

First, I'd like to thank the people at Homeward Alliance for all the help and assistance, and the opportunity to talk to you today.

Here's what is so extraordinary about what I'm about to tell you: There's nothing extraordinary about it. It couldn't be more ordinary.

I grew up in Philadelphia. My father worked for 42 years for the VA. My mother was a saleswoman at a department store and then a counselor for troubled teenage girls. I went to parochial schools and then to a number of colleges -- Penn State, Temple, Arizona State, among others. I studied pre-law, but never graduated. I served in the military in California as an engineer and was honorably discharged.

Pretty ordinary, right?

My life took a turn when I was old enough to know better. It was a familiar story: a champagne diet on a beer budget. I never made any big mistake, just a bunch of small ones. It's about choices. You make one choice and go down that path, and then you make another choice and another. And it doesn't take long before you're so far from where you wanted to be.

That was my story. I got involved with the wrong people and ended up in prison for a non-violent crime. There's no question I was also a victim of the system; under different circumstances, I might have gotten a slap on the wrist. But I don't want to shift the blame. I made the choices I made, and they weren't always good ones.

This past December 26, I was released early -- part of the state's efforts to accelerate the release of non-violent offenders. I was dropped off at the Fort Collins parole office and told, "good luck." Nobody at the parole office knew I was coming. My parole officer wasn't there and I was told to come back tomorrow.

When you get out of prison, you have visions of an alternative life -- one with purpose and comfort and people who care about you. Here I was, just released, in the middle of a snowstorm, alone, lost, frustrated and angry. Prison, I thought, was better than this.

But in that moment, I planted the seed to my recovery. I went into a store and bought a planner. Even in my despair, I knew that an organized mind was the way forward. I needed to put one foot in front of the other. I needed a plan.

The next day, I went to the Murphy Center. The people there provided me with clothes and information. That may not seem like much, but on a cold winter's night in a place that's foreign to you with no family or friends, that act of kindness means the world. Just being able to talk to somebody is a minor miracle.

I saw three different counselors -- for employment, for help with services and for parole re-entry. And the next day I had my first job as a day laborer. I am a cook, certified in all sorts of cuisines, and it wasn't long before I had a full-time job as a cook.

Which brings me today. I'm still living at the Mission, but the people at Homeward Alliance are helping me find a place to live. Believe me, with my record, finding a place to live would be nearly impossible without their support.

I have 60 more days to finish my parole, and then I have to make decisions. And they'll be good ones this time. I am older now, not as bound to material desires as I once was. These days, my dreams are more attainable – like working for a company that focuses on environmental issues, making enough money to be comfortable but not having to live like a king.

We live in difficult times, and they're especially difficult for those who live in neglected communities. Too many people look at those experiencing homelessness and they see a herd. Just a group of people living on the fringes of society. My hope, my request, is that you take a closer look. If you do, you'll see not a herd, but individuals. Individuals who have their own dreams and desires and needs.

They want what everybody wants: an opportunity to live ordinary lives.