



*Practice of Freedom*

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## **Unload 2 Reload: An Adult Education Workshop in Prison**

**Ayman Marji**

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I do not have your typical prison story. What I mean by that is I did not come from a broken home. I was raised by two loving parents who supported me and gave me every advantage. To understand how I got here, serving a 20-year-to-life sentence for murder, I had to reflect on the poor decisions I made.

Growing up in south Yonkers was difficult. Being surrounded by many negative influences led me to believe I needed to follow a "street code." Let me be clear, I am not blaming my environment for the bad decisions I made. My brother lived in the same household and was exposed to the same negative influences yet never succumbed to the lifestyle I was attracted to. What I realized are the negative influences I chose led me to commit such a horrific crime. I was the cause of this violent act, but violence was not part of my character. Reflecting on this, I now fully realize this was not the person my parents raised me to be.

The most notable difference between freedom and life in prison is the amount of time one who is incarcerated is afforded to truly self-reflect. It was not until after I was incarcerated that the magnitude of taking someone's life settled deep into my conscience and motivated me to look at myself and my actions through a different lens. It was then I realized my change had to begin with a complete renewal of my perspective on life.

The first step on my path to rehabilitation began with the realization that: I am guilty. Taking full responsibility is the most important step to making a commitment to change. Once I made that commitment, my outlook on life became a polar opposite of what it was when I was a misguided youth. My desire now is to help prevent others from causing the pain and suffering I inflicted, as well as experiencing the consequences I lived with.

Over the years I was incarcerated, I took advantage of all mandated and volunteer programs. At Green Haven Correctional Facility, I was part of the Youth Assistant Program (YAP). During my facilitation, I encountered hundreds of teenagers and adults who glamorized street life as I once did. I was able to share my story on how the bad choices I made changed not only the life of the victim, but the victim's family, my family, my life, and the community. Seeing the impact of my story and my co-facilitators' stories helped me understand the power we have as incarcerated individuals. I wanted to do more.

Just imagine if hundreds of formally incarcerated individuals shared their life stories how much of an impact it would have on our community. The obstacle was that many incarcerated individuals are not able to articulate their life story. I truly believe the ones who helped destroy our community are the ones with the best insight to help rebuild it. Mother Teresa said, "I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples." This was the seed that grew in my mind. I kept asking myself, how can I help create the many ripples needed to affect positive changes in our communities?

This led me to create Unload 2 Reload. An educational workshop in prison designed to help educate the youth about the impact of Gun Violence. The three session workshop is completed in five classes that teach incarcerated individuals how to "Unload" their old negative behaviors and their understanding of the destruction they caused with gun violence, to "Reload" a new outlook on life and the commitment it takes, and "Release" their story to the youth in the community and become a positive role model.

- Session 1 (2 classes) - Unload: incarcerated individuals unpack their old negative behaviors and destructive lifestyles. Topics of discussion include family history, role models growing up, how they developed old morals, values, and principles, how gun violence impacted their life, and who the victims were. At the end of the session, participants must complete the Confronting Our Self Exercise: A letter to your younger self that will be read in class. The letter will include: what would you tell yourself? What or who were the influences that allowed you to make the choices you did growing up? What important event did you experience as a child you believe altered the outcome of your life? Who was most impacted by your choices? How holding and using a gun affected your life?

- Session 2 (2 classes) - Reload: we instill a positive attitude by creating a new decision-making process and changing their value system. Topics of discussion include taking full responsibility for your actions, why you want to change your morals, values, and principles, what truly matters now, who are you surrounded by, why are you against guns, different ways to deal with adversity, and identifying at-risk youth. At the end of the session, participants will begin the Identifying Yourself Exercise - Life Autobiography. This will include background, peer pressure, substance abuse, breaking down your life in important moments and decisions, what led you to prison, and how gun violence impacted your life.

- Session 3 (1 Class) - Release: Putting it all together. We discuss the importance of making a commitment to excellence and the steps necessary to becoming a Mentor Leader to the youth in the community. Once the class discussion is completed, all participants will recite their life Auto's in class. The idea is to have as many formally incarcerated individuals share their story with the youth.

The seven E's of Mentor Leadership:

1. Engage - first you must have the courage to engage with the youth because without engagement there can be no mentorship.
2. Educate - we then must educate the youth about the impact of poor decision making and the impact of gun violence.
3. Equip - only after we educate can we equip the youth with the right tools they need to handle adversity.
4. Encourage - once they have the tools, we continue to encourage them to be the best version of themselves.
5. Empower - after encouragement comes empowering them to make the right choices on their own.
6. Energize - once empowered, you continue to feed the youth with positive energy to strive for excellence.
7. Elevate - once they are educated and equipped with the tools to make the right decisions, and are encouraged, empowered, and energized can they fully elevate to help the next person become the best version of themselves.

I truly believe education is the most important aspect a youth can receive in order to become successful. Learning the basic class's school offer is essential to the development of an adolescent, such as: History, Math, English, and Science. What many school systems lack are the necessary education classes on how a teenager needs to learn how to overcome obstacles they face on a daily basis, such as peer pressure, lack of a positive role model, how to think independently, not following the crowd, and being comfortable being themselves.

Words alone cannot reflect the changes I have made in my life, but I intend to demonstrate these changes in whatever opportunities are provided to me in the future. In my 20 years of incarceration, I have accomplished a great deal. I enrolled in college courses every opportunity I could to complete my bachelor's degree. As the Osborne Association clerk, I have facilitated numerous Parenting, Fatherhood Forum, and Strengthening Relationships classes. Another class I facilitated A Closer look: examines, challenges, and dispels old beliefs, principles, and lifestyles. I also facilitated the Aggression Replacement Training (A.RT) program, which is the mandated violence program in New York State Department of Corrections. No, I do not expect to be rewarded for something I am obliged to do. The strides I have made are a testament of my willingness to grow and develop, and my strong desire to eviscerate all negative thinking and behavior. Who I am today is the product of all the education I learned through these programs.

I cannot change the result of what happened when I committed this crime, however, I am doing my best to be a better person and help make positive changes in the community by creating as many ripple effects as I can.

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Born in Jordan, Ayman Marji moved to the United States in 1989. A football star who excelled as high school football coach. He has always been passionate about mentoring others. Despite facing significant challenges, including serving 20 years in prison, he transformed his experience into a powerful force for good. While incarcerated, he facilitated numerous programs and workshops to help individuals turn their lives around. Now, he strives each day to give back to the community and inspire others with his resilience and dedication.