



STEPHEN DOYLE WAS SENTENCED TO LIFE IMPRISONMENT AT THE AGE OF 22. WHILE SERVING HIS SENTENCE IN IRELAND'S MOUNTJOY PRISON, HE REACHED OUT AND WROTE A LETTER OF APOLOGY TO THE FAMILY OF THE MAN HE KILLED. THEY FORGAVE HIM AND IT SET HIS LIFE ON A DIFFERENT COURSE. STEPHEN'S STORY IS ABOUT THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS, A BELIEF IN CHANGE, AND

CARE AFTER ★ PRISON

STEPHEN WAS BORN IN BALLYMUN—NORTH DUBLIN, A TOUGH, SOCIALLY DEPRIVED COMMUNITY THAT STRUGGLED WITH POVERTY AND RELATED SOCIAL ISSUES. LIFE WAS TOUGH AND HIS MOTHER WAS AT TIMES ABUSIVE AGAINST STEPHEN AND HIS SISTER. HE LEFT HOME AT 15 AND BECAME A FATHER JUST BEFORE HIS 17TH BIRTHDAY. IT WAS THE BIRTH OF HIS CHILD THAT SET ABOUT THE CHAIN OF EVENTS THAT LED TO HIS CRIME AND IMPRISONMENT.



The relationship with his partner was short lived and Stephen won custody of his child. An allegation was made by the child's mother that an unnamed member of her family was abusing their child. This led to a dispute and resulted in Stephen assaulting a man who then died. After two days of deliberation, a jury sentenced Stephen to life in prison.

While imprisoned, Stephen sought the support of the prison chaplain and wrote a letter of apology to the victim's family.

"The letter I wrote to the family was straightforward," says Stephen. "I explained why the crime had happened and my understanding of what I had committed and what my intentions had been. I explained that I was very, very sorry."

Stephen was not sure they would even reply. "Actually, I expected that they would reply with 'Go to hell.' But they relayed back to me that they forgave me. In fact, they said that they had decided to forgive me at the trial and they believed me when I said I had not intended to kill their son." Stephen received this news through his priest and was awe-struck. The family not only offered Stephen forgiveness, but they asked Stephen to do three things: *To re-educate himself while in prison, to make something positive come from the experience and lastly, to forgive himself.*

He enrolled in school the very next day and continued with education in prison throughout his sentence. He began to work with other prisoners on issues they struggled with. "Other people in prison started asking me to help them to write letters, or show them how to advocate for themselves in a way that was effective," explains Stephen. "I also started to observe the people who came back to prison. I would ask them, 'Why are you back here?' and they would say, 'I got out but I couldn't get anything done. So I began robbing again.' Or they would tell me, 'I had no one to help me and I slipped back in the drugs.'"

It planted the seeds for his theory that a peer-led organization addressing the issues of ex-offenders could perhaps make a difference in keeping them from re-offending. It was during Stephen's imprisonment that he met with Father Charlie Hoey and Paul Mackay who was a member of the Parole Committee. They shared his vision of a service that would address the needs of ex-offenders, their families, and victims. "I worked as a prison chaplain in Mountjoy Prison from 2003 to 2009," says Father Hoey. "I met with Stephen almost on a daily basis during my time in Mountjoy and he stood out in the prison service as a model prisoner. I asked if he could be given day release to work in the Carmelite Community Centre (Whitefriar Street) and this was granted. Stephen's experience is

invaluable and has helped the project to be so successful." And so, while still serving his sentence, Stephen worked with Father Hoey and Paul Mackay to form Care After Prison. Later, in 2013 after serving 14 years of his sentence, Stephen was granted a rare full release on account of his transformative time served, his restorative approach towards his actions and the forgiveness from his victim's family. He now serves as Director of Services for the organization which is headquartered at the Carmelite Community Centre in Dublin.

He is keeping the promise he made to his victim's family. "I wanted to give something back," says Stephen. "To do something positive and productive with my life in response to the negative that had happened. You can't rectify what you've done wrong, but you can use the bad as an experience to motivate you."

Support from The Ireland Funds has made a significant difference to the organization. "We applied to The Ireland Funds for funding and were ecstatic when we got the news that we got a grant," explains Stephen. "It was a moment of euphoria simply that the work was being acknowledged. That funding was sustainability for us. It was room to move forward and develop the ideas we had. The Ireland Funds provided that platform for us to be idealistic and to want more."

Today, Care for Prison works with ex-offenders, their families, and victims. They engage and advocate on issues ranging from housing to education opportunities. The peer-led aspect is a key to the program's success. "We are seeing people who are willing and want to change their lives. We don't condone bad behavior, but we understand where they are coming from and what their backgrounds are, so we talk straight and we can motivate," explains Stephen. "We talk honestly about addiction, about improving their appearance to interview for a job, about how to get counselling and how to make an honest living. And for victims, we explain the court system and what they can expect in terms of sentencing in language they understand." It currently costs up to €65,000 a year to incarcerate a prisoner in Ireland. Care After Prison hopes to not only stem the flow of re-offenders, but to prevent young people from committing crimes in the first place. They conduct free workshops in schools for 5th and 6th year students that create awareness around behavioural choices and the harsh realities of prison.

Over 700 people have been assisted by Care After Prison to-date, the majority being ex-offenders. Only 6 have re-offended, a figure the organization sees as a successful sign. "Our job is to be ready all the time for that moment when someone is ready to change," says Stephen. "We accept that our work may not be seen as priority work to many people. But we argue that if we do our job, we are hopefully lessening the toll of crime."

THIS IS ABOUT PEOPLE ACCEPTING THEIR OWN ROLE IN THEIR LIFE AND MOVING FORWARD WITH RESPONSIBILITY. AND WE'RE HERE TO SAY WE BELIEVE IN CHANGE. THERE IS ROOM FOR CHANGE IN EVERYONE."