

S2E15 Quan Huynh

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SPEAKERS

Amanda Acker, Quan Huynh, Robot



Amanda Acker 00:05

Welcome to The Let Good Things In Show. I'm your host Amanda Acker. I'm so happy you're here at the let good things in show we talk all about second chances resiliency following your intuition and even music listen to hear stories of hope and to be inspired. Remember, you are stronger than you think. Let's dive in. Hi my amazing humans. Thank you so much for tuning in to yet again, another episode of The Let good things in Show. I am so so grateful for you and I would love to hear from you. Whether you have a suggestion or a comment or even if you are thinking about being a guest on the show, send me an email Amanda at Amanda.acker.com Acker is spelled a c k e r. And if you're loving the show, head on over to Apple podcasts and leave me a review, so more people can find the show. So this interview, I'm so excited to release it. It's been a long time in the making. And this man that I interviewed just amazes me in so many ways, and I'm so excited to dive in, but a couple of things about this episode. So number one, it had to happen in two sessions, because my internet decided to go completely haywire. So it is a little bit pieced together. But I assure you that it sounds great. And my husband is such a great editor. So it's still going to be amazing. So I'm excited. And you know, April is second chances month and since I'm releasing this episode on the last day of April, this is the perfect episode to end out second chances month, because this man that I interviewed or had a conversation with rather, was incarcerated for a long time, and his story is extremely inspirational. So I'm so excited. So let me start with his bio. I interviewed Quan Huynh, he has been described as a mighty warrior, a magician and a mountain of goodness. He is the Best Selling Author of sparrow in the razor wire, finding freedom from within while serving a life sentence. His book was written for men that are doing long or life term sentences and in it, he shares how he found his freedom years before he was ever even paroled. He works as the senior post release program manager for defy ventures, a nonprofit helping those with a criminal past transform their lives through the journey of entrepreneurship. After spending 22 years in and out of correctional institutions. One was paroled from a life sentence in 2015, and created his first company six months later, the following year, he received the Peace Fellowship Award for his work with the Alternatives to Violence Project. Quan has been featured in Entrepreneur PBS News Hour Talks at Google and numerous other publications and podcasts. One is an amazing human and he's so kind and so open to share his story. I'm so grateful that he chose to be a guest on the show. So without further ado, let's dive in. Hi, Quan, welcome to the show. So happy to have you here.

Q Quan Huynh 03:23
Hi, Amanda. I'm happy to be here.

A Amanda Acker 03:25
So I just want to start our conversation just like by asking you you know a little bit about your story and what led you to be where you are today.

Q Quan Huynh 03:35
Sure, where where would you like me to start?

A Amanda Acker 03:38
Well, I read your entire book. So I know pretty much the whole story. But I wanted you to touch on you know what first let's talk about what was it like growing up? Where did you grow up? And how was that for you?

Q Quan Huynh 03:54
Yeah, I I grew up in Provo, Utah. I'm a first generation Vietnamese immigrant. We came to the United States, right after we lost our country in Vietnam. So I was only several months old. I grew up in Provo, Utah. My father had come to the US to train with the American forces. So he knew what the country the lay of the land of the country was. My mother had never seen snow.

A Amanda Acker 04:27
Oh, wow.

Q Quan Huynh 04:28
So yeah, so that's why they decided Provo, Utah of all places.

A Amanda Acker 04:33
Awesome. Yeah. And in your book, you talked about, you know, the racism that was you know, you were put into as a young child and how you know, you were you were the oldest correct you were the older brother.

Q Quan Huynh 04:47
Yes.

A Amanda Acker 04:47
And so have you witnessed something? I believe, like when you and your brother were out somewhere and your brother got beat up correct. And then you felt like your dad made you feel as though like you should have protected had him. So what transpired from that, like, how did that make you feel going forward? And how old were you when that happened?

