

## **FROM A HYPERACTIVE CRIMINAL TO A TAXPAYER**

### **John: Norway**

John (40) was a criminal in Oslo, Norway. A hyperactive one, by his own account. "I must have cost the insurance companies 25,000 Euro a week, I had to sink so deep that I found a real reason to stop being a criminal." Today, John is a volunteer at the 'Activities After Imprisonment Network' (ORCN), part of Oslo Red Cross, where he is helping others find the right way forward. "I am now working for the community, an ordinary citizen with a station wagon and a bank loan. I had no idea I would ever become such a man."

*Criminal acts:* theft, drug trafficking, fraud, car thefts and driving under the influence

*Seriousness:* Verdicts from 30 days to three years

*Last prison sentence:* Released in 2004

*No more crimes:* After he was last arrested in 2003

### ***Why did you choose to stop being a criminal?***

Bad conscience on behalf of myself. Others were not important to me at that time, so I had no bad conscience on behalf of anyone else. I understood I was gliding as far down as possible. My own rock bottom, so to say. Researchers have focused on where the turning point is. Some say you have to be face down on the basement floor first. And I agree!

### ***Was the change due to your own choice, or did it happen gradually? Or both?***

Both. I have battled myself many times. Tried often, but not intensely enough or in the right way. A trained eye can see easily if an effort will succeed or fail. I think most people bite off more than they can chew too fast.

### ***Did you enjoy being a criminal? Was it something in particular that made you change your assessment of yourself?***

I thoroughly enjoyed being a criminal. By and by I grew secure in my role as a clever gangster. I felt I deserved this role since I never diluted any drugs, never stole from friends, be it money, drugs or women. And I never squealed on anyone.

I had to find an answer to one particular question. Why can I not be a criminal? What is a really important reason to stop? Important for me. You may think of arguments like children, family and conscience as good reasons. Or the problems that arise when one becomes a drug abuser and criminal. Those arguments were not applicable. I could solve all problems by taking drugs. I was of the opinion that I never had any problems, others had them. Family and friends had distanced themselves from me a long time ago anyway. The only reasons to end were to do with myself. Myself alone.

***What or whom supported you and what or whom made problems for you as you were about to stop being a criminal?***

A prison guard who did more than he was supposed to according to the rules of conduct. He saw me and followed me when I changed to different blocks and when I was out in society between my times in prison. Bad old friends made problems. All on my phone list, all in my neighbourhood. They wanted me to join them in buying and selling. All of them expect people who take charge of themselves to stumble back into crime again. It's only a question of time. And there are many coincidences. Not being in the wrong place at the wrong time is one of those. When I took charge of myself, I was very carefully reducing the odds of failure to a minimum. I was thinking action leads to consequences, which was a new concept to me.

***Have your attitudes changed over time?***

They have changed. Education. Being given responsibilities and trust in education, in the family and so on. I have been vigilant about doing things – activities that gave me tasks and a role to play. Becoming a trainer for the ORCN football team, starting education and such.

I was dead certain I had finished using drugs. Crime was not that easy to get away from. I turned into a criminal long before I started using drugs. I went up and down streets with a prison guard to practice not scanning cars, locks and so on. I also had social training. I exercised with the intent of no longer being ashamed about my past. I trained at apologizing when I felt the urge to do that. I also had a problem with some people owing me money. I called them to say they need not think of me any longer. That was to finish the attitude that cash and other stuff were important.

***How and why were the people and things important in your process?***

It was very evident to me that I needed help. They helped me especially with answers to questions about ending my bad habits and how to end them.

***What would you say are the most important arguments for and against ending a criminal career?***

It isn't normal. A criminal is on the outside of society. You think you are a free man, that you can do anything you want. But at last you understand that it is not true. But then you don't know about the other world. You don't know about the bonuses in an ordinary life. To be able to enjoy time with your children, managing a job. Knowing that you get paid next month because you have a job. All this is unimportant when you're outside society, when you are a criminal.

Previously, I would have chosen ten grammes of amphetamine rather than 1500 Euro at any time. A hundred times out of a hundred, definitely. Always I wanted the short-term profits or gains before anything else.

There still are things to do with a criminal life that are fascinating and that I miss, even if I don't want such things back in my life. The brotherhood. The people you meet on their way into or out of prison. Us versus them. Never lose face, never squeal. The jargon, the codes that those on the inside of society never will understand. Some of this is great fun. But, you would still be in prison all the time, having paranoia, rotten teeth and being drunk or drugged.

Even though I now have many reasons for no longer being a criminal, it is very difficult when you are in the centre of that world. The change must come from within and the criminal himself has to understand it himself. It can take many laps and many years. It is important not to lose faith in the one who needs help. I try to do all I can to have people take some education. Whoever is not under the influence and not too disorganized can manage that. It gives you a settled life, and is a way of taking one step at a time, different from going directly into a job. I wouldn't have managed going straight into a full job. The process of building a crime free foundation takes time.

***How is your life now? How do you see yourself, and what are the most important differences compared to your past?***

I am now always very active all the time. Planning is now very important for me, I need to fill my time with activities, and keep the trust and responsibilities I have been given in my current environment. The Red Cross have made it possible for me to be a resource for others, and being a volunteer there, has given me more than I would previously have thought possible. To get rid of me, they would have to remove me by force, I never want to end being part of the project. I saw myself as unique before, because of what I was doing. Now I know I am special because of what I am being. I am still concerned with not ending up in situations that could give me trouble. But now trouble is less dangerous than before. I am glad I have come through.