



Jerry Blassingame

UNLOCKED

by Jordana Meigonigal



He was five years old, sitting in the front room, watching TV with his four siblings and grandparents, when it happened.

He sneaked back to the back room where his mother fought loudly with her boyfriend. Ever so quietly he peeked through the keyhole to make sure his mom was okay. But his slight bump against the door notified them of his presence.

“You better leave before you see something you don’t want to see,” the man shouted at him. So purposefully, the boy moved back to the living room, where he sat back down with the rest of his family.

Until the shots rang out.

Two shots.

For those five small children, everything had changed before they could even make it to the front door.

There were so many things that Jerry Blassingame didn’t know that night, as he ran out the door—a small five-year-old boy racing for the neighbor’s house.

He didn’t know his mother was dead, or that his grandfather, who had gone back to check on her, would be shot as well.

He didn’t know that burying her in a random South Carolina snowstorm would give him an aversion to wintery weather.

He didn’t know that the scars he kept from that night would put him on a road that would end in prison.

And he certainly didn’t know that he would—eventually—become a fighter for human rights and economic development—starting in the very neighborhood in which he last saw his mother alive.

SHAPED

Growing up from that point was difficult. Living with their grandparents, the children struggled to live in a small apartment in a low-income neighborhood on the small disability check that their grandfather (who survived, after being shot in the eye) brought in.

When there was no food, “sometimes, we used to have sleep for dinner,” he remembers with a faint smile. “But school was my escape; I remember loving to go to school because I wanted to escape poverty.”

From that point on, learning was ingrained in him, and he spent every opportunity reading or working on schoolwork. But although he was smart, and inquisitive, and surrounded by family, the loss of his mother and absence of his father dug deep within him.

“There is a scripture in Proverbs that talks about kids being like arrows in the hands of a warrior,” he notes.

“When I think about that, a father takes a child...and he ‘shoots’ him in the right direction. Some kids are shot in the wrong direction. I look at my life, and I was never ‘shot’ at all.” Instead, he says, he found his life “shaped” by not having parents at all.

“I had a lot of holes in my childhood,” he remembers. “Everything I learned I learned it on my own. I learned it in the streets. I learned it from my friends.”

But that “everything” wasn’t always positive. He was only nine when he discovered pornography; around that same age, he began drinking and getting high, taking a note from his older brothers and sisters.

Still, he was able to keep his head on straight, and maintained his grades at school. He was smart enough to get a two-year scholarship in engineering to Greenville Tech, and planned, after two years, to transfer into Clemson.

But his first year in college, he needed money, and he turned back to the life he was so familiar with. It was easy; his friends from his neighborhood would pay him \$100 a day to keep an eye out for police or simply bag up drugs. While at first it may have seemed harmless, it marked the beginning of his fall, and he dropped out of college in his second year, getting arrested for the first time and doing four months in jail with five years probation. But even after getting out, there was no “wake up call” for Blassingame. In fact, he fell even further into the career that would undo him.



“After that I really got off deep into the streets. I never went back to school, and that’s when I started a 10-year run using and selling drugs,” he says. “I would sniff cocaine everyday and smoke marijuana everyday. If I didn’t have my own product I would have to buy it.

“And then, I got busted again.”

This time, the punishment—a 20-year sentence—was far more severe. But while in jail awaiting his final sentence, he began to talk to a preacher. That talk, which Blessingame tells as his redemption story, changed his perspective forever. He began to think about teaching others, and about how to keep bettering himself.

After sentencing, Blessingame found himself in prison in McCormick, S.C. And on his first day, he ran into someone he knew.

“Prison is scary. I cried the first three days,” he says. “Then, the first guy I ran into in the yard was a guy that some of my friends had robbed for drugs. He told me he would kill me if he ever caught me in the yard alone.”

Still, he noted that prison offers structure for those who never had any, and his positive outlook opened his eyes to the possibilities that surrounded him in his cold, dark cell.

CHANGED

While in prison, Blessingame’s desire to learn never faded, and his passion to teach only grew stronger.

“I was real concerned about some of the people who were in prison and why they were there,” he says. “I kept thinking, ‘Why are all these young guys coming to prison?’ So I would talk to them and they would tell me they couldn’t find a job, they couldn’t finding housing, nobody would let them live with them, and they had to go back to crime to make a living.”

It was at that point that Blessingame first had the idea of a new ministry—one that would speak to the ex-prisoners, teach them life skills and help them rebuild themselves and their communities. Understanding the troubles that faced the men and women when they were released from prison—and many times, what got them there in the first place—Blessingame saw himself as a prime candidate to help change the patterns.

Then, Stephanie came into the picture.

They had known each other growing up, but that day, as she came to visit, along with his brother, she immediately noticed something was different. “You’ve changed,” she told him. The two began to write—“date,” as Blessingame laughingly calls it—and soon found themselves entwined in each other, as well as a program that would help break the patterns that kept so many young men in prison. Soon, Blessingame was moved to Abbeville to continue his sentence—something he had desired for a long time, to be closer to his home in the Upstate.

But although they were in love, and now closer than ever, the S.C. Department of Corrections didn’t allow for inmates to get married. With just over two years of his 20-year sentence served, it seemed like an eternity for the couple, until they found out that they could appeal to the county for a marriage. After calls to the county councilman, they were approved to get married. And not only approved, but were allowed to have guests, a tuxedo, photos and a full reception—something far from what would typically be allowed an inmate. Blessingame’s humility and changed attitude had been noticed by far more than just Stephanie.