Q Quan Huynh 05:06
I mean, I, you know, I think as a little boy, I experienced quite a bit of racism. But I didn't know what that was. I just always felt that Why are these people teasing or saying stuff? Or mocking us or looking or pointing at us? I remember growing up just wishing like, Why Why does? Why can't I look normal like all the kids at school, why can't my family look normal or just never really feeling like we fit in. And the incident that you're referring to it was my younger brother and I playing with our GI Joes in the, in the streams, we used to play this game where we make some rafts with our popsicle sticks. And we tied it together, and we put a GI Joes, let them float on the stream and just follow it. And some older kids and some adults, like started throwing rocks scattered us upon us, like get out of our country, things like that. And, of course, being like little kids and thinking like the fence is so big, and you know, there's no way they can get us. Yeah, we can come and make this and those those kids have the fence and chase us down. I had dropped my GI Joes and my younger brother stopped to pick it up and face the kids. And, of course, you know, they punch them and shut them down and just started throwing dirt in his mouth. And I stood there. I didn't I didn't do anything. But I'm just terrified. So you I was at around eight, my brother's six. And when we got home, yeah, my dad was when he finally is like, how did this happen to your younger brother? So I'm not sure you know what his Like, of course, he's just frustrated and like, how did this happen, your supposed to protect your family at all costs. But for me, I just felt like very ashamed. I'd like to my, my, my family, that my brother let down my dad. And I remember growing up after that my brother and I were like overly sensitive to anyone even harming us. So he'd fly into a rage when someone would just get near me or threaten me in some way. And vice versa. So I think from there, it was already instilled in me like, I never want to let down my family or let down my brother, anything happened to him. So it was just like, went to the other extreme of just protecting him.

A Amanda Acker 05:06
So what was your relationship like with your father?

Q Quan Huynh 06:32
Oh, my father was my hero. So when he came to US, his first job was as a janitor at a supermarket. That's what I know from about my mom being off just just from family talking about my mom telling me. And then the first thing he bought the first vehicle he bought was a

bike so to get to work faster. So he worked as a janitor. And then he later on created the Vietnamese Refugee Association help other other Vietnamese refugees adjust to our new homeland. So he, he would drive on like Saturday mornings to like neighboring states to help other families that, that didn't know how to fill out the paperwork for their social security documents, or the DMV. That's all he was doing was just helping get Vietnamese refugees. I got to go with him on these, these things. And he's tell me like, this is his job. And and our, you know, as a little boy, like, oh, how much do you get paid, I don't get paid for this. And that didn't make any sense to me. And then as a boy, I'm thinking like, this is so boring, but I enjoyed being in the car ride with my father. So I was the one that is long car rides with him on a Saturday mornings, we get home late and Saturday evenings, and he was helping people that that's what his weekend was dedicated to like, later on, he was working in the coal mines. There, but on the weekends, that's what he would do. And I used to get to accompany him. So because of his work, he got recognized. And was on the news quite often, like people would come to our house and yeah, like government officials and stuff like that. And so they might see him on TV. So he just just made my father even more superhuman in my eyes.

A Amanda Acker 09:16

Yeah, yeah. You know, and then I know something tragic happens with your father. So, you know, whenever is I know, in the book, you said that you eventually moved to California when your father got sick. So what was that like for you like seeing your superhero father, fall ill and no longer be able to do those things?

Q Quan Huynh 09:42

Yeah, he gets diagnosed with leukemia, which I didn't know what that was. They just said it's a cancer and they said, so his condition like he started going in and out of the hospital, and then his condition started to get worse. So I guess that's when he decided He wanted to get closer to his family that had settled out in California. So I think when I was 10 is when we settled out to California. Of course, I was scared, but because of hearing that he has cancer that you might possibly die, but of course, as a boy, I'm like, now my dad is superhuman, he's going to be okay. We moved, we moved out here to California. And this is the first time that I'm going to school with like, kids, other kids of color, because in Utah is all 99% White and, and 99% Mormon and we were like Vietnamese and Roman Catholic.

A Amanda Acker 10:41

Oh, wow.

Q Quan Huynh 10:42

So going to school over here in California was also a shock for me, because then there were all these different races. It was very diverse. But then I remember some Vietnamese kids would started teasing me because they said that was whitewashed, because I couldn't speak Vietnamese well. So I think that also contributed to a lot of my issues of not feeling like I fit in and my acceptance issues that I struggled with for a long time, even into my adult years. But

that's where a lot of that began from my father's condition, I think, it took a turn for the worse, like, close to my like, when I was around 13. And the doctors had said that he's going to my mom told us that the doctor said that he was going to die. Of course, I think because we are as a little boy, my understanding of my faith is like, Okay, well, I'm just going to pray and things are going to be fine. And our first communion was coming up. So I'm having conversation with my brother and sister now. And I think all of us were like, okay, they said that dad's gonna die. But we are all having our first communion soon. And we get to pray and at first prayers doing just well as to pray for debt to live. So the morning of our first communion. I remember stepping into the bathroom on my little sister peaks her head out from the shower curtain says like, oh, that died last night. And I said how'd you know and she said I overheard mom and grandma taught me about it. But we're not supposed to know. And, you know, and it was, it was, I didn't realize how bizarre that whole scene was, of going to church and returning that we didn't know my father was dead until I, you know, had to go back and explore and write and begin writing about this experience in my books and just remembering, and then just how it became like, wow, this was such a bizarre day. We're all in church. The priest is talking. This is a joyous occasion, and we're all celebrating. But yet me my brother and sister all know, my dad is dead. And yet we still have to pretend to he's alive, to put on this front from my mom and grandma, or for some reason, thinking we have to just be here be happy. And then yeah, it was. It was very bizarre, but

