

2019 Advance Your Reach "Speak Off" Winning Speech "From Prison to Prosperity"

by Erik Salzenstein

Erik: I messed up. I was facing life in prison for armed robbery in what the detectives labeled as a drug deal gone bad. The judge was looking down at me, disappointment on her face as if I was her own son. I had on a navy blue jumpsuit, shackles running from my ankles up to my wrist, and around my waist. But the thing is I wasn't supposed to be there, I came from a great home, a loving family. My mom, she taught me God; my dad, he taught me sports; I was an all-star basketball player, I wasn't supposed to be there, but yet there I was. Goosebumps ran down my arms from the chill of the courtroom, and the hairs on the back of my neck, standing up from the anticipation of the gavel finally slamming down, I knew I messed up, and I was about to lose my freedom because of it.

After being sentenced to 4 years in state prison, the roller coaster of emotions only intensified as you can imagine. But the truth is, I lost my freedom long before that day in the courtroom. And what I discovered is that we can be in prison without physically being in prison. We can be chained down by our addictions and destructive habits, we can be restricted by our fears and insecurities, we can be trapped by our limiting beliefs and negative mindset.

I am now on a mission, to share my story and my process of transformation with schools across the country, to help the youth break the chains that are holding them back. But you know, the thing is, the break-free mindset applies to all of us, this is a story about going from prison to prosperity.

6 months into my sentence, I realized I had to face my biggest enemy up until that point, myself. At times, have you ever felt like you could be your own worst enemy? Well I made a decision, a decision that I was going to break free and do whatever it took to change my life. For the next 3 and a half years, I relentlessly pursued all things growth. I discovered a hidden talent for public speaking, I had no idea existed. I was published in the local newspaper for a speech contest against two other prisons, and the good thing about speaking at prisons, your audience is fully captive.

I started coaching; I set up and ran workshops for other inmates and hopes that they too would make a decision to break free. That was the title of my talk, "Break Free" but for some reason that didn't go over well with the guards, at all. We had some problems there.

While incarcerated, I developed a 4-step process of transformation using the acronym ROCK. Raise your standards, Own your thoughts, Consistency in your efforts, and Know your values. Tonight, we're going to hone in on one of those 4 steps, and I promise you if you embody this, this is going to be a game changer for you. Raise your standards.

As a society we've become okay with average, careers, relationships, spirituality, mindset, health. But the thing is, we're not meant for average, I'm not here for average, you're not here for average. And so, my call to action for you tonight is, when you're lying in bed you ask yourself, "What's holding you back?" and you make a decision to break free, you raise your standards, you make a decision to change just like I did back in that cell. We no longer have to feel trapped by anything; I'm here to help you go from prison to prosperity, thank you.