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Proving Change is Possible

From Crack Addict to C.O.O.

By ALEX KRATZ

Looking back on his early life – cycling in and out of prison as a drug dealing, crack-addicted young hustler – Stanley Richards can still remember his Riker's Island inmate number: 2418616600.

By his mid-20s, Richards had become just another number. He never imagined he would one day be living a dream life.

Now, 16 years from his last incarceration, Richards, 46, is chief operating officer and second in command of a major Manhattan non-profit agency and lives in a Bedford Park house with a loving wife and four thriving children.

You can change, he tells all of the lost souls who come through the Fortune Society, an organization dedicated to helping ex-convicts as well as preventing people from becoming incarcerated in the first place.

Of course, shifting your reality from hustler to the straight and narrow isn't easy. Often, Richards recounts his own tumultuous story to illustrate that it can be done.

Going AWOL

Richards, now a giant teddy bear of a man, grew up in a Soundview housing project, the second oldest of four kids. His father worked in the Garment District. His mother was asthmatic and died after suffering a severe asthma attack when Richards was just 10.

Though Richards doesn't use his mom's death as an excuse for his bad behavior, he says it affected him deeply.

His father tried his best to compensate, even hiring a babysitter to look after his young family.

"He really stepped up to the plate," Richards says.

Ultimately, however, Richards

struggled in school, constantly getting into fights and skipping classes. After getting kicked out of the eighth grade for fighting, Richards was placed in a special school for kids with behavior problems.

"It was a disaster," he says. "I was in a school with a bunch of kids just like me, who liked to get in fights and party all the time."

Like many Bronx youth in the early 1970s, Richards fell in with a local gang, in his case, the Black Spades.

He never finished the eighth grade.

Faced with a bleak future, Richards decided to join the Army at the age of 17 after talking with his father.

Stationed at Fort Knox in Kentucky following boot camp, Richards encountered racism and a daily grind for the first time. He quickly became disillusioned with military lifestyle, so he went on leave and never went back.

"I went AWOL," he says.

The Corner and Prison

Back home, the Bronx was burning and the drug trade was booming. Like Richards, lots of his friends who had joined the military, just "faded back into the old scene." Soon, Richards was on the street corner selling drugs (mostly heroin at the time), making good money, and partying like a rock star.

Then, predictably, Richards says, "Like any good dealer, I started getting high on my own supply."

He also started getting picked up by police for dealing to undercover cops, and doing prison stints.

"I remember back then, my whole life view was the projects and the corner," Richards says. "And then the corner and jail."

He became comfortable with his lifestyle. Richards knew he could do time in prison, where his drug habit and street credibility increased by the day. The corner and prison became his reality.

That reality also included serious debt. To pay off those debts, Richards began "hustling" outside of his drug dealing day job, which usually meant robbing people at gunpoint.

His last "hustle" earned Richards a six-year prison term in 1986. While awaiting trial on Riker's Island, Richards continued to use drugs: heroin, crack, whatever he could get his hands on.

It wasn't until Richards was sent to prison upstate that his reality began to change. But first, he went through the painful hell of drug withdrawal, where at times, Richards says, your "bones feel like they're going to just snap."

Filling an Empty Cup

At Downstate Prison, program officers asked Richards what he wanted to do. He told them he wanted to go back to school and he did, passing his GED test on his first attempt.

"That gave me a lot of confidence," Richards says, remembering how his early teachers lamented the fact that he was wasting a keen mind.

Bedford Park Resident Proves Change is Possible



Photo by Alex Kratz

STANLEY RICHARDS, a former gangster, drug dealer and drug abuser, now heads a non-profit and lives with his family in Bedford Park.

From there, Richards went on an academic binge. Through a college program that has since been dropped, Richards went to class in the evenings and spent his days studying.

"It was like filling up an empty cup," Richards says.

Richards completed his bachelor's degree in prison and family members came to the graduation ceremony. His aunt gave him a big hug and told him: "I always knew you'd make it."

Culminating his prison reformation, Richards became director of the prison's pre-release program, which he hoped would help him land a job on the outside when he was released to a halfway house in 1991.

Richards wanted a social service job, but it was the same story with each rejection. He didn't have enough experience.

At the same time he was struggling to find a job, Richards met his future wife, Satara. "The two of us together, we both wanted to move on and move forward," she says.

The couple married and moved into an apartment together two weeks after Richards was released from the halfway

house. He took a job as a telemarketer and kept applying to nonprofit organizations. Finally, with Satara pregnant with their son, Marquis, and the family down to their last dollar, "we got that magic call from the Fortune Society," Satara says.

Joanne Paige, Fortune's CEO, remembers the woman who interviewed Richards telling her, "This one's going to be a shining star."

Completing the Transformation

Soon after establishing himself at the Society, Richards took in his father and gained custody of a son from a previous relationship. Satara brought in two of her own children, as they created a sort of Bronx Brady Bunch in their Castle Hill apartment. They moved to a house in Bedford Park, on Creston Avenue, in 2000.

Richards is now chief operating officer of Fortune, a fast-growing non-profit that is receiving national recognition for its low-threshold, multi-service, holistic model and now operates a \$14 million annual budget.

"I've seen him grow professionally,"

Paige says, gushing. "He's really smart, really dedicated. He's also a gentle male figure and so many of our clients are fatherless males. He's powerful by being caring, not by being threatening."

Richards is more of a manager now, but his favorite part of his job is working with Fortune clients. Most of them, like Richards in his former life, are struggling with addiction and resistant to change.

The other day, at a meeting at Fortune's Harlem emergency housing center, an ex-con sat in with his arms folded into his chest and scowl pressed on his face – the "prison face," Richards called it.

Richards looked him in the eye and asked him, "Why are you here?"

"Because the judge told me to be here," the ex-con said defiantly.

"No you're not," Richards told the man. "You can get up and walk out of here right now, but you'll have to face the consequences, legal and otherwise."

"It was like a light bulb flashed on," Richards said. "It was empowering for him. He said 'You're right.' It was his first step toward changing his reality. He realized he had a choice."