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Amanda Acker 13:11

I couldn't imagine

Q

Quan Huynh 13:12

We leave mass. I remember my younger sister threw up outside the church when we left after eating the bread. And it's like, you know, thinking, Okay, wait, I can't. Somehow I'm a bad kid, or somehow, something's wrong because God killed my father, because so that he wouldn't have to grab this prayer for me.

A

Amanda Acker 13:33

Wow.

Q

Quan Huynh 13:33

So there's all these things that I think all of us had the process, like, I mean, at that age, like when I look now, like, we should have definitely went to therapy. But at that time, it's like, no one ever asks us, how are you feeling? Or, or Okay, you want to talk about this process this it's more? Oh, yeah, like I remember at the funeral, my father's friends in the military said, yours. You're such a brave kid, because you're not even crying. That somehow need to cry and think, Oh, if I just let them know that I'm gonna cry. And that means I'm weak. So I have to be strong, like my father was and thinking that's how, you know, men are supposed to be.

A

Amanda Acker 14:13

Yeah, you know, that had to have been so hard as a child to experience something so tragic. Like, you looked up to your father, you know, you had a strong bond with him. And yeah, like you said, you saw him as like a superhero, you know, so to have to go through that and then to not feel like it was okay to cry that somehow you were doing something wrong. If you showed emotion, you know, that. I just, I couldn't imagine going through something like that at such a young age and then not being able to fully express myself and how I was feeling, you know, and feeling like so when your father passed, like, what did that do for you know, you moving forward, like, did you ever, you know, mourn his death or did you kind of just go through the motions and start to go down the path that you ultimately went down. Was it a quick transition? Or did it take time for you to get there?

Q

Quan Huynh 15:12

Well, I mean, I would say I did not begin to mourn his death until, like 25 years later. Yeah. So I think it's just like, I just went through life kind of numb and, you know, put my head down like, okay, not talk about it. Not be about the weird kid in school that suddenly doesn't have a father sticking out more, you know?

A

Amanda Acker 15:39

Yeah.

Q

Quan Huynh 15:41

Yeah, but then getting mixed up with other kids in the neighborhood that were also, you know, like, I wouldn't say bad kids, but like, we're just kids that are just like I don't know how to describe it, like just just kids that that start running on the streets already. And of course, then becomes worse, worse, worse, like, hey, you know, I wasn't first first sentence in chapter two of my book, I was not born a murderer. And it was just like, Okay, I just didn't suddenly flip over to slip and become a bad person. It was just, okay, I was just lost, I was misguided. And I began going down this path of running on the streets. And this actually alleviated some of my feelings of not being accepted, because now I have certain friends. And yes, even if certain friends are running on the streets and breaking into cars, well, this is what we do. And, and it just becomes normalized. And I think, Okay, this is this is a criminal element. That's exciting for me. And I think it's a way for was a way for me to just feel like I belong somewhere.

A

Amanda Acker 16:53

Yeah. You know, that's so

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Quan Huynh 16:55

yeah, I think, sorry. I'm sorry.

A Amanda Acker 16:58

I mean, to cut you off, but, you know, because you felt like, because you were searching for that acceptance. You know, I mean, all kids are searching for some sort of acceptance, especially at when you're a teenager, you know, it's very important for us to find our place. And, you know, it's unfortunate that that's where you ended up finding your place, but at the same time, that gave you some sort of feeling of, I don't know what they were, I don't want to say power. Maybe that is the right word, but you felt like you were included, you know, so when did the criminal activity start? Like, what was the first time you know, because I know you were incarcerated a few times. So what at first experience, like what happened

Q Quan Huynh 17:43

Well the first incarceration wouldn't would not be inclusive of my first criminal experience. I mean, let me maybe 13 or 14, I was with one of my friends when he broke into a car for the first time his older brothers drove us and then just seeing that, like, we're going out at night and going in the car and just the excitement, but then also like, Oh, we're not supposed to do this. But yet, there was a sense of excitement. So and then, I think, how old was the first time that I had one of my friends had told me to get his briefcase from his home, because the police were coming to raid them. So I brought the briefcase up to my house, and they lived in the same apartments. And I saw the the police raid raid their home, and they brought them out and there was nothing. So I was like, what is in this suitcase,

A Amanda Acker 18:46

right?

