ever.' Don't take it for granted, don't take life for granted, just keep striving and wear your testimony with pride!