In fact, not long after, Blessingame found himself in a very different situation—up before the parole board, after only three and a half years of his sentence.

On January 23, 1999, he was paroled, with eleven years of probation. He was free, and the first order of business was to start the non-profit that he had put so much into already, behind prison walls.

“When I got out, I had already written the bylaws,” he says. “I gave it to Stephanie and she typed everything up. We started a non-profit and we were incorporated in June of 1999.” They named the organization Soteria—the Greek word for salvation, defined as deliverance, preservation, and safety.

Out of prison and living out his passion, Blessingame returned to his roots for ideas. A return to the street his mother was murdered on—Vance Street—provided the vision.

“One day I came to a stop sign at the dead end of Vance Street and it was all dilapidated; there were boarded up houses, crack houses....and I thought, ‘I would love to have this street to rebuild,’” he says.

Two weeks later, a lady came into the Soteria offices and offered up the deeds to nine houses—a whole street—that needed to be rebuilt. As Blessingame rode with the woman to see the property that she wanted to donate, he realized something that would bring his whole world full-circle: the houses were on South Vance Street.

“The world stopped for me that day...I was so happy,” he remembers. “[The woman] probably thought I was crazy because I was happy, but I saw the vision. I saw the houses fixed up. I saw kids on bicycles and kids playing basketball, but she saw a dilapidated neighborhood that she just wanted to get out of.”

So Blessingame began to revitalize the area, rebuilding two of the houses and building six others.



It was the beginnings of what is now (more formally) called Soteria Community Development Corporation, with the vision to rebuild older, many times low-income neighborhoods, from the inside out—houses, businesses, people and all.

But the challenges weren't over yet. Five years after his release, and well into the development of Soteria, Blassingame was found in violation of his parole, due to his formation of the non-profit. With 12 men in the year-long program at that time, and the program already becoming well-known, it was a blow that Blassingame couldn't take. Ever the learner, he began to research his situation, and found that after five years on parole, anyone can apply for a full pardon.

"Everything I had worked for for the last six years was just on hold," he says. "So, I applied for a pardon. It took them six months to approve it, but I was pardoned in 2005, from every charge."

Now safe from his prior record (although they were not expunged, as pardons do not forgive the sentence, they simply release it), Blassingame could focus on Soteria fully, building it into an economic powerhouse for low-income communities.

He began to add pieces on to the men's year-long program on re-entry, adding classes for first-time homebuyers, transitional housing, downpayment assistance, and entrepreneurship classes. And as the economy dipped further and further downward, leaving even those with money and jobs scrambling for their livelihood, Blassingame realized he'd have to prove himself an entrepreneur, as well.

"Grants and the funding streams are drying up, so in order for non-profits to sustain themselves, they have got to become more entrepreneurial."

As an example, three years ago, Soteria started a recycling business that served local schools. Today, 61 schools are part of the program that employs three people full-time. The move provided money and jobs where there were none—a solid move for a relatively new non-profit who was fighting for funding along with everyone else.

"When we first started it, there wasn't anything for prison reentry," Blassingame says of their beginnings. "I didn't know anything about community development corporations back then but I learned...community development corporations are non-profits that help low-moderate income individuals become owners—homeowners and business owners—to give them a better way of life. We don't go into communities and try to change communities; our goal is to go into communities and empower the people to become owners and leaders in their communities."

By taking men who are getting out of prison and empowering them to go back and rebuild their own communities, Soteria is not only giving the men a reason to stay out of prison, but also building businesses that can further sustain the neighborhoods

they are in. Sometimes it all starts with simple lessons—personal money management and budgeting—but learning these tasks is sometimes the gateway to changing a life.

"First thing I teach my guys when they get out of prison is about money management and financial literacy, because most of these guys are locked up are in there because of some drug-related or money transaction," Blassingame notes. "And most of the time they create a crime for money, and if they would work and manage their money right, they wouldn't be there."

With these tools in place, there is then the opportunity to discuss entrepreneurship with these men—many who will never be hired anywhere else—but who can run the businesses to sustain neighborhoods, like mechanics, repairmen, or landscapers.

For Blassingame, it's a chance not just to create houses for people, but to offer them the one thing many of them have lived without—true community.

"We are doing a lot of low-income housing in the communities, but we're not doing a lot of economic development," he notes, of many outlying neighborhoods that skirt the cities. (He also notes a lack of even a grocery or drug store on the West Side of downtown, noting that the closest are in downtown Greenville itself. "No businesses are [in those neighborhoods], so we have to create jobs. With guys who are getting out of prison that are low on the totem pole, we're at the best place to create our own economic development in our own neighborhoods.")

REBUILT

Now, as a father of six children, aged 24 to six, and building a new office in the Poe Mill community in West Greenville, Blassingame realizes his job is now "to work myself out of a job." He's a success story from an area with limited successes—at least, until now.

"When I talk about success, I talk about it in a very different way," he says of the program, noting that not many will finish the year-long re-entry program (it's too strict; "too much like prison for some of them") but instead go back to school or start their own jobs. Still with only 15 to 20 percent of the men he tries to help through Soteria returning to prison, it's a fact that Blassingame is doing something right, and a testament to the opportunities that can be found in our community—even in those who have run off-track.

For him, that is the true mission—to offer opportunities that can change lives.

"People look at us and say we'll never change. But given the right opportunities, we can." ■