Q Quan Huynh 18:48

So I was like, What is this? So I was the one with like the lock combination? Yes, there's three digits. So I started trying to talk figure it out. 000001. And just, and I finally got it open. And inside were a bunch of counterfeit payroll checks. And I saw a gun. So I was like, Oh, look at this. And so I picked up the gun. And I remember like feeling like what you're talking about that sense of power. Wow, this is so cool. This is a gun. And I know what they do with these payroll checks. Oh, yeah, I know what they're doing. Like they used to have us go shop some of this stuff off at at the banks and just use this as the pull cash out and things like that. So, but like okay, so I kind of got involved with that. Just seeing that being exposed to and thinking okay, this is normal. This is what we do. And yeah, my first arrest was at 17. It was when my younger brother had come to my work. I was working at Subway sandwich. And I was one of the people that make the Subway sandwiches and My younger brother comes in and said that some other kids from like a continuation high school nearby to the same high school we went to had called and threatened to kill my family. These were kids that yeah, these are kids that proclaim to be like, like, skinheads or like Nazis or stuff like that so we already didn't get along with them like that. And we've already had a couple of run ins with them. I think previous to that, one of my friends at a party when we were at a party, we were outnumbered and he had pulled his gun out. We had by the time we had like a little, one of my friends had a 22 caliber gun that he

carried everywhere with him. And it was at a party that we got surrounded, he pulled the gun out. And everyone ran and I remember feeling like oh, wow, this is so powerful. This is this is this is so cool for our group to have this thing. This is like the best equalizer of the mall. So then our mouth empty when we just talked about, oh, well, we'll just shoot this up. We'll shoot that up. So that night and my brother came, he said, Yeah, that skinheads had called threaten our mom. And if I knew where they live, and I said no. So I asked my coworker. She's She's like, I think this is where they live. So she drew like a very crude map like, Oh, this is the streets and stuff. And my brother, my friends. Okay, we'll come back to pick you up at 10 o'clock. We'll find we'll find their house and we'll shoot it up. And of course, I was like Yeah, yeah. So like we were all to start talking about, there's none. Knowing damn Well, none of us have ever shot a gun before we had never done anything like this. So I guess my brother and my friends left, they went to an arcade that we always used to go and play video games. And I guess when they were there, they ran into an older kid that knew where these guys live. So this older kids are here. I'll take you guys there. They went there and my friend ended up going up to the house. Knocking on the door. They opened the door and he ran inside and shot three people.

A

Amanda Acker 21:53

Oh, goodness.

Q

Quan Huynh 21:54

Luck. Yeah. Luckily, they all survived. But within a couple of weeks, they arrested I remember I came home that night. And my brother because 10 o'clock I get off. But nobody was nobody came pick me up. So I went home. I have a younger brother was laid in bed terrified. I said, What's what happened? He's like, all they ran up in the house and they shot we looked at we saw the helicopters flying around. So my brother was like, I yeah, he was terrified. I was terrified. And then within a couple of weeks, they came to arrest my brother and I they arrested me for conspiracy to commit murder. So at 17 My brother was 15. We were facing 45 years to life. Oh, for that? Yeah.

A

Amanda Acker 22:40

Oh my gosh, well, how did they even? Like my question around that story is like, but you weren't there? You know, you maybe you, you, you, obviously you conspired, but you know, because you talked about it with these other friends of yours. But why would they sentence used for so long? When you weren't even there? You didn't commit the actual crime?

Q

Quan Huynh 23:06

Well, I mean, my understanding now is because that those conspiracy laws were were a result of the war on drugs, like the mass incarceration policies of the 80s and 90s. So these laws came out where they could just grabbed people up and it was, so I was arrested under this conspiracy. This penal called conspiracy, I think it's 180 6.2 that came out in California. So they were able to arrest me under that. And it's because during the war on drugs, they wanted to be

able to grab as many people as possible under very loose sounding legalities. And the conspiracy charge was one of those. I mean, like, yeah, they grabbed me, but they didn't grab the person that drew the map.

A Amanda Acker 23:50

Yeah, so I was gonna ask like, what, uh, yeah, that's doesn't make any sense. Like she was obviously also conspiring because she literally was trying to help you guys find these other boys. And what happened to the guys who actually shot shot up that house?

