

**“He Graduated From Harvard, I Robbed a Bank”
With Christopher Flowers of J.C. Flowers and Thomas Edwards of the Harlem Parolee Initiative**

David Snow, Privcap:

Today, we’re joined by Chris Flowers of J.C. Flowers & Company and Thomas Edwards of the Harlem Parolee Initiative. Gentlemen, welcome to Privcap. Thanks for being here.

Unison: Thank you. Thanks for having us.

Snow: We’re talking about a very important subject, which is the huge population of people in the U.S. who are formerly incarcerated and who are often facing challenges in re-integrating themselves into society. Both of you are working on, or a part of, an initiative to help people in the New York area succeed after being in prison. I’d love to hear about how you two met and how you know each other. A good place to start would be Thomas telling us about your background and what led you to the Harlem Parolee Initiative.

Thomas Edwards, Harlem Parolee Initiative:

It’s ironic that Chris and I, as different as we are and from different worlds, we share a connection in starting our financial careers around the same time. He graduated from Harvard. I robbed a bank and went to prison. So that’s our connection and now we’re working on a common cause.

Snow: Talk about where you most recently spent 21 years, correct?

Edwards: I was in New York State prisons. I spent time in Sing Sing, Attica, Auburn and a number of other prisons. I was convicted of felony murder and robbery—a bank robbery that went wrong and a police officer inadvertently shot a bystander. I was sentenced to 21 years to life. But I wasn’t a victim. I was definitely fortunate to go to prison because two people died that day and that’s what led me to prison.

Snow: Talk about growing up and some of the challenges you faced.

Edwards: It’s a story that’s played out time and time again. I come from an abusive home—an abusive stepfather, a mother who was

challenged with some things—and I spent a lot of time in the street. I learned lessons there. [At] 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, they had no doctors, no social workers out. You're going to find a con man, armed robbers and prostitutes; those are the people who embraced and taught me things and I grew up with that lifestyle. By 17, I was robbing banks and by 20, I was in prison for bank robbery the first time, where the guy—my crime partner and friend—was shot and killed.

When I went to prison, what I did was not think about not robbing banks again. What I thought about was not getting caught again. It was a lifestyle I embraced. I made choices too young, but they were still my choices. And that's what led me to continue that lifestyle.

Snow: Chris, talk a bit about how this issue came to your attention and held itself forth as something you'd like to get involved with.

Chris Flowers, J.C. Flowers & Company:

David, we've been involved in charitable activities through our foundation for many, many years. And one thing we try to do is to think about big, global issues where maybe we can make a difference but also think about things right here at home, in our own backyard. For a long time, we've been involved in the prisons in New York State and [with] parolees who come out of prison with a number of programs seeking to improve their chance and their lot in life. It's not a particularly glamorous or popular cause, but we've found it to be a very rewarding one.

Snow: People who have been in prison often go back to prison and it's largely because they lack the resources and guidance to stay mainstream, correct?

Flowers: I think there are a lot of reasons why and you've heard some of Thomas' background. It's amazing, frankly, that Thomas is sitting here with us today, given some of the things he's been through. But one thing we learned, which is part of this program we're involved in right now, is that number one, not surprisingly, the [riskiest] times are right when you get out. The first 90 days when you get out. Jobs, housing, substance issues—that's one thing.

The other thing you might not imagine but is true is that the prison system and the parole system are completely separate. So you leave A, you go to B. It might seem the same to Thomas, but it's two completely different bureaucracies. And trying to bridge that gap is one place where we thought we could make a difference.

Snow: Thomas, after spending 21 years in prison, you were released 14 month ago, correct?

Edwards: Right.

Snow: What have been the challenges or, initially, what were the challenges of coming back to society?

Edwards: I think Chris hit on the big ones: definitely housing and employment. I was in prison 21 years. It wasn't like I had built up a resume that someone wanted to hire me and was just re-acclimating myself in society. Number one, I wasn't only away for 21 years, I was away longer than that because I lived in a subculture. I wasn't part of mainstream America, so it was a different lifestyle to come home and try to find a job. I mean, have you ever been arrested? Of course, I have and that turns an employer off.

So there was a number of challenges. Housing is one of the big ones, because if you can't be stable, if you can't be comfortable where you live, it creates certain issues. A lot of guys go back to what they know in order to make things better. That's why these programs are so important because they give you the resources. Maybe they won't find you place to live, but maybe they give you pause to think about how best to create such a resource.

Snow: Talk about the Harlem Parolee Initiative. How did you get connected with that and what sort of resources were made available to you?

Edwards: When I got into the program, I wasn't working at the time. I was pretty much drifting around. I had went on a few interviews. I would sit in the park thinking about what I should do. I was fortunate that I had changed my pattern of thinking prior to coming home, so that wasn't an issue for me, but I needed something to do and to be a part of and that became a source of peace. A place to go, a connection to [something]. I had no idea that it would grow into what it grew into for me. But it was definitely the right place at the right time for me.

Snow: Chris, talk about the Harlem Parolee Initiative, how you've structured it the way you have and what's been working especially well?

Flowers: One thing we're trying to do is help parolees work with family members. By the way, Thomas, for example, many (in fact, most, I would guess) people coming home have children who they might not have seen for a long time. They have ex-wives or wives or girlfriends and all that to try to get that to work more smoothly. To help re-enter and become functioning with good relationships as a part of society. We're trying to help prisoners, or ex-prisoners, reintegrate.

Snow: Thomas, what are you doing now and how has it been going since you were released?

Edwards: I definitely have my challenges and some struggles at that same time, but it's been great. I mean, if I get caught in the rain, it's a great day. I spent 21 straight years in prison and I spent a lot of years looking over my shoulder. I don't have those problems anymore, so it's been great, even with the things that I have to overcome. But at this point, I finally found employment. I've been working for the last eight or nine months as a project manager for a youth program and I work at a re-entry program called Exodus Transitional Community Incorporated. I'm fortunate enough to have a youth program that I shaped and I work with young people.

It leads me to prevention. I'm big on re-entry and helping people when they come home. But I'm bigger on [stopping] them from going. Let's invest in these young people and create something where they will stay out and become productive members of the community without going to prison in order to make a transition. I'm fortunate to work with them. I mean, they do me a favor by allowing me to work with them, because I owe somebody something.

Snow: Final question. For the people watching this who are interested in the issue and might want to help, what would be some key takeaways that you could offer to them as far as how they could get involved or spread more awareness?

Flowers: Two ways. One is, of course, money always helps. Through our foundation, many other organizations and churches—that's one way to get involved: financially. And we do a lot with volunteers, so people who are interested in coming up and getting to know about this and being a part of it. Of course, they gain too.

Snow: Thomas, from your point of view, what would be a key takeaway that you'd hope someone would understand about the issue of people getting reintegrated into society?

Edwards:

I would hope they would understand, like I pointed out once—I didn't go to prison by mistake, by accident. I worked hard to get there. But I also worked hard to get out. And I can't change that history that I created, but this no history I'm creating. No one can change that either. I just want people to accept me for who I am and what I'm going to do. And let that speak for itself.