

ANON: IRELAND

I grew up in a happy family in rural Ireland and had what I would call a normal upbringing. I suppose my offending started at the typical age of 15 with the usual smoking cannabis and drinking. At the time my parents were breaking up and we moved from where I grew up, a rural place, to a new rural location in Ireland. I quickly started hanging out with a group of older boys and started experimenting with acid, speed and ecstasy. Ecstasy led on to smoking heroin and my offending quickly escalated from simple theft, or whatever, led to free drugs, to more organised crimes.

I was arrested at the age of 16 for possession of cannabis. After my mother's house was raided for stolen property I decided to join an older friend who was on the run in England. Within a week living in England I was selling crack and heroin. I did not realise I was addicted until a friend diagnosed my "flu" as withdrawal from heroin.

My offending rates went through the roof and I am ashamed to say that I was involved in more crimes than I was detected for. These offences were mainly driving offences although some were for minor drug possession. After a three month sentence in a young offender Institute in Shropshire for disqualified driving and going through a particularly bad "cold turkey" or withdrawal from drugs, I was placed on a methadone maintenance programme, a pharmaceutical treatment to support a reduction in drug use. HMP offered no detoxification programme, so I decided to go home to Ireland. So arriving home, I gained employment on a building site pouring concrete and, living in Dublin, work was easy to get during the "Celtic Tiger". During this period of economic growth in Ireland there was an associated building boom and employment was easily obtained, either through friends, agencies or simply asking around at building sites. I drank and smoked hash but went to work every day. As I was not using heroin there was not any offending. I was working and earned enough to pay my rent and live well. Most of the people I was friends with through work drank and smoked hash and I stayed away from those old friends who were using harder drugs. It was a period of about three years between coming home to Ireland, gaining employment and experiencing a life changing event which was the loss of my grandfather. He had been a father figure to me and I had always hid the realities of my life from him as I did not want to

disappoint him. After my Granddad died in 2003 I began smoking heroin again which helped numb the pain I felt and started “working” for the older boys I had grown up with. By “working” I mean buying, selling or transporting drugs around the country.

This quickly grew to the point that we came under surveillance from the National Drugs Unit, and I was eventually arrested with over £600,000 worth of cannabis. I was subsequently charged under 15A Legislation which carries a (presumptive minimum) sentence of ten years for sale or supply of drugs valued over 13,000 Euro. My court case lasted two years, during which time I tried two treatment centres, to no avail. Looking back I suppose the reason that they did not work was that I was doing it for the wrong reasons. Neither family, friends, girlfriends nor a court of law were strong enough reasons for me to successfully desist from using drugs. My offending rates declined as I was awaiting the court case but my drug use continued, although at a much lower level due in part to finances and also to family intervention, such as greater monitoring of my whereabouts.

In 2003 I was sentenced to six years with two suspended. Within one month of being in Mountjoy prison my cell mate, who was a friend before prison, was stabbed to death. This was truly life changing as within 20 minutes of his death I heard prison guards laughing, I don't know what was being laughed at, but it made me realise that within the Irish prison system, life truly is cheap. Around this time I started to reconsider what was important to me and re-evaluate the direction my life was taking.

After this event I started going to the school in prison, partly to briefly avoid activities on the prison landings and partly to engage in conversations that did not involve criminal activity, and after gentle persuasion from a teacher I completed my Leaving Certificate which I had previously failed. I have to admit I got a buzz from passing what I never thought I could and went on to do whatever various courses were available in prison. I suppose this was in part a thirst for knowledge as well as testing my own ability to pass exams, write essays and so on. Something I thought I would never be able to do. As my release date approached a genuine teacher suggested that I may be able to go to University. I was released in September 2006 and within ten days I was sitting in a leading University, enrolled in an access programme. I tried a variety of subjects and graduated with a 2.1. My circle of friends slowly changed and

instead of discussing criminal activity, essays and exams became the dominant topic. I had less in common with old friends and talk about drugs and crime became boring to me. Nearly all my new friends were met through University and I found I had a lot in common with people from very different walks of life.

I got a job working on a market stall on Sundays in order to have some cash. I also won the Bank of Ireland Scholarship which helped me a lot, from paying household bills to simply having enough to live on without having to resort to criminal activity. With a friend I met in University, we went on to do a degree in Social Science in Maynooth. The three years there passed quickly and I made a lot of friends from different backgrounds. I never hide my background and although some people may have judged me I was just happy to be passing essays and exams. I decided from the beginning that if I was going to complete University I was going to do it without having to lie about my past. If I told the truth then the past could not come back to haunt me. Looking back I always kept myself busy and kept away from people or situations that may have lead to trouble. I guess this was critical in me succeeding in my efforts and as they say the devil makes work for idle hands.