Q Quan Huynh 24:07

The guy who shot up the house got the same amount of time as me we ended up getting seven years in California to 30. The person that drove the car got the Sean warehouse only got five years. Yeah, it's well, I mean, like, there's the person that showed the house was not a person of color. And, yeah, and of course, that drew the map. Was that a person of color? So there there was there, there was a whole bunch of stuff like that, you know, but, um,

A Amanda Acker 24:42

wow, I couldn't, you know, like, it's not a thing like I, as I was reading your book, you know, and I'm sitting here I'm going wow, like, I couldn't imagine that but at the same time, like, you know, before you got arrested and just like the idea of like, conspiracy like I could understand why that would be almost exciting in a way like, oh, you know, we have this gun and like, so that gives us some sort of authority and that rush of like getting away with something, you know, and having these things that, you know, you're not supposed to have, you know, and when you're that young, but you're very impressionable. So that's what you're exposed to. And that's what you think is going to give you popularity, acceptance, whatever it is you're searching for, you know, that that's a high in itself, even without the use of substances, you know, like, that's an intense emotion. That's an intense feeling. And if you like that feeling, you're going to chase that feeling. You know. So after you're in the juvenile center, I know you didn't spend the whole seven years in there, correct?

Q Quan Huynh 25:45

No, I think I did about two years, two and a half years, they probed me after that. But now I'm branded as a convicted felon came home. And I felt very out of place. I remember, my friends from high school, or the ones that I ran into, were like, Oh, he was in jail, or you know, and I felt like, man, I was in jail, they don't understand. Plus, I also had my experience of what happened to me during those two years in while incarcerated, how I got very involved with the gang element inside the jails, and just the thinking of, you know, different races and, and so a lot of the guys that I was incarcerated with, throughout Juvenile Hall and the jails and youth started, later on, became the core part of the game that we formed. So that was like, I come home, lost and confused still. So I, of course, enroll back in Kosovo, this is at least well I will enroll in college and just trying to get jobs. But I kept on getting turned down because of that I was a

convicted felon, and really found out about that later and just fired me. And then there was a part of me that was still very attracted to the gang life because at least here's a place where people can accept me and just be okay with me.

A Amanda Acker 27:11

Yeah, so like you were, you know, it's hard to I know, like, I'm a convicted felon. And I know like, when you get out, it's like, you do you almost I describe it as like, you feel like, not only do you have that, mark, you feel like everybody knows, you know what I mean? So like, if you're surrounded by other people who haven't experienced it, you feel like an outsider, like, no matter if they know or they don't know, you still feel that internally. So of course, you're going to gravitate towards those who get it. You know, they know what that's like. They're also felons, or at least they've been involved in crime in some way. So you feel like that's where you belong.

R Robot 27:57

Sorry, we are experiencing technical difficulties, and the show will resume in 3, 2, 1.

A Amanda Acker 28:04

So Quan, um, could you tell us you know, what happened that led you to be incarcerated for for you know, your life sentence?

Q Quan Huynh 28:15

Yes. So on January 15 1999, I shot and killed a man by the name of Min Win and tried to shoot kill three other men though in the car with him. I was tried for death penalty. Because I lied at trial, I coached witnesses and I've already got rid of evidence. I was found guilty of second degree murder, and sentenced to 15 years to life in the California prison system. At the time, for me, a life sentence, regardless, in the state of California, was the same thing as a death sentence because they had not paroled one single life term prisoners since 1977. And I knew that I knew Okay, I have a life sentence. And I'm going to die in here. Because 15 to life, fifty to life five to life nobody was parolling from California at that time. And that's the mindset. So I'm going to live the way I want. And that's basically like continued with living the way I wanted in prison because now like, Okay, what did they get to do? Nothing. So right, yeah, so I just lived the way I wanted for about 10 10, 11 years of my sentence, there was there was no sense of remorse, no sense of self reflection or understanding. There was basically okay. The reason why I'm in prison is because of them. They told on me or because they were in a game too, and I made all these excuses of why I was in prison. And there was never any sense of personal responsibility and like, wait, you know, like, oh, Oh, shot killed somebody, but I didn't look at it like that was more acknowledged my life or there's all these ways to justify it.

A Amanda Acker 30:08

So what happened that made you kind of in, you know, obviously you got out So what made

So what happened that made you kind of is, you know, obviously you got out so what made you have that transition from thinking, you know having no remorse to now you are taking ownership for what you did. And all How did that transpire?