I was under a three year supervision order and had constant contact with the probation service. These meetings were useless as it was simply a box ticking exercise. I could have been carrying out contract killings and no one would have known. No help was offered by the way of advice regarding studying or financial assistance. Some of my friends are social workers, so I now am aware that the case load of probation staff prevents meaningful contact. I find it is now prudent not to disclose my criminal convictions in all situations as discrimination by the State due to criminal record is difficult enough to deal with, without the added stigma of the criminal label in society. In Ireland someone with a criminal record cannot obtain work in the civil service. So a social worker was simply not an option, although I feel I would have had a lot of experience which would have proved beneficial. The conviction also meant that I had to choose courses that did not have placements that I could not have obtained Police clearance for. A career in Law was also never an option. It makes me laugh that in Ireland a conviction means you will not be employed by Government but a conviction means that you can still be elected to Government, where would someone with a criminal past do the most damage?

I also have to mention that the help of my best friend, my mum, allowed me stay away from a life of crime. Constant encouragement, assistance and unconditional love made me even more determined to succeed in finishing the degree and make her proud. As time passed I had less and less contact with old friends, this was partly as we had less in common but also I was sick of the drug lifestyle. I developed a website with a friend and we are gradually developing a sustainable business; this process is still ongoing.

After completing the degree, I applied and was accepted for a postgraduate course in teaching. I was not interested in teaching children but loved interacting with other determined adults, in particular prisoners. Due to my conviction I had difficulty in obtaining placement to get experience teaching. An education centre which deals with ex offenders, and which I had attended previously, accepted me to do my teacher training. I also volunteered to give talks about my experience to young offenders and also in schools. I did this partly to remind myself where I came from, partly to give something back and partly in an effort to help someone from not having to go through the events which I had experienced. A wise man once told me to say yes to everything and then when established I could pick and choose. To date this has not happened but I am still hopeful. At a time of massive unemployment there are few job opportunities and I remain optimistic about getting a job which I enjoy thoroughly. It was towards the end of my teacher training that I became involved with penal reform. After giving a talk in the Dáil, (Irish Parliament) about the upcoming spent convictions and the implications of having a criminal conviction, I was invited to join the board of directors of the Irish Penal Reform Trust. My role consists of advising about issues relating to prison life and attempting to change prison life on a practical level. Sometimes issues which may seem unimportant can have a massive effect on the daily lives of prisoners. There are also huge issues relating to the successful reintegration of prisoners. It is taking some time to find my own voice in relation to these issues but I am confident that in time change can be effected.

I thoroughly enjoy this as it gives me the chance to give something back and also see how a pressure group achieves its aims. I have finished a Masters in Criminology, which I have enjoyed as the class was made up of probation workers, detectives, social workers and

prison staff. Lots of different perspectives and viewpoints made class discussion very interesting. I have been able to offer a perspective which differs from that of a social worker, detective or someone who works with offenders. It also has enhanced my own self esteem as I realise that I have the ability to be part of informed discussion and that my own experience is as valuable to that of anyone else. I guess I have gone from being a serial offender to a serial course offender. I have more letters after my name now than I have in it, although I am not really academic. Sometimes I miss the thrill that I guess I got from criminal activity but I have replaced this with activities that also give me a thrill but in a productive manner. I do not miss the looking over my shoulder and all the hassle that was my life previously.

A lot of old friends are now dead, both natural and unnatural causes, some are in prison or living abroad unable to come home due to criminal activity. In contrast I now vote, have a television licence, and live a different life from the one I used to. I do any teaching hours I get offered, which are quite few, but I remain hopeful. It is not easy in the current economic climate but rarely does the thought enter my head to go back to my old way of living. I have met some amazing people and am lucky to have genuine friends, of all ages and all walks of life. At 34 years of age, I am no longer the constant cause of worry to my mum that I once was and believe that she is proud of me and what I have achieved. I would love to do more in the way of mentoring former prisoners as I believe that sharing my story can assist others change their life trajectory.

I should also mention how much I relate to the process of desistance as this change did not happen overnight. I am grateful for the opportunities, experience and people who have helped me, through advice and encouragement.

Post Script

I am happy to report that I am now employed as a Sociology teacher in an adult education centre which specifically deals with former prisoners. As part of my job I also provide peer support and study skills to former prisoners who have embarked on education courses, from FETAC courses, to University Access course and onto Degree courses. I wake up every morning, grateful to have a fantastic job, which I simply love doing, give something back to

people who can benefit from my experiences and also receive a decent wage in the process.
Life is good.