Q Quan Huynh 30:24

Yes. So around 2010 2011 right around that time, several things happened. I got news that my grandfather had passed away, which was my father's father. So that took me back to like just thinking about my father, like, how did I end up here? Am I supposed to die in here now, like how what my father did during his time on Earth in his, what, 38 years on earth. And I contrasted that with me, I think I was like, 35 of the time, or something I can't remember around that same age that my father had passed away. And I started thinking, like, How did my dad lives make such an impact in the world? I remember his funeral. And how many people showed up at that word that he had impacted during this brief time on Earth? And then I thought about my own life and like, I'm gonna die who's gonna show up to my funeral? You know, things like that question like that. I also got a, I remember, my, my brother had a daughter, and I've ever seen her picture for the first time and baby picture. And she she looked exactly like my younger brother. It's just the in the form of a girl, I saw the same features. And it just took me back to my childhood. How did my life ended up like this. Around one thing that's always given me escape is books. So I've been a bookworm my whole life, especially in prison. And that's how I got my escape. And I had this tendency, when I read I go down rabbit trails about this topic or that. And my, my, at the time, I was, I can't remember what book I was reading. But then somehow I stumbled upon books of the saints. And in particular, stories about saints that had failed in some way or another, yet had gone on to build these legacies and, and create these orders for the church. And I became very fascinated with that. And of course, that leads me down other rabbit trails of spirituality, mindfulness, and my mind becomes expanded. And then, so like, all these became like a perfect storm in my head. And it was one day on a prison yard, I was standing by the fence, and I said, Why do I have to view prison as punishment? Why can't this be a place I could remake myself? Regardless if I'm gonna die in here, and I have a choice in this. And of course, the the answer comes back from the universe, like, Yeah, I do have a choice and I choose to, look at this one way or another. And that made all the difference in the world. I remember that sun was coming up over the hills that morning, and I could feel the warmth. In the individual blades of grass, I could see the tiny drops dew and up top of me in the razor wire, I heard a sparrow chirping. And, you know, I tell everyone, the sparrow had probably been chirping my whole prison term, I never heard it. But that day, I heard it. And from that day, that prison was no longer this cold, harsh, ugly place, and became a place where I felt I could connect to other human beings. Some of them much further along than me. Some of them perhaps not even awakened, riflemen, this is just a journey. And we're just here temporarily, and I just looked at that. That's how I started to do prison life. So of course, I get also by this time, this new fascination with personal development and what do I want to do and how do I become a better person? One of the first things I did was I checked in with a therapist, and you know what, 25 years later begin to grieve my father's death for the first time. And begin that process of mourning. And of course, being the bookworm. I'm, I decide that I want to find out more about the grief and loss process. I go down another rabbit trail and become very fascinated with Elisabeth Kubler Ross's model of grief and loss and mourning. And looking around me I noticed men did not have a way to mourn or to grieve, whether that's grieving from family members that have passed away whether that's grieving because they've been transferred to uprooted from one prison to another and they have to leave friends that they have known for years behind. Grieving or mourning, the sense of loss because some family members have moved on or are no longer writing them are no longer in

contact with them grieving or mourning, just their a the aging process. No one could, no one could really properly mourn. Because in prison, you have to put up this facade, and you have to be strong and tough. So I put together a syllabus and submitted it to the prison psychologist for the grief and loss, a grief and loss group, and he loved it. We didn't launch the prisons first ever, grief and loss group. And suddenly that, building that and be involved with that made me feel like oh, my goodness, I feel alive for once I can give back. And, and then I began this process for me. What else can I be involved with? What other groups can I join? What other groups can I create? And I began reading books on facilitating groups, and how to and all these other things to to be involved with. And next thing I know, I look back over the course of several years, and I had been involved in so many groups and creating groups and just being involved with them. And then, you know, in the process I would do is also, of course, being the bookworm and wanting to be a better person writing to in my journal each night. What is, what do I want to? What did I do right today that I can acknowledge? What did where did I stumble? Or where did I fall short? And replaying in my mind the places where I fell short? And how can I fix this for tomorrow? Let's say I want to practice communicating effectively, or communicating in kindness. But yet, someone says something that I allowed to trigger me and then I go off, or I say something stupid, or even say it in my mind, but then remembering that and telling myself, okay, how could I respond better? Next time this happens. So then prison was not even a place where I'm locked in. And people are making me doubt or anything like that, this became a place where I can become a human being a better human being. And these are opportunities, these are things that I can continue to practice each day in this fishbowl of, of these concepts of I want to become a better person. And it just changed the whole fabric of living in there. Yes, I was incarcerated. By the time I was totally it absolutely free is felt like, I am just here to become a better soul. And I get to refine every day. So I am actually more blessed than a lot of people out on the streets. And that's just how I approached life. I mean, in 2015, I went to the parole board, expressed, how I felt of how I saw things, share with them, the groups I've created owned and took full responsibility for all my actions leading up to that point. And they found me suitable, they said, we feel you're no longer a threat to society. And that's when I was paroled in November of 2015.

A Amanda Acker 37:57

What did that feel like to you know, as you know, when you went in, you said, like, you know, getting paroled wasn't really a thing that was heard of, for people with life sentences. So what did that? I know, it's probably really hard to explain, but if you could try to like, how would you put how, how would you describe how that felt to hear those words? Like, was it because I know what I thought out? You know, when I got out, I was only in for eight months. So it's not really that much comparable, but I remember that feeling of like, holy shit, I'm free. You know, but I couldn't imagine, you know, having to go to the parole board and do all those things you had to do to regain your freedom. So how would you just depict that emotion?

Q Quan Huynh 38:42

Yeah. They They, after hearing him say we feel you are no longer a threat to society as it was affirming thing I could hear at that time. Like, it's almost like we accept you back into society. We're we're here as gatekeepers and we feel that we feel safe to allow you to to rejoin your community. That's that's basically what their word felt like to me. Like I was totally surprised. I

remember I was having a what I thought was a terrible hearing. I thought no way is the Commissioner going to grant me parole because she despises me and or to hear her say, we find that you are no a threat society it was Yeah.

A Amanda Acker 39:30

I bet. I bet it was, you know, and then how was the experience? You know, because then you had to go. As I know, you said in your book, like you had to wait a while to actually get out. You know, so what was it like, you know, in that moment, because I know you've probably created some close relationships with other men that were still you're gonna have to leave them behind. So how was that?

Q Quan Huynh 39:49

That was because it's in the California prison system is 150 days. So while they go through the paperwork, make sure it passes the governor's review desk. And I looked at it as This is my last 150 days, basically, to be alive with these men. So I wanted to be present with these men. So I was very intentional about spending time instead of like, okay, I'm out here in the world check out but like, I want to be present with each of the men that I was trying to basically leave behind. So I began, I knew that so I had to take care of myself. And I actually began my grieving process with them before I left them so that I wouldn't look back on it with regret later. So yeah, I in, in a weird sense, I'm glad I had those 150 days to mourn the loss of their friendships before I left, because, you know, some of them may or may never see again.

A Amanda Acker 40:46

Right. Do you still talk to any of them?

Q Quan Huynh 40:49

I still, I still keep in touch with several several. We've lost contact. Like when by the time I paroled, there were some court rulings that came down. So it wasn't unheard of. But I think it was, I can't remember the exact percentages, but it was way less than 5%. I would imagine at the time of anyone getting paroled. And most of the men that I saw getting paroled around me were in their 60s had probably done 30 something years of a life sentence already before their parole, so I was able to parole at my 16th year. But since then, they have started to parole more, not as much as they should. But at least they've started more, I think those numbers, it's about 20 to 30% now of lifers that go

A Amanda Acker 41:36

Oh, wow.

Q Quan Huynh 41:37

Q Quan Huynh 41:37

So it's a lot more, but I think it's the needle still needs to move in the other way.

A Amanda Acker 41:44

Oh, yeah, definitely. So, you know, once you were released, like what? I'm sure the outside world had probably changed drastically since you were in the outside world. So what was that, like?

Q Quan Huynh 41:56

I remember the first night out, or even the first week out, it was very hard for me to sleep because it was way too quiet. And I did not hear the regular noises that I used to hear in prison of the officers walking and the keys, jingling the boot stomping on the ground, men shuffling in their slippers to go to the toilet, the flush of a toilet in the middle of the night. And that some men in hushed whispers that are still up late talking. Those are just background noises that I was very used to, and to come home and there was none of that. It's just absolute silence. It felt very eerie to me. I wasn't used to it. So I remember, like, Okay, well, I can't sleep while I'm home. I'm so excited. And it's like three, four in the morning. So let me just see what's on TV, trying to figure out how to work the remote control. And then when it turns on seeing the channels and there's hundreds of channels, and I don't know how to go. Can I just find ABC or PBS or something. And there's all the channels that I don't know how to get anywhere. And I remember early that morning coffee trying to look through all the drawers for coffee, but they have a coffee machine. But in prison we have the instant coffee. I just need hot water and some instant coffee. There's none of that they have this coffee machine and I don't know how to work did everybody's sleeping and I want coffee. And yeah, so just feeling very overwhelmed about those are just the very first day I remember going to the store for the first time and they have the self checkout out kiosks. And like, looking at Whoa, I want to go over there. See how that is. But no, I don't think I want to go over there because I don't know how to work in I want to ask anybody. And just having this weird feeling that everyone knows I just got out of prison even though there's nobody knowing. Just feeling Yeah, yeah.

A Amanda Acker 44:00

Yeah, that's a horrible feeling. I you know, I know that feeling too. It's like, you feel like, you know, you look around you just assume everyone knows like, and you feel it's almost like you're like, you don't make you feel uncomfortable. Like all the time, you know? So after you know, you got reacquainted with the outside world, like what did you set out to do? Like, what was your next step? And what was your path?

Q Quan Huynh 44:23

Well, I mean, before I left prison, like during my time, it's always I always went with like, Does this feel right in my gut? is Am I being led somewhere the universe opened up an opportunity for me. And if it felt right, my gut, I followed it. So for me it was like I always want to do something in alignment with how I see the world now whether whether that's treating others

with kindness and making some type of impact wherever I go. You know, I used to tell the guys there was a saying that I said, like, I want to leave Seeds of Light and Love wherever I walk. And out of those Seeds of Light and Love, I would love for flowers to bloom in my wake. And that's how I turned the chart visualize it to myself this, this is how I want to show up in the world now. And that's still there was just not knowing what that meant. But just looking at it from that lens and that context. So, of course, I went Luckily, my, one of my family members had a real estate firm. So I began work right away.

A Amanda Acker 45:33
Nice.

Q Quan Huynh 45:34
And then there's one of the self help groups that I was involved with called one of these programs, I was involved in prison called Defy Ventures, expanded their chapter out down to Southern California where I was living. So I was involved with them in prison stayed involved with them, after I got out. And it's their, their mission is to shift mindsets to give people with criminal histories to have their best shot shot at the second chance to career readiness, personal development and entrepreneurship training programs. So I was which you know was perfectly aligned with how I saw things I was. So I stayed involved with them, even after I came home and launched my first company six months after, it's a commercial cleaning company, with six employees, four of them are also formerly incarcerated, I still haven't still friends to this day. But then when they expanded out here, and there was an opportunity for me to join the team, I saw this is in alignment with how I want to show up and give back. So I joined your team that was what, four, four and a half years ago, to help build our approach release program. And then of course, my roles and responsibilities continued to evolve and, and expand. And today I work as the executive director for Defy Ventures in Southern California.

A Amanda Acker 47:03
That's amazing. Wow, you know, to go from all the trauma you've experienced and then being incarcerated with a life sentence and thinking you know, I'm never gonna get out and then to come out and have such a positive outlook on the world, you know, because you were all through all those experiences, like you experienced a lot of pain from the outside world, you know, a lot of you know, racism and all the things that you've been through and to come out of prison of all places and still have that, you know, positive outlook and wanting to help others is just absolutely admirable. So that's just amazing. And you know, I have heard of Defy Ventures and I wish they were here in Pittsburgh because I would love to work with them but they're not in Pittsburgh, so but

Q Quan Huynh 47:54
we can connect offline and figure out how we could get them over there. So

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A

Amanda Acker 47:59

That'd be amazing. Yeah, because we need it here. We I think we have like one organization here that helps incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. So it's very much needed in our area. But so another question for you Quan is just if somebody wanted to connect with you further and you know, buy your book or meet with you or just follow you on social media like how could they find you?

Q

Quan Huynh 48:23

I can be found on all social media at Quan X Huynh so it's qu a n and an x and h u y n h. Because I like to buy website also fun x when.com. I know that may be hard first for the spouse. So I also have sparrow in the razor wire.com pointed at my website. Yeah, they could think go to my website, you can get on the mailing list, if they want to find out about and get involved with the work that we're doing at Defy Ventures by sign up on that list too. And partnering with me there so there's there's many other ways to reach out. So on the website, or on social media, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter.

A

Amanda Acker 49:12

Awesome. Well, my final question for you Quan is what would be your number one tip for our listeners to allow the good things into their lives?

Q

Quan Huynh 49:26

Listen, listen to the universe listen to your gut. Go with your intuition. Okay, ask questions of people. Yeah, just be open to the possibility of learning from everyone that comes across you.

A

Amanda Acker 49:45

Awesome. Well, thank you so much Quan, for your time and for being here and sharing your story and I will have all your links in the show notes for anyone who wants to connect with you and buy your book. Please buy his book. It's so good. Thank you again, Quan, for your time.

Q

Quan Huynh 50:01

Okay. Thank you, Amanda.

A

Amanda Acker 50:05

And just as a reminder for everyone listening remember you're stronger than you think and you can have the life you imagined regardless of your past. Make sure to hit that follow or subscribe button so you don't miss an episode of the show and I will talk to y'all